

The Law of the Harvest

Practical Principles of Effective Missionary Work

Section III. Chapter 31: Convert Retention for Leaders

Convert Retention for Leaders The main elements of effective retention programs are discussed in the earlier Convert Retention chapter. This section can help mission leaders to identify causes of continued poor convert retention beyond the purview of individual missionaries that have unwittingly been perpetuated in modern programs. An awareness of history can help us to understand what can be done to stem the losses and dramatically improve convert retention in harmony with standards set by scriptures and modern prophets.

Actual Performance versus the Divine Mandate

It is striking to compare the scriptural teachings and results of the Book of Mormon and early LDS missionaries to the British Isles to the fractional retention rates of the modern LDS missionary program. From 1840 to 1890, over 97 percent of LDS converts baptized in the British Isles left relatives and property and crossed land and sea to join the saints.[342] President Hinckley counseled that "it is not necessary that we should lose [any of] those who are baptized,"[343] yet only one-quarter to one-fifth of converts remain active in most international missions. In some areas of Latin America, 30 to 40 percent of LDS converts today never return to church after baptism.[344] In these same nations, other faiths such as the Jehovah's Witnesses and Seventh-Day Adventists consistently retain at least 70 to 80 percent of their converts long-term. In 2001, the sole convert-based area of the Church with a member activity rate above 50 percent was the Africa West area, where proselyting was performed primarily by native African missionaries with no formal MTC training.[345] In no administrative area of the world Church today have MTC-taught missionaries achieved even the 50 percent convert retention rate routinely surpassed by their predecessors who taught discussions over longer periods or even by modern missionaries with no MTC training at all.

The discrepancy between the results mandated by ancient and modern prophets and those achieved in actual practice reflects a similar discrepancy between the instructions given by ancient and modern prophets and actual programs and policies widely implemented in the mission field today. The legacy of the 100 percent convert retention of Ammon and his brethren and the heritage of nineteenth century retention well over 90 percent in the British Isles have been supplanted by an ongoing retention crisis.

The Standardized Missionary Program

During the first half of the twentieth century, many missions developed their own lessons and teaching protocols. Some missions had no formal program for teaching the gospel. Missionaries would prayerfully determine what they felt each investigator needed to be taught. The teaching process was generally protracted over many months, and many investigators studied with the missionaries and attended church for six months to a year prior to baptism. The decision to baptize an investigator was generally not made until the investigator had demonstrated consistent effort to put his or her life in harmony with the gospel and had become well integrated into the local congregation. However, the lack of a systematic program for teaching the gospel in many areas had significant drawbacks. It was difficult to know what investigators and new converts were being taught and whether the spontaneous teachings of missionaries were doctrinally sound. Some felt that missionaries were taking too long to baptize converts who might be ready for baptism at an earlier date.

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The period of 1948-1957 saw strides being taken toward standardized teaching protocols as the independent efforts of Richard Lloyd Anderson, Willard Aston, and several others attracted attention. In the early years following World War II, many missions began to adopt the fifteen-lesson plan developed by Richard Lloyd Anderson. In these missions, investigators continued to study with the missionaries for several months prior to baptism. The Anderson discussions were viewed as a great step forward, because they offered a clear and standardized approach to teaching the gospel without compromising the prebaptismal preparation of investigators. Even though this plan was not adopted in all missions, it tripled the number of conversions in many missions that adopted it and nearly doubled missionary productivity worldwide, while maintaining convert retention rates above 50 percent.[346] The Anderson program offered the benefits of standardization and higher baptism rates without compromising convert retention. These benefits can be attributed to a purposeful and appealing style of teaching basic doctrines of the gospel with a focus on key topics relevant to the conversion process, a commitment-based focus on basic gospel laws, and a reduction

in the number of investigators who monopolized missionary time without keeping commitments.

In 1952-1953, the first official missionary manual was published by the LDS Missionary Department. The manual, entitled A Systematic Program for Teaching the Gospel, contained seven brief lessons and selected "reasoning principles" and teaching points. It drew heavily on Willard Aston's work and also incorporated significant contributions from Richard Lloyd Anderson, Glenn Pearson, and Reid E. Bankhead, who had helped to pioneer the implementation of standardized discussions and teaching methods in different areas. Quality prebaptismal preparation was strongly emphasized. The 1952-1953 manual taught: "Whatever you do, don't minimize any expressed feeling of unworthiness until you have found out what prompts it. Do not encourage anyone into the waters of baptism if there is reasonable doubt that he has failed the principles of repentance. Make sure he understands its importance, and complies with it." Although the manual was published by the Church, its implementation was optional, and many missions continued to employ their own plans.

A remarkable book by Willard Ashton entitled Teaching the Gospel with Prayer and Testimony, published in 1956, gave further impetus to standardization. This book further delineated a systematic approach to teaching doctrines of the gospel and offered much helpful insight. The use of an adapted six-discussion program resulted in a sharp increase in convert baptisms even in non-Christian nations such as Japan.[347] The trend toward shorter teaching protocols with six or seven lessons continued to spread.

The Accelerated Baptism Program

As standardized programs based on the sound scriptural teaching principles of Richard Lloyd Anderson and others gained acceptance, growth rates increased in LDS missions worldwide, while convert retention rates remained relatively high. Some believed that opportunities for even greater growth could be found by incorporating elements of corporate structure, marketing psychology, and well-known salesmanship techniques into the standardized missionary program. Nonscriptural elements were added to the missionary program that promoted rapid baptisms, while unwittingly undermining the conversion process. It is beyond the scope of this work to provide a comprehensive historical overview of the events resulting in the development of the accelerated baptism program. These events are described in detail in other sources.[348]

In brief, Elder Henry D. Moyle was given charge of the Church missionary program in 1959. He introduced a rapid standardization in which missionaries were instructed to teach and baptize investigators over very brief periods, and goals, high-pressure deadlines, and marketing tactics came to replace scriptural standards and personal conscience as guidelines for when investigators should be baptized. Missionaries were instructed to challenge investigators, still unaware of the most basic expectations of church membership, to accept a baptismal date not more than two to three weeks in the future on the first or second visit. The prior focus on investigator needs and concerns gave way to focus on baptismal numbers. Minimized periods of teaching, a lack of meaningful baptismal standards, and pressure from leaders to achieve baptismal quotas combined to result in a tragic period of rushed baptisms, rampant inactivity, and later mass excommunications. Official LDS news organs lauded "astronomic growth," while failing to report dismal convert retention rates that had fallen below 10 percent in some missions. Baptism had become uncoupled from the conversion process, becoming an end of its own.

Quinn observed that many senior Church leaders objected to Elder Moyle's tactics. Elder Harold B. Lee cautioned missionaries in France: "Conversions are not merely the result of a system, not merely the result of a machine operation ... We are not concerned primarily with how many baptisms you get."[349] Elder Moyle confided that Apostles Joseph Fielding Smith and Harold B. Lee were in "real opposition" to his "accelerated missionary program."[350] By "May 1961, 'nearly all' of the apostles were 'gravely concerned about the pressures being put on missionaries to baptize to fill a quota of baptisms.'"[351],[352] In July 1963, Joseph Fielding Smith, then President of the Quorum of the Twelve, challenged "the unorthodox way with which youngsters had been baptized in the Church."[353] Elder Moyle was relieved of his responsibilities for Church finance and the missionary program. President McKay instructed missionaries "to discontinue such things and bring the missions back to a normal proselyting program."[354] During this period, D. Michael Quinn estimates that approximately 90 percent of all British baseball baptism youth and 100,000 or more "converts" churchwide were excommunicated.[355] David O. McKay, Mark E. Peterson, Harold B. Lee, Gordon B. Hinckley, Marion D. Hanks, Joseph Fielding Smith, and others who opposed the abuses of the accelerated baptism program were able to expunge at least some of the excesses. One general authority who served on the missionary committee stated of Elder Moyle: "We spend a lot of time cleaning up after him." The cleanup was at best incomplete. Many who had promulgated rush baptisms during the "baseball baptism" era were elevated to important Church offices where they continued to exert their influence, and the missionary program continued to draw many key elements from the accelerated baptism program. International convert retention rates have remained at or below 25 percent for over forty years, never approaching the much higher rates routinely achieved before the accelerated baptism program was introduced.

The Second Cleanup

Ongoing accelerated baptism programs fueled poor convert retention rates and caused real growth to stagnate. The second major period of institutional cleanup came as many apostles spoke out strongly to condemn quick-baptize schemes and tried to educate mission and area leaders. President Thomas S. Monson taught new mission presidents: "Chaos results when we baptize without teaching. We have baptisms, but we don't have converts, and every president of the Church has extended the plea: 'Teach, that people may be converted, and then baptized and confirmed members of the Church.' I thought it significant, too, that the Lord added, even after the word baptize, 'teaching them to observe all things' whatsoever the Lord hath commanded you."[356] In 2002, the First Presidency issued a directive that all converts must have attended several sacrament meetings prior to baptism and be consistently keeping all commitments.[357] Apostles serving in Chile and the Philippines

worked to educate local leaders and reverse quick-baptize programs.

The new missionary manual, Preach My Gospel, was published in September 2004, superseding the old missionary guide. The Preach My Gospel manual educates missionaries on factors important to convert retention for the first time in the history of the standardized missionary program. Missionaries were instructed to baptize converts only when they were consistently keeping commitments. The convert preparation checklists, which previously had listed only mechanical activities such as receiving a discussion that did not reflect an investigator's true preparation or worthiness, were revised to include consistency in keeping core commandments, including scripture reading and church attendance. These changes provide hope for the future and attest to rising awareness and insight into the causes of and solutions to the problem of low convert retention in both the missionary department and among Church membership as a whole.

While the few missions that applied scriptural principles of teaching and prebaptismal preparation quickly achieved very high convert retention rates, convert retention remained extremely low in the many missions that continued to practice accelerated baptism programs, while other missions made only slight adaptations and experienced marginal improvement. Official directives on ensuring regular church attendance and consistent observance of divine commandments before baptism were ignored by many mission and area leaders and individual missionaries. While the dictionary defines "several" as "three or more," the First Presidency directive that converts must attend church several times before baptism and be consistently keeping all commitments before baptism has been reduced by many mission and area leaders to policies that investigators should attend church once or twice before baptism, with no mention of consistent observance of commitments at all. Many leaders who had been raised under the banner of the accelerated baptism program did not agree with these changes and continued to focus on rapidly achieving large numbers of baptisms with little, if any, regard for true conversion or convert retention. Programs rushing converts to baptism within arbitrary periods from ten to twenty-one days, "doorstep discussions," and many other tactics of the quick baptism era continued to be advocated by some mission presidents.

Accelerated Baptism Elements Today

Official teaching materials, while much improved, continue to incorporate many subtler elements of the accelerated baptism program. It is important for those who desire to achieve quality results and promote full convert retention to recognize residual elements of the accelerated baptism program in official instructional materials that can undermine the conversion process and harm investigators. These elements conflict with prophetic directives and send ambiguous messages that can subvert the conversion process through inadequate pre-baptismal preparation. The entire teaching protocol has been shortened to just four discussions, down from six prior discussions, and the recommended discussion teaching time has been cut to just thirty to forty-five minutes, leaving the average convert with less recommended instructional time than a single LDS Sunday block meeting schedule.

The Missionary Handbook

The Missionary Handbook or "white bible," the pocket handbook carried and read daily by all missionaries, continues to instruct: "Commit investigators to baptism during the first or second discussion, and renew the commitment at each subsequent discussion ... Help each investigator meet all qualifications for baptism." It also notes: "a. Teach two or three discussions per week to each investigator or investigator family. b. Ensure that investigators are contacted daily by members or missionaries." No exceptions are mentioned for individuals who may not be ready to accept the baptismal commitment on the first or second visit or for those who may find daily contact too intrusive. To absorb and incorporate the critical information and commitments in the discussions, most investigators cannot handle more than about one formal discussion per week and contacts two to three times a week. Individuals with jobs, families, and other commitments need the time and opportunity to read, ponder, and contemplate for themselves without pressure. Instructions calling for daily contact with each investigator are intrusive and fuel the "quick-baptism" mentality, because this intensive practice is unsustainable for meaningful periods. Frequency of contact should be based on individual investigator needs and availability, not on such sweeping directives. Investigators taught to provide spiritual self-nourishment through daily scripture reading do not require daily contact to remain receptive.

Baptismal Goals

Official materials continue to instruct missionaries to establish and report monthly baptismal goals, even when they have no serious investigators. The implication is that missionaries with faith are able to successfully find, teach, and baptize converts within the course of one month, virtually regardless of investigator challenges or concerns, and that those who do not meet their goals are not faithful or obedient. The mission president will also be able to compare the missionaries' reported goals with their subsequent baptismal figures. This practice exerts both strong internal and external pressure on missionaries to meet arbitrary monthly baptismal goals. Many missionaries feel discouraged or unworthy if they do not meet their monthly goal. This further drives away the Spirit and impairs the missionary's judgment, making him or her only hunger more for what he or she perceives as an opportunity for redemption through future rush baptisms. Missed arbitrary monthly baptismal goals were a source of great frustration and discouragement early in my mission. When I abandoned monthly baptismal goals and turned my focus wholly toward achieving many fresh contacts daily and meeting investigator needs, the number of baptisms rose to levels considerably higher than that of earlier goals, and the quality of converts improved dramatically.

Baptismal goals ignore the moral agency of others. Missionaries should set goals for their personal effort, such as the number of individuals to be contacted, but never for results that depend upon the response of others. The focus on setting monthly

baptismal goals and deadlines undermines convert retention, is manipulative of both the missionary and the investigator, and demonstrates misunderstanding of gospel principles of moral agency and prebaptismal preparation. D. Michael Quinn observed that "even self-imposed 'baptism goals' can cause missionaries to engage in exploitation of potential converts."[358] Investigator needs must never be sacrificed to meet arbitrary baptismal goals.

The affliction of chronically low retention in missions where baptismal "covenants" have been employed demonstrates that God neither recognizes nor respects the promises some make for arbitrary baptismal numbers. God grants according to His will; ours is only to obey and pray that His will be done. Great missionaries such as Ammon, Wilford Woodruff, and Dan Jones never established numerical baptismal goals or deadlines but put forth their best efforts and worked according to the Holy Spirit. Mahatma Gandhi noted: "A man of faith does not bargain or stipulate with God." Those who bargain with God for immediate baptisms are afflicted with a deep lack or misunderstanding of faith.

Monthly baptismal goals and their accompanying push to reach month-end deadlines conflict with scriptural requirements for adequate convert preparation. My brother, who served a mission in Canada, noted in one of his first letters home that his first mission president asked him in front of a mid-month zone conference, "Elder Stewart, are you going to have a baptism this month?" Even though he and his companion had no serious investigators at that time, his answer, "I'll try," was deemed unacceptable. The mission president instructed him that the proper answer was "yes." The message was clear that finding, teaching, and baptizing converts within abbreviated periods of only a few days is both appropriate and expected and that missionaries who worked hard and were obedient to mission rules could consistently achieve monthly baptisms even with no one to teach at mid-month. The mission president lacked regard for the moral agency of investigators and other factors outside of the missionaries' control. The pressure exerted to encourage missionaries to baptize quickly to meet goals fostered a deep retention crisis. Elder Stewart shared the agony of quick-baptize tactics in one of his subsequent letters home: "My senior companion ... did everything within his power to make sure that [an investigator] was baptized by the end of the month so that it can show in our numbers that we had a baptism for the month of June. Yesterday our investigator was baptized. I felt that it was rushed for the sake of numbers. If I had any say, I would have waited until next month ... I have learned since that the bishop also felt the baptism was horribly rushed. There is nothing I can do about it. My companion wants to baptize, so he will baptize, regardless of whether or not the person is ready, just as soon as they say they will. There are many people here who have been baptized for the sake of numbers, but then have been excommunicated or have become inactive." Subsequent letters reported that the "convert" became inactive almost immediately following baptism.

Elder Hartman Rector Jr., a proponent of monthly baptismal goals, had an influential role in the Missionary Department for many years. Countless mission presidents and missionaries were taught the "Rector system." Elder Rector's book Already to Harvest,[359] one of the most widely distributed missionary books of the past two decades, contains a "positive" example of missionaries who covenant with the Lord to be obedient and to eat, sleep, and breathe the goal of achieving twenty-five baptisms for the month. He details how the missionaries worked hard to find individuals willing to accept the baptismal challenge. Some prospective "converts" were taught and baptized within a single day. As the end of the month approached, the missionaries even made font calls for baptism and baptized untaught visitors after only a cursory interview, ultimately achieving their statistical goal. Conspicuously missing from Rector's "miraculous" story of the missionaries achieving twenty-five baptisms in one month by such methods is follow-up of how many of these "converts" were still active one year or even one month later. One can be assured that baptism is not the end of the story, although it is likely that it may have been very close to the end of the "converts'" activity in the Church.

A chapter in Elder Rector's book is entitled "Baptize Now!" He stated that investigators are ready to be baptized when they have "repented of their sins and are willing to live in obedience to the Ten Commandments." For Rector, prebaptismal repentance consists of promising to live the Ten Commandments and refrain from further wrongdoing, regardless of past conduct. Prospective converts can be living in violation of the Word of Wisdom, the Law of Chastity, or other fundamental gospel directives until literally the day before baptism and still be considered ready to be baptized as long as they express willingness to live by these commandments in the future. Elder Rector wrote: "When these conditions of faith and repentance are met, then the candidate should be baptized immediately -- which means that baptismal fonts should be made available whenever they are needed." Nowhere in this definition is there a place for the scriptural mandate of bringing forth the fruits of repentance by righteous living. Rector wrote that while baptismal services should be conducted by the ward mission leader after invitations have been extended to the investigator's friends and family, "there are times when this is not possible. Then the baptismal service should be held as soon as possible. Many times it is necessary to help people know what they should do." There is no mention of helping investigators to "count the cost" to determine whether they are prepared, and involvement of the ward family in the teaching and fellowshipping process prior to baptism is viewed as expendable. For proponents of the accelerated baptism program, it would seem that prebaptismal fellowshipping, church attendance, and other commandments are mere niceties that must often be sacrificed to achieve the momentary expediencies of rushed baptisms. The fact that such programs and methods have been widely taught and accepted as effective examples rather than being condemned as improper demonstrates how far the pendulum has swung toward low-commitment, quick-baptize programs. Catastrophic rates of convert retention worldwide document the spiritual devastation left in the wake of all-important monthly baptismal goals. One can believe that the intentions of the proponents of accelerated baptism plans were good and that the dismal retention rates which resulted from their programs were not anticipated or desired, yet one can also appreciate the grave danger of violating scriptural principles to accomplish an agenda.

Baptismal Commitment and Baptismal Dates

Official materials make no mention of church attendance as a consideration in determining whether the investigators may be ready to commit to baptism. The baptismal commitment is placed in the second discussion before most investigators have even attended church, as a holdover from the early accelerated baptism program era. The difficulty with routinely asking investigators

to make an immediate and lifelong commitment to Church membership when they have not put forth the effort to attend church even once should be obvious, yet this practice continues to be the rule rather than the exception. Most can appreciate the impropriety of proposing marriage on a first or second date. Baptism is an eternal commitment that is no less significant than marriage: scriptural imagery refers to the Church as the bride of Christ (Matthew 25:1-14, Ephesians 5:22-32). Thoughtful individuals are put off by the pressure to accept baptism quickly, recognizing that hasty, pressured decisions are inconsistent with their efforts to find and accept eternal truths. Most investigators reject the second discussion baptismal commitment. The practice of premature solicitation of baptismal commitments has driven away large numbers of sincere investigators, even as those who reach baptism are rarely adequately prepared. It is almost never appropriate to ask investigators to who have not yet attended church to accept the baptismal commitment.

The current discussions instruct missionaries to help investigators "progress toward a specific day and time when they can enter into the covenant of baptism and receive the ordinance of confirmation." Missionaries are instructed to extend the baptismal challenge only with a specific date and time. This unscriptural practice creates serious and unnecessary difficulties. The missionaries are generally imposing a completely arbitrary, often very proximate, date, without basic information on the investigator's performance in regard to essential commandments. The Word of Wisdom, the Law of Chastity, the Ten Commandments, and numerous other gospel laws have generally not even been discussed at all at the point in the discussions when missionaries are instructed to extend the baptismal commitment. How can a missionary without this information possibly have adequate criteria even to assess a reasonable time frame for investigator preparation? How can an investigator rationally commit to baptism at all, let alone in the immediate future, when the missionaries have not yet disclosed basic membership expectations?

The large majority of investigators in most areas miss their initial missionary-imposed baptismal dates, which should provide its proponents with some hint as to the problematic nature of this practice. The challenge of dealing with investigators who were not baptized on their scheduled day is acknowledged in the Preach My Gospel manual (p. 148). This problem is a serious one, since prospective converts who miss baptismal dates because of personal concerns while the missionaries are trying to pressure them forward become less likely to respond to future invitations. An achieved goal strengthens and encourages, while a missed one has the opposite effect. A missed baptismal date frequently implies to investigators that they are unworthy, when in fact the only error is often one made by the missionaries in establishing arbitrary premature dates without accounting for the investigator's needs, pace of progress, and input. Some Missionary Department research suggests that only one-fifth of those who accept a baptismal commitment ever go on to be baptized, so it is remarkable that such practices of premature solicitation of the baptismal commitment and unilateral imposition of short-term baptismal deadlines have remained institutionalized in the LDS missionary program ever since the era of Henry Moyle.

The Interview

Most LDS baptismal interviews focus on nominal belief and professed future intentions with little regard for the investigator's record at fulfilling basic commitments reliably. In the section on conducting baptismal interviews, the Preach My Gospel manual provides nineteen questions for the interviewer to ask prospective converts (p. 206). There are four questions of belief, two questions on repentance, four questions on major past transgressions that would require a mission president interview, four questions to assess understanding of gospel laws and principles, and five questions asking if the prospective convert is willing to adhere to specific gospel laws. Not a single question asks whether the prospective converts are currently living gospel standards, regularly attending church, reading scriptures daily, and obeying other commandments. While the guide suggests that a baptismal interview should not be scheduled "until the investigator is keeping the commitments and meets the standards" (p. 207), this assessment is not part of the interview at all.

The lack of specific standards on any meaningful period of obedience to gospel laws before baptism often makes lifestyle requirements more nominal than real. While everyone would agree that it is necessary for new converts to give up alcohol and tobacco prior to baptism, investigators who say that they have quit smoking or quit drinking alcohol can be baptized within one week or less of this event in most missions, leading to catastrophic relapse rates.

Local leaders are not permitted to evaluate the prospective convert's preparation, which is assessed exclusively by transient missionaries who bear no responsibility for looking after the converts after baptism and have no vested interest in quality. This is one of the key reasons why LDS convert retention rates have fallen far below the rates of many other outreach-oriented denominations. There is an inherent conflict of interest when convert preparation for baptism is assessed exclusively by missionaries, since the desire to reach arbitrary mission and companionship baptismal goals often supersedes objective considerations of the prospective convert's comprehension, commitment, and record. When missionaries believe that "God wants everyone to be baptized" and that God also wants them to meet their arbitrary monthly baptismal goals, baptismal interviews become a rubber stamp formality rather than a meaningful safeguard for both the investigator and the Church. While it is possible for young elders to develop insight consistently into the conversion process and conduct quality interviews, this requires considerable discipline and training.

One can appreciate how interviews focusing on nominal belief and future promises alone have generally failed to provide insight into the need for additional preparation of even the most poorly prepared converts in high-turnover, quick-baptize areas. In contrast, Moroni instructed: "And they were not baptized save they brought forth fruit meet that they were worthy of it" (Moroni 6:1). Moroni taught that preparation for baptism must be assessed by a present conduct demonstrating that essential gospel habits have been firmly established and that the investigator has the obligatory determination to "serve [Christ] to the end" (Moroni 6:3).

Evaluation of the convert's consistency in attending church, studying scriptures daily, and obeying other commandments is the most important element of a proper baptismal interview. Properly conducted interviews offer an essential check to ensure the requisite convert preparation that will lead to full activity and provide a powerful tool to facilitate additional prebaptismal preparation and subsequent long-term activity of those who would be lost to the Church if baptized prematurely. Just as a premature birth can endanger an infant's health or cause permanent damage, premature baptisms lead to the loss of many of converts who could have been fortified and retained with better preparation. Many converts held back at their initial baptismal interview to allow better preparation have later noted that this was "the best thing anyone ever did for them" since it reinforced the serious nature of gospel covenants and helped them to become strong members with firm gospel habits.

Baptize, Baptize, Baptize

Prophetic messages of the necessity to ensure adequate prebaptismal preparation are undermined by an ongoing emphasis of many lower authorities on raw baptismal numbers virtually without regard to retention. One mission president serving in Latin America reported in 2003: "I have been told clearly by members of our area presidency that my success is measured only in terms of the number of baptisms." A mission newsletter message from one North American mission president provides a glimpse into the type of instruction many missionaries receive:[360]3 "In the month of August we had 59 baptisms and in the month of September, which had five full weekends we had only 65 baptisms. But for the extra weekend in September we would have had 54 baptisms. Our question to each of you missionaries is: What ever happened to our goal of having 100 baptisms in a month and 1,000 baptisms this year? As the year has progressed we have been sliding down rather than moving up toward this goal. Lest any of us forget, we are here to do two things -- teach and baptize ... Before we came to Missouri, we met with our then Area President ... He told us there were only five things to remember about being a mission president. They were BAPTIZE, BAPTIZE, BAPTIZE, BAPTIZE, and BAPTIZE! We hope we have not lost sight of that goal ... You must do all in your power to reach our goal to baptize weekly ... We testify that with faith we can baptize 100 souls in a month and we can baptize 1,000 souls this year." One LDS bishop in an area enfeebled by ongoing quick-baptize practices observed: "In this message there is no mention of quality, only quantity ... How are young men going to respond to such a message? Should we really set dates of baptism for investigators and have goals for baptismal numbers? Surely we should invite people to be baptized only when they are ready as the scriptures indicate. The methods described above resemble more high-powered business sales techniques than training and motivation for the Lord's missionaries."

Many individuals have promoted quick-baptize techniques to ingratiate themselves to higher-ups, meet mission goals, or produce glowing statistical reports. Such motives are neither pure nor "single to the glory of God" (D&C 4:5). The Kingdom of God can only be built up by the principles of the celestial world (D&C 105:5) and is harmed greatly by impure quick-baptize practices. A Chinese proverb states: "He who sacrifices his conscience to ambition burns a picture to obtain the ashes."

Why Are Standards Necessary?

Specific and consistently applied standards generate more predictably successful outcomes. Some object to clear and powerful prebaptismal standards, noting that some exceptional individuals taught without these standards become active, while a few go inactive in spite of appropriate teaching. It is not clear that any valid principles or lessons can be distilled from the stories of those few individuals who manage to remain active in spite of cursory prebaptismal teaching. Some individuals have survived speeding across town while ignoring traffic lights, while others have been involved in automobile accidents in spite of obeying the rules of the road. It is possible that one may escape without infection after a surgery performed by a surgeon who did not wash his hands or use antibiotics. Some individuals never brush their teeth and never develop a cavity. What should one deduce from such stories? Do a few survivors make such behaviors safe and appropriate? No one would consider these behaviors desirable for himself or for a loved one. Few drivers would dare to guess which red lights they can race through without stopping, yet many missionaries feel that they can successfully rush converts to baptism at the neglect of basic principles if they feel "prompted." Low worldwide LDS convert retention rates suggest that missionaries and leaders do not have the ability to discern accurately which converts can forgo adequate preparation. Instead of looking at the minority who survived reckless experiences without major harm, we might be better served to examine the casualties of these practices and their cost to society. While few measures have an all-or-none impact on outcome, empirical standards have been widely adopted by informed societies because of their tremendous success at minimizing problems and fostering predictable positive outcomes on a large scale. Only by applying specific standards to all are consistent positive outcomes achieved. The fact that we cannot avoid every problem does not mitigate our responsibility to put forth our very best effort to ensure that problems do not occur.

When daily scripture reading, consistent church attendance, and adherence to other basic gospel laws are optional for baptism, we cannot be surprised that convert retention remains the exception rather than the rule. Nothing that is essential to the conversion process and to the investigator's prospects for long-term activity should be optional.

Gospel-based prebaptismal standards may seem formulaic, just like a physician washing his hands and giving a dose of antibiotics before surgery. Divine commandments such as daily scripture reading, tithing, and temple marriage may also seem rigid and formulaic to those do not understand the gospel, yet consistent obedience to divine laws brings power. Scriptural standards are empowering rather than restricting, just as God' commandments make us free. Appropriate standards provide room to individualize to meet specific needs. However, the individualization typically comes in the form of additional effort for those who demonstrate concerning trends, rather than as an exemption from essential standards deeply rooted in gospel teachings. There is virtually never any valid role for quick-baptize approaches. The few converts who remain active in spite of such approaches would almost always be retained with improved preparation and teaching, while most of those needlessly lost because of quick-baptize approaches could be retained with longer and more thorough preparation.

Working Together versus Working Apart

Recognizing inadequate member involvement in the missionary program, church leaders dissolved stake missions in 2002 and designated the bishop and stake president as the "head of local missionary efforts." "The missionaries are your helpers," explained one apostle in remarks directed to LDS bishops. Yet bishops have no direct jurisdiction over full-time missionaries, nor are they given any authority to assess the preparation of new converts for baptism or adjust baptismal dates to reflect worthiness and preparation. These issues are decided by the full-time missionaries alone. Official policies require the introduction of prospective converts to a member of the bishopric or branch presidency before baptism, but do not require their agreement or consent. Wilfried Decoo, an experienced Belgian church leader who became the president of a branch of 200 members with only 10 percent activity at the age of 22, noted that "branch presidents and bishops are not allowed to evaluate the readiness for baptism of even seriously troubled and eccentric converts if missionaries and mission leaders are determined to baptize them."[361] I am aware of dozens of incidents where a local bishop or branch president disagreed with missionaries who wanted to rush poorly prepared converts to baptism, and in virtually every case, the missionaries were instructed by their mission or area president to proceed with the baptisms. Recognizing the crucial role of member involvement in the retention process and the dismal retention rates of accelerated baptism programs, it seems that little could be more foolish than proceeding with rush baptisms over the objections of mature local leaders. In such circumstances, the missionaries can hardly be considered helpers to the local leaders who will bear the responsibility for ensuring that every effort is made to home and visit teach the uncommitted and often hostile "converts" monthly for the rest of their lives, long after the missionaries have left. Instructions naming LDS bishops and branch presidents as the titular "heads of local missionary efforts" while failing to grant them any authority to regulate or supervise the baptism of converts in their congregations present local leaders with the unenviable dilemma of responsibility without authority. They have no voice in determining the preparation of converts for baptism, yet even crisis-level inactivity almost immediately following baptism is almost inevitably attributed by local missions to "poor fellowshipping" of the new converts rather than poor teaching or inadequate preparation. It is difficult for bishops to establish relevant leadership or feel true ownership of a missionary system that simultaneously disenfranchises them. Cooperation in ward missions should never be a one-way street in which members are expected to jump on the bandwagon of the latest missionary initiative while missionaries continue to act unilaterally in rushing unprepared converts to baptism. Both member responsiveness to missionary requests and missionary responsiveness to the wisdom and maturity of local leaders are essential for any missionary program to reach its potential.

What Is the Hurry?

Over the past decade, I have visited with many new converts and investigators in many nations about their experiences with the teaching process. While most individuals express respect and appreciation for the missionaries, by far the most common criticism of the teaching process is that many felt pressured or rushed to baptism. Pressure to accept baptism rapidly drives away many honest and sincere people, while leaving most of those who are baptized with serious unresolved issues. The devastation that has been left by accelerated baptism protocols leads one to wonder: what is the hurry? Are we rushing converts to baptism so that they can go inactive faster? Rampant inactivity following accelerated baptism programs is not an anomaly; it is the natural and expected outcome of such approaches. Some speak as if delaying baptism a few weeks to allow better preparation represents a tremendous spiritual tragedy and denial of blessings, while the catastrophically poor retention rates incurred by accelerated baptism practices and the subsequent years of poorly productive reactivation work are regarded as inconsequential or inevitable. After extensive research, I have been unable to ascertain what alleged benefits experienced by the fraction of converts who remain active in spite of accelerated baptism policies can possibly compensate for the nearly immediate loss of the large majority of converts. Time is not a threat to true and life-changing conversion.

Accelerated baptism programs violate the prime rule of therapeutic intervention: "first do no harm." The few individuals who would perhaps remain active and faithful in spite of brief teaching periods certainly suffer no harm from longer preparation periods and, in most cases, experience considerable benefits. In contrast, many converts who could have been retained with more thorough preparation are lost after being rushed to baptism unprepared. While longer teaching in itself does not guarantee weekly church attendance, daily scripture reading, or good fellowshipping without additional effort, performance in all of these areas is almost uniformly poor when converts are taught and baptized over abbreviated periods. Investigators must never be denied the opportunity to complete the repentance process prior to baptism in order to meet a goal or arbitrary date. Spirituality is not acquired suddenly. Joseph Smith taught "the things of God are of deep import: and time, and experience, and careful and ponderous and solemn thoughts can only find them out."[362]

A Historical Perspective

President Heber J. Grant's account of the high standards of prebaptismal preparation he adhered to while preaching the gospel in Japan provides some perspective on how far modern accelerated baptism programs have drifted from the moorings of scripture and the teachings of inspired church leaders.

Gaburo Kikuchi, the second convert [in Japan], for a number of years has separated himself from the Christian sect to which he belonged, because, he said, they did not teach the Bible, and he has been teaching the people the truths of the Bible in the parks in the city of Tokyo, having audiences of from five hundred to one thousand five hundred people. He seems to be a very sincere, determined man, and I have enjoyed my conversations with him. The day I baptized him, before attending to that ordinance, I told Brother Kelsch to try to discourage him from becoming a member of the Church and that I would do the same, because I told him I desired him to study more and to comprehend more before he was baptized. He came to the hotel before I was out of bed in the morning and insisted upon baptism. When I told him that he had better study more and get a better comprehension of the gospel, he said, "It is true. I believe it. I want to be baptized. And I can understand it better after I have been baptized and confirmed a member of the Church." I knew this was true; so I told him he would be persecuted and he

quoted the scripture, "Blessed are ye, when men shall revile you, and persecute you, and shall say all manner of evil against you falsely, for my sake." Brother Kelsch and I went on in this line, trying to discourage this man. I referred to the drivings of our people, to the killing of the Prophet Joseph Smith and his brother Hyrum, and to the fact that many men had to give up their lives for the truth; and I wanted him to be thoroughly converted. He said, "It is true; and if I die and am the first martyr in Japan, it would be the best thing that could happen to Japan." "That's enough," I said, "I'll baptize you."[363]

Speaking from abundant experience in an area where quick-baptize approaches had spoiled most of an already difficult harvest, Wilfried Decoo suggested "a longer period of preparation before an investigator is baptized." He wrote:

On the one hand, I understand and appreciate the sense of urgency that accompanies our proselyting system at present: We have long been taught that these are the last days, that the harvest time is short. If people have truly repented and accepted the gospel, they should not have to jump through a lot of hoops to get to the baptismal font. Also, the missionaries themselves understandably look to the number of baptisms as measures of their own success. Yet, on the other hand, in our preoccupation with sheer numbers we have often baptized people prematurely in the expectation that some spiritual form of "natural selection" would eventually separate the weak from the strong. For many new members, and for the church units which they have joined, our experience in Europe and elsewhere has shown us the drawbacks of this proselyting philosophy. It has produced the opposite of the desired result. Instead of saving souls, it has placed in spiritual jeopardy at least half of those baptized by persuading them to make sacred covenants which they were not ready or able to fulfill. Why could we not ask prospective converts to attend church meetings and keep the commandments [regularly] before baptism? We might lose some who are not stable or fully converted, or whose early enthusiasm cools somewhat in the process; but those who endure for that year will be far more likely to endure for a lifetime. Furthermore, local leaders could become more involved than they are now both in the decision to accept new members for baptism and in the process of their integration into the church unit, which would enhance their sense of responsibility for new members. All of this might mean that missionaries who first introduce a given investigator to the gospel will not be in town for the baptism, but that consideration should not take precedence over adequate convert preparation. A longer preparation might also help avoid or lessen tragic clashes with family, friends, and the larger community. Candidates will have more time to work out tensions, to brace themselves for a new and overwhelming change in life, and even to invite family members and friends to join in the investigation process, which will be less threatening given the longer time frame. Some people will probably attempt to dissuade the potential convert from baptism, but others might be intrigued enough to become investigators themselves. In any case, if the potential convert cannot stand up to the social consequences of joining the church, it is better to learn that before baptism than afterward.[364]

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