

# Missionary Work and the Atonement

*The Atonement of Jesus Christ is rightfully seen as the central fact, the crucial foundation, and the chief doctrine of the plan of salvation, which we are called to teach.*

*Ensign, March 2001, pages 8–15*

**BY ELDER JEFFREY R. HOLLAND**

*Of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles*

The Prophet Joseph Smith once declared that all things “which pertain to our religion are only appendages” to the Atonement of Jesus Christ.<sup>1</sup> In like manner and for the same reasons, every truth that a missionary or member teaches is only an appendage to the central message of all time — that Jesus is the Christ, the Only Begotten Son of God, the Holy Messiah, the Promised One, the Savior and Redeemer of the world; that He alone burst the bands of death and triumphed over the captivity of hell; that no one of us could ever have those same blessings without His intervention in our behalf; and that there never shall be any “other name given nor any other way nor means whereby salvation can come unto the children of men, [except] in and through the name of Christ, the Lord Omnipotent.”<sup>2</sup>

Our basic message is that with a complete offering of His body, His blood, and the anguish of His spirit, Christ atoned for the initial transgression of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, and also for the personal sins of everyone else who would ever live in this world from Adam to the end of time.

Some of those blessings are unconditional, such as the gift of the Resurrection. Other of the blessings, at least the full realization of them, are very conditional, requiring the keeping of commandments, the performance of ordinances, and living the life of a disciple of Christ.

Either way, the essential message of the gospel, the starting point for all other truths, is this from the Master’s own lips: “I am the way, the truth, and the life: no man cometh unto the Father, but by me.”<sup>3</sup> Thus

the Atonement of Christ, which makes that return to the Father possible, is rightfully seen as the central fact, the crucial foundation, and the chief doctrine of the great and eternal plan of salvation — “our Heavenly Father’s plan,” which we are called to teach.

Little wonder, then, that the Apostle Paul, the greatest missionary the world has ever known (or at least one of them), said: “The preaching of the cross is to them that perish foolishness; but unto us which are saved it is the power of God. ... For the Jews require a sign, and the Greeks seek after wisdom: *But we preach Christ crucified.*”<sup>4</sup>

## The “Good News”

Inherent in all of this is a rather simple definition of the gospel, at least when considered in its essence. The word *gospel* as we use it in English comes down to us through early scriptural language which meant literally “good news” or sometimes “glad tidings.” The “good news” was that death and hell could be escaped, that mistakes and sins could be overcome, that there was hope, that there was help, that the insoluble was solved, that the enemy had been conquered. The good news was that *everyone’s* tomb could one day be empty, that *everyone’s* soul could again be pure, that *every* child of God could again return to the Father who gave them life.

This is the essence of the message delivered by every prophet who has ever lived and every Apostle ever called to the work. It is the message we are called to declare. It is the message of the angel who came to those unsuspecting Judean shepherds:

“And, lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them: and they were sore afraid.

“And the angel said unto them, Fear not: for, behold, *I bring you good tidings of*

*great joy* [or, in other words, I bring you the *gospel* personified], which shall be to all people.

“For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord.”<sup>5</sup>

## Prerequisites for Baptism

Probably there are very few missionaries, if any, who do not know the centrality of this doctrine. But I have been surprised to regularly be with the missionaries and discover that this is not something that readily comes forward in a discussion of missionary work.

For example, in zone conferences, which are some of the greatest teaching moments we as General Authorities have with these young elders and sisters, I have asked missionaries what it is they want investigators<sup>6</sup> to do as a result of their discussions with them.

“Be baptized!” is shouted forward in an absolute chorus.

“Yes,” I say, “we do want them to be baptized, but what has to precede that?”

Now they are a little leery. *Aha*, they think. *This is a test. It is a test on the first discussion.*<sup>7</sup> “Read the Book of Mormon!” someone shouts. “Pray!” an elder roars from the back of the room. “Attend church!” one of the sisters on the front row declares. “Receive all of the discussions!” someone else offers.

“Well, you have pretty much covered the commitments in the first discussion,” I say, “but what else do you want your investigators to do?”

“Be baptized!” The chorus comes a second time.

“Elders,” I plead, “you have already told

<sup>5</sup> Luke 2:9–11; emphasis added

<sup>6</sup> At the time, church members often called those the missionaries were teaching “investigators”. The church began to move away from this term in the mid-2000s.

<sup>7</sup> The missionary lessons used to be called “discussions”. The church moved away from this term with the introduction of *Preach My Gospel* in 2004.

<sup>1</sup> See *Teachings of Presidents of the Church: Joseph Smith* (2007), page 49

<sup>2</sup> Mosiah 3:17; compare Acts 4:12

<sup>3</sup> John 14:6

<sup>4</sup> 1 Corinthians 1:18, 22–23; emphasis added



me about baptism, and I am still asking!”

Well, now they are stumped. *It must be commitments from the other discussions*, they think. “Live the Word of Wisdom!” someone says. “Pay tithing!” another shouts. And so it goes.

I don’t always run through this little exercise in a zone conference, but sometimes I do. And I have to say that almost never do the missionaries get around to identifying the two most fundamental things we want investigators to do prior to baptism: have faith in the Lord Jesus Christ and repent of their sins. Yet “we believe that the first principles and ordinances of the Gospel are: first, Faith in the Lord Jesus Christ; second, Repentance; [then] third, Baptism by immersion *for the remission of sins*; fourth, Laying on of hands for the gift of the Holy Ghost.”<sup>8</sup>

A convert’s new life is to be built upon faith in the Lord Jesus Christ and His redeeming sacrifice — a conviction that He really is the Son of God, that He lives this very moment, that He really is the door of the sheepfold, that He alone holds the key to our salvation and exaltation. That belief is to be followed by true repentance, repentance which shows our desire to be clean and renewed and whole, repentance that allows us to lay claim to the full blessings of the Atonement.

Then comes baptism for the remission of sins. Yes, baptism is also for membership in the Church, but that isn’t what the Prophet Joseph Smith chose to stress in that article of faith. He stressed that it was baptism for the remission of sins — focusing you and me, the missionary and the investigator again on the Atonement, on salvation, on the gift Christ gives us. This points that new convert toward the blessings of the “good news.”

## Making the Atonement Central to Missionary Work

In an effort to keep our work closely linked to the Savior’s ministry, let me suggest some things all of us might do to keep Christ and His Atonement in the forefront of members’ and investigators’ consciousness.

Encourage in every way possible more spiritual Church meetings, especially sacrament meetings. One of the great fears missionaries have at least in some locations

is taking their investigators to church. And indeed the investigators deserve to feel essentially the same spirit in sacrament meeting that they feel when being taught by the missionaries.

It will also help orient investigators if missionaries will take some time to explain the ordinance of the sacrament that investigators will be witnessing, what it means for the renewing of baptismal covenants, that the emblems represent the Savior’s body and blood, and so forth. Missionaries could read to these investigators the sacramental prayers as found in the scriptures, they could share some of the words of favorite sacrament hymns, or they could do any number of other things that would help these new visitors and prospective members have a powerful learning experience when they visit a sacrament meeting.

In like manner, do all that you can to make your baptismal services a spiritual, Christ-centered experience. A new convert deserves to have this be a sacred, carefully planned, and spiritually uplifting moment. The prayers, the hymns, surely the talks that are given — all ought to be focused on the significance of this ordinance and the Atonement of Christ, which makes it efficacious.

Probably no other meeting we hold in the Church has the high referral and future baptismal harvest that a baptismal service does. Many of the investigators who attend a baptismal service (that is, the service of someone else being baptized) will go on to their own baptisms. That is more likely to occur if this service is a spiritual, strong teaching moment in which it is clear to participants and visitors alike that this is a sacred act of faith centered on the Lord Jesus Christ, that it is an act of repentance claiming the cleansing power of Christ, that through His majesty and Atonement it brings a remission of sins as well as, with confirmation, membership in His Church. Missionaries, don’t get so consumed with the desire to record a baptism that you yourselves forget what this baptism represents and what it must mean in the life of this new member.

Throughout the teaching experience, missionaries must bear testimony of the Savior and His gift of salvation to us. Obviously you should bear testimony regularly of all the principles you are teaching, but it is especially important that you bear testimony of this central doctrine

in the plan of our Heavenly Father.

There are several reasons for bearing testimony. One is that when you declare the truth, it will bring an echo, a memory, even if it is an unconscious memory to the investigator, that they have heard this truth before — and of course they have. A missionary’s testimony invokes a great legacy of testimony dating back to the councils in heaven before this world was. There, in an earlier place, these same people heard this same plan outlined and heard there the role that Jesus Christ would play in their salvation.

“And I heard a loud voice saying in heaven, Now is come salvation, and strength, and the kingdom of our God, and *the power of his Christ*: for the accuser of our brethren is cast down, which accused them before our God day and night.

*“And they overcame him by the blood of the Lamb, and by the word of their testimony; and they loved not their lives unto the death.”*<sup>9</sup>

So the fact of the matter is investigators are not only hearing our testimony of Christ, but they are hearing echoes of other, earlier testimonies, including their own testimony of Him, for they were on the side of the faithful who kept their first estate and earned the privilege of a second estate. We must always remember that these investigators, every man, woman, and child, were among the valiant who once overcame Satan by the power of their testimony of Christ! So when they hear others bear that witness of Christ’s saving mission, it has a familiar feeling; it brings an echo of truth they themselves already know.

Furthermore, when you bear witness of “Jesus Christ, and him crucified,”<sup>10</sup> to use Paul’s phrase, you invoke the power of God the Father and the Holy Ghost. The Savior Himself taught about bearing witness before any other doctrine when He visited the Nephites:

“After this manner shall ye baptize in my name; for behold, verily I say unto you, that the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Ghost are one. ...

“And this is my doctrine, and it is the doctrine which the Father hath given unto me. ...

“... Whoso believeth in me believeth in the Father also; and *unto him* [the

<sup>8</sup> Fourth Article of Faith; emphasis added

<sup>9</sup> Revelation 12:10–11; emphasis added

<sup>10</sup> 1 Corinthians 2:2



investigator] *will the Father bear record of me, for he will visit him [the investigator] with fire and with the Holy Ghost.*

*“And thus will the Father bear record of me, and the Holy Ghost will bear record unto him [the investigator] of the Father and me; for the Father, and I, and the Holy Ghost are one. ...*

*“... This is my doctrine, and whoso buildeth upon this buildeth upon my rock, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against them.”<sup>11</sup>*

So why should we bear frequent and powerful testimony of Christ as Savior, as Redeemer, as Atoning Lamb of God? Because doing so invites and becomes part of the divine power of testimony borne by God the Father and by the Holy Ghost, a testimony borne on wings of fire to the very hearts of investigators. Such a divine testimony of Christ is the rock upon which every new convert must build. Only this testimony of the atoning Anointed, Victorious One will prevail against the gates of hell. So saith the Son of God Himself.

Study the scriptures conscientiously and become familiar with those passages that teach and testify of Christ's redeeming mission. Nothing will so touch your heart and stir your soul like the truths of which I have been speaking.

I would particularly ask full-time and member missionaries to study from and teach the Atonement of Christ out of the Book of Mormon. I say that in a very biased way, because it was on my own mission that I came to love the Book of Mormon and the majesty of the Son of God which is revealed there. In its unparalleled focus on the messianic message of the Savior of the world, the Book of Mormon is literally a new testament or (to avoid confusion) “another testament” of Jesus Christ. As such the book centers upon that which scriptural testaments have always centered upon since the days of Adam and Eve: the declaration to all that through the Atonement of the Son of God, “as thou hast fallen thou mayest be redeemed, and all mankind, even as many as will.”<sup>12</sup>

## Testimonies of Book of Mormon Prophets

There is not enough space here to convey the wonder and breadth of these Book of Mormon sermons, but consider this from

Nephi early in his ministry:

“And the world, because of their iniquity, shall judge him to be a thing of naught; wherefore they scourge him, and he suffereth it; and they smite him, and he suffereth it. Yea, they spit upon him, and he suffereth it, because of his loving kindness and his long-suffering towards the children of men.

“And the God of our fathers, ... yea, the God of Abraham, and of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, yieldeth himself ... as a man, into the hands of wicked men, to be lifted up, according to the words of Zenock, and to be crucified, according to the words of Neum, and to be buried in a sepulchre, according to the words of Zenos. ...

“And all these things must surely come, saith the prophet Zenos. And the rocks of the earth must rend; and because of the groanings of the earth, many of the kings of the isles of the sea shall be wrought upon by the Spirit of God, to exclaim: The God of nature suffers.”<sup>13</sup>

Or this from Nephi at the end of his life:

“And now, my beloved brethren, after ye have gotten into this strait and narrow path, I would ask if all is done? Behold, I say unto you, Nay; for ye have not come thus far save it were by the word of Christ with unshaken faith in him, relying wholly upon the merits of him who is mighty to save.

“Wherefore, ye must press forward with a steadfastness in Christ, having a perfect brightness of hope, and a love of God and of all men. Wherefore, if ye shall press forward, feasting upon the word of Christ, and endure to the end, behold, thus saith the Father: Ye shall have eternal life.

“And now, behold, my beloved brethren, this is the way; ... this is the doctrine of Christ, and the only and true doctrine of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost.”<sup>14</sup>

Or this from Nephi's remarkable brother Jacob, who gave a *two-day* sermon on the Fall and the Atonement!

“I know ... that in the body he shall show himself unto those at Jerusalem, ... for it behooveth the great Creator that he suffereth himself to become subject unto man in the flesh, and die for all men, that all men might become subject unto him.

“For as death hath passed upon all men, to fulfil the merciful plan of the great Creator, there must needs be a power of

resurrection, and the resurrection must needs come unto man by reason of the fall; and the fall came by reason of transgression; and because man became fallen they were cut off from the presence of the Lord.

“Wherefore, it must needs be an infinite atonement. ...

“O how great the goodness of our God, who prepareth a way for our escape from the grasp of this awful monster; yea, that monster, death and hell, which I call the death of the body, and also the death of the spirit. ...

“And he cometh into the world that he may save all men if they will hearken unto his voice; for behold, he suffereth the pains of all men, yea, the pains of every living creature, both men, women, and children, who belong to the family of Adam.

“And he suffereth this that the resurrection might pass upon all men. ...

“And he commandeth all men that they must repent, and be baptized in his name, having perfect faith in the Holy One of Israel, or they cannot be saved in the kingdom of God.”<sup>15</sup>

Consider this from King Benjamin:

“For behold, the time cometh, and is not far distant, that with power, the Lord Omnipotent ... shall come down from heaven among the children of men, and shall dwell in a tabernacle of clay, and shall go forth amongst men, working mighty miracles, such as healing the sick, raising the dead, causing the lame to walk, the blind to receive their sight, and the deaf to hear, and curing all manner of diseases.

“And he shall cast out devils, or the evil spirits which dwell in the hearts of the children of men.

“And lo, he shall suffer temptations, and pain of body, hunger, thirst, and fatigue, even more than man can suffer, except it be unto death; for behold, blood cometh from every pore, so great shall be his anguish for the wickedness and the abominations of his people. ...

“... And even after all this they shall consider him a man, and say that he hath a devil, and shall scourge him, and shall crucify him.

“And he shall rise the third day from the dead. ...

“... His blood atoneth for the sins of those who have fallen by the transgression of Adam, who have died not knowing the will of God concerning them, or who have

<sup>11</sup> 3 Nephi 11:27, 32, 35–36, 39; emphasis added

<sup>12</sup> Moses 5:9

<sup>13</sup> 1 Nephi 19:9–10, 12

<sup>14</sup> 2 Nephi 31:19–21

<sup>15</sup> 2 Nephi 9:5–7, 10, 21–23



ignorantly sinned.”<sup>16</sup>

Or, as a last example, this from the great patriarch Lehi:

“Wherefore, redemption cometh in and through the Holy Messiah. ...

“Behold, he offereth himself a sacrifice for sin, to answer the ends of the law, unto all those who have a broken heart and a contrite spirit; and unto none else can the ends of the law be answered.

“Wherefore, *how great the importance to make these things known unto the inhabitants of the earth*, that they may know that there is no flesh that can dwell in the presence of God, save it be through the merits, and mercy, and grace of the Holy Messiah, who layeth down his life according to the flesh, and taketh it again by the power of the Spirit, that he may bring to pass the resurrection of the dead, being the first that should rise.

“Wherefore, he is the firstfruits unto God, inasmuch as he shall make intercession for all the children of men; and they that believe in him shall be saved.”<sup>17</sup>

Obviously, you recognize that these samples are testimonies from just the first pages of the Book of Mormon. Perhaps this is enough to give you a feel for the urgent, impressive theme that runs all through that sacred record. With its declared title-page purpose of testifying that Jesus is the Christ, little wonder that the Book of Mormon was the first — and is still the greatest — missionary tract of this dispensation. As Lehi says to me and to you, “How great the importance to make these things [of the Atonement] known unto the inhabitants of the earth.”

I testify to you that we will change lives, including our own, if we will teach the Atonement through the Book of Mormon as well as, of course, from all of the other scriptures.

## The Atonement and the Missionary

Almost everything I have said here has been an aid directed toward the missionary process, ultimately toward the investigator. May I close with an extended testimony about how focusing on the Atonement helps full-time and member missionaries and mission leaders.

Anyone who does any kind of missionary work will have occasion to ask, Why is this so hard? Why doesn't it go

better? Why can't our success be more rapid? Why aren't there more people joining the Church? It is the truth. We believe in angels. We trust in miracles. Why don't people just flock to the font? Why isn't the only risk in missionary work that of pneumonia from being soaking wet all day and all night in the baptismal font?

You will have occasion to ask those questions. I have thought about this a great deal. I offer this as my personal feeling. I am convinced that missionary work is not easy because *salvation is not a cheap experience*. Salvation *never* was easy. We are The Church of Jesus Christ, this is the truth, and He is our Great Eternal Head. How could we believe it would be easy for us when it was never, ever easy for Him? It seems to me that missionaries and mission leaders have to spend at least a few moments in Gethsemane. Missionaries and mission leaders have to take at least a step or two toward the summit of Calvary.

Now, please don't misunderstand. I'm not talking about anything anywhere near what Christ experienced. That would be presumptuous and sacrilegious. But I believe that missionaries *and* investigators, to come to the truth, to come to salvation, to know something of this price that has been paid, will have to pay a token of that same price.

For that reason I don't believe missionary work has ever been easy, nor that conversion is, nor that retention is, nor that continued faithfulness is. I believe it is supposed to require some effort, something from the depths of our soul.

If He could come forward in the night, kneel down, fall on His face, bleed from every pore, and cry, “Abba, Father (Papa), if this cup can pass, let it pass,”<sup>18</sup> then little wonder that salvation is not a whimsical or easy thing for us. If you wonder if there isn't an easier way, you should remember you are not the first one to ask that. Someone a lot greater and a lot grander asked a long time ago if there wasn't an easier way.

The Atonement will carry the missionaries perhaps even more importantly than it will carry the investigators. When you struggle, when you are rejected, when you are spit upon and cast out and made a hiss and a byword, you are standing with the best life this world has ever known, the only pure and perfect life ever lived. You have reason to stand tall

and be grateful that the Living Son of the Living God knows all about your sorrows and afflictions. The only way to salvation is through Gethsemane and on to Calvary. The only way to eternity is through Him — the Way, the Truth, and the Life.

I testify that the living God is our Eternal Father and that Jesus Christ is His living and Only Begotten Son in the flesh. I testify that this Jesus, who was slain and hanged on a tree,<sup>19</sup> was the chief Apostle then and is the chief Apostle now, the Great High Priest, the chief cornerstone of His Church in this last and greatest of all dispensations. I testify that He lives, that the whole triumph of the gospel is that He lives, and because He does, so will we.

On that first Resurrection Sunday, Mary Magdalene first thought she saw a gardener. Well, she did — the Gardener who cultivated Eden and who endured Gethsemane. The Gardener who gave us the rose of Sharon, the lily of the valley, the cedars of Lebanon, the tree of life.

I declare Him to be the Savior of the world, the Bishop and Shepherd of our souls, the Bright and Morning Star. I know that our garments can be washed white only in the blood of that Lamb, slain from the foundation of the world. I know that we are lifted up unto life because He was lifted up unto death, that He bore our griefs and carried our sorrows, and with His stripes we are healed. I bear witness that He was wounded for our transgressions and bruised for our iniquities, that He was a man of sorrows acquainted with grief because upon Him were laid the transgressions of us all.<sup>20</sup>

I bear witness that He came from God as a God to bind up the brokenhearted, to dry the tears from every eye, to proclaim liberty to the captive and open the prison doors to them that are bound.<sup>21</sup> I promise that because of your faithful response to the call to spread the gospel, He will bind up *your* broken hearts, dry *your* tears, and set *you* and your families free. That is my missionary promise to you and your missionary message to the world.

*From a talk given at the Provo (Utah) Missionary Training Center on 20 June 2000.*

<sup>16</sup> Mosiah 3:5–7, 9–11

<sup>17</sup> 2 Nephi 2:6–9; emphasis added

<sup>18</sup> See Mark 14:36

<sup>19</sup> See Acts 5:30

<sup>20</sup> See Isaiah 53; Mosiah 14

<sup>21</sup> See Isaiah 61:1–3