

Elder M. Russell Ballard

Be dedicated to building the kingdom

In March of 1839 from the bleak dungeon that was Liberty Jail, the Prophet Joseph Smith counseled the Church:

"There are many yet on the earth among all sects, parties, and denominations, who are blinded by the subtle craftiness of men . . . and who are only kept from the truth because they know not where to find it" (D&C 123:12).

Years later, at the age of 15, the Prophet's nephew Joseph F. Smith was called to serve a mission in Hawaii. You will remember that he was only five when his father, Hyrum, was martyred. His mother, Mary Fielding, died when he was just 13. Upon arriving on the island of Maui, young Joseph fell gravely ill. Despite these and other adversities, he wrote to Elder George A. Smith:

"I am ready to bear my testimony . . . at any time, or at any place, or in whatsoever circumstances I may be placed. . . . I am ready to go through thick and thin for this cause in which I am engaged" (quoted in Joseph Fielding Smith, comp., *Life of Joseph F. Smith* [1938], 176).

Today we must ask ourselves: Are we ready and willing to go through thick and thin for the cause in which we are engaged? Do we reflect in our countenances the joy of living the gospel of Jesus Christ as true disciples should? If we do not understand and willingly teach others of the Restoration of the gospel through the Prophet Joseph Smith, who will? We cannot place the burden of taking the gospel to all people solely on the backs of the full-time missionaries. Families will not be fortified, nor will individual testimonies be strengthened; convert baptisms will not be increased, nor will the less active be welcomed back until we as members of the Church arise individually and collectively, with dedication and action, to help build the kingdom of God.

True conversion is the key

Our duty lies in assisting others, through the power of the Spirit, to *know* and *understand* the doctrines and principles of the gospel. Everyone must come to *feel* that the doctrines of the Restoration are true and of great value. And everyone who accepts the message must strive to *live* the gospel by making and keeping sacred covenants and by participating in all the ordinances of salvation and exaltation. We often think of conversion as applying only to investigators, but there are some members who are not yet fully converted and who have yet to experience the mighty change of heart described in the scriptures (see Alma 5:12).

Brethren and sisters, true and complete conversion is the key to accelerating the work of the Church.

We know that both members and nonmembers are more likely to be thoroughly converted to the gospel of Jesus Christ when they are willing to experiment upon the word (see Alma 32:27). This is an attitude of both mind and heart that includes a desire to know the truth and a willingness to act on that desire. For those investigating the Church, the experiment can be as simple as agreeing to read the Book of Mormon, to pray about it, and to earnestly seek to know if Joseph Smith was the Lord's prophet.

True conversion comes through the power of the Spirit. When the Spirit touches the heart, hearts are changed. When individuals, both members and investigators, feel the Spirit working with them, or when they see the evidence of the Lord's love and mercy in their lives, they are edified and strengthened spiritually, and their faith in Him increases. These experiences with the Spirit follow naturally when a person is willing to experiment upon the word. This is how we come to *feel* the gospel is true.

Sharing gospel is evidence of conversion

A most significant evidence of our conversion and of how we feel about the gospel in our lives is our willingness to share it with others and help missionaries find someone to teach. The likelihood of lasting conversion greatly increases when a nonmember has a friend or a relative who radiates the joy of being a member of the Church. The influence of members of the Church is very powerful. I believe that's why President Hinckley asked us to see that everyone has a friend (see Conference Report, Apr. 1997, 65; or *Ensign*, May 1997, 47).

Here, then, is an important key to our success in accelerating the Lord's work. As active members of the Church, and especially as priesthood and auxiliary leaders, we need to do more to assist in the process of conversion, retention, and activation. We know that faithful members desire to serve, but sometimes we lose sight of the essential outcomes that our faith and works ought to produce in strengthening the commitment of our Father's children to the gospel.

Use councils to strengthen conversion

Bishops, you are the key. You give the vision and invite your ward council to help you strengthen the spiritual conversion of those investigating the Church as well as all of your members. Encourage council members to constantly think about the specific things they can do to assist you in helping your ward members and their nonmember friends to better know and understand the gospel. What can they do to help them feel it is true and to support them as they strive to live the principles? Ask yourselves what specific things we as priesthood and auxiliary leaders can do to encourage a family or an individual to experiment on the good word of God. What can the council do as leaders and teachers to ensure that every person who attends our Church

meetings feels the Spirit and is strengthened spiritually?

We are just now learning to focus on the right things in our council meetings, but too often we focus only on generalities. In one stake where they are having great success in baptizing and retaining new converts, the full-time missionaries are invited to meet with the ward council to discuss people they are teaching. The council members seek inspiration in determining which leaders and ward members can best help the missionaries fellowship specific individuals and families and bring them into the Church.

Use councils to make best use of ward resources

Some of you bishops feel like you must be involved in every action your council members take. This is a mistake because if you do, you will never bring all the powerful resources God has given to you into full strength. At the general Relief Society meeting two weeks ago, Sister Sheri Dew said she believes the sisters are "the Lord's secret weapon" ("Stand Tall and Stand Together," *Ensign*, Nov. 2000, 96). I think she is right. Our sister leaders have a spiritual sensitivity that will prompt them how to best approach and nurture those whom the missionaries are teaching. The best place to begin to fully utilize the talents and wisdom of our sisters is through the established council system of the Church. You are free to be flexible in how you use the ward council.

Just last year, President Hinckley said this to the bishops of the Church:

"You are not bound by rigid rules. You have unlimited flexibility. You are entitled to answers to your prayers, to inspiration and revelation from the Lord" ("Find the Lambs, Feed the Sheep," *Ensign*, May 1999, 110).

Perhaps in some cases, holding council meetings only once a month will not be sufficient to focus on the spiritual con-

version of members and nonmembers alike who are under your ministering care. You are free to meet in council as often as deemed necessary.

Council members support a young girl

Recently a stake president shared with me a tender story demonstrating the power of the council system in building up the Church. He said that both the Relief Society and the priesthood had been working with a family in their stake but had failed to make progress with the parents. Primary leaders found the answer. Permission was given by the parents for their young daughter to attend Primary. Their one condition was that she had to want to go badly enough to get there on her own. Rides to church could not be provided. Because she had to go through a rough part of town, the ward council saw to it that someone would drive along beside her as she rode an old bicycle to church.

Through summer heat, through rain and even snow, she persisted in going to church. One young man, who with his family was assigned to escort her on a snowy morning, was so touched as he watched the commitment of this little girl pedaling through the snow and cold that he decided to serve a full-time mission, citing this experience as the turning point in his life.

At Christmastime, a family in the ward gave this faithful little girl a new 10-speed bicycle. This so touched the parents that they too began attending church. In May 1999 this young girl was baptized. What made the baptism even more special was that it was performed by the newest priest in the ward, her recently activated father.

Help council members work together

Bishops, for you to accomplish what the First Presidency and the Quorum of

the Twelve are asking, your ward council needs to capture this vision and work more closely together in doing God's great work of bringing to pass the immortality and eternal life of all of His children. Imagine the power that would come if every member of the Church would reach out to help all members and investigators enjoy the companionship of the Spirit. Let all of us work harder to see that the presence of the Spirit is in all of our meetings to bring about deeper spiritual conversion. This will especially require ward councils to assist the bishops in improving reverence in our sacrament meetings and in better teaching of the gospel of Jesus Christ in all of our Church meetings.

Now is the time to be bold in reaching out

All of us should constantly think about the Savior giving His life for us. We must never forget that He suffered rejection, humiliation, unspeakable agony, and eventually death in order to save you and me and the whole world from sin. Can any one of us go before Him in some future day and say that we didn't share the gospel with others and help others come to the missionaries because we were too busy or too shy, or for any other reason?

This is God's work. He wants us to participate with Him and His Beloved Son in bringing the gospel into the lives of all of His children. The Lord has promised us that our joy will be great if we bring just one soul unto Him (see D&C 18:15-16). Let us exercise greater faith and work together, members and missionaries, to bring many more souls unto Him. Let every family in the Church include as part of their daily family prayers a plea with the Lord to go before your family members and help them to find someone prepared to receive the message of the restored gospel of Jesus Christ.

Now is the time for members of the Church to be more bold in reaching out

to others, helping them to know the Church is true. Now is the time to sustain by our actions what President Gordon B. Hinckley is asking us to do.

Marshal all resources in the Lord's work

Lucifer is unleashing vulgar, revolting, violent, and sleazy filth with the design to destroy the spiritual sensitivity of our Father's children. We truly are at war with those who mock God and shun the truth, so let us keep our covenants and heed our call to service. Let us marshal all of the Lord's resources, including the power of our own testimonies. Let them be heard by many more people. Let the spirit of President Joseph F. Smith be in our hearts. Let us say, "I am ready to bear my testimony . . . at any time, or at any place, or in whatsoever circumstances I may be placed." It will help us

to do this by reading often the Prophet Joseph Smith's own story and then sharing with others our own sure knowledge that the fulness of the everlasting gospel of Jesus Christ has been restored once again to the earth.

We must move forward with the promise that the Spirit will bless us to know what to do and what to say as we assist those who are seeking to know the truth. Let us go forward with more faith, never forgetting that the Lord will help us as we turn to Him in mighty prayer. Our Heavenly Father lives and loves each of His children. The Lord Jesus Christ lives. The most important work we can do is to help God's children come to a full understanding of the restored gospel of Jesus Christ. This I know to be true and so testify in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

Elder Keith Crockett

Retaining a remission of sin

It was in his final address to his people that King Benjamin gave them a formula for retaining a remission of their sins. He had seen their willingness to enter into a covenant with God to do His will and to be obedient to His commandments in all things. Would it not be beneficial for us to review that formula so that we too might enjoy this great blessing?

After having received the great joy that comes from knowing the goodness of God and having tasted of His love, King Benjamin taught his people three basic principles that would help them retain a remission of their sins: first, to remain humble; second, to call upon the Lord daily; and third, to stand steadfast in the faith of that which was to come (see Mosiah 4:11).

Let us review each of these so that we may also be strengthened in our resolves to retain a remission of our sins.

Remain humble

Elder Bruce R. McConkie taught us that "all progress in spiritual things is conditioned upon the prior attainment of *humility*."¹ Humility has been described as having the "desire to submit to the Lord," the "desire to seek the Lord's will and glory," and the "desire to remove pride."²

King Benjamin told his people that they should "always retain in remembrance, the greatness of God, and your own nothingness, and his goodness and long-suffering towards you, unworthy creatures, and humble yourselves even in the depths of humility" (Mosiah 4:11). The Lord counseled in the Doctrine and Covenants that "inasmuch as they were