

The Joyous Obligation of Missionary Work

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It is always a very pleasant but humbling experience to be in your presence. You of our rising generation are very special, and I salute you not only for what you are, but for what you can become. I appreciate that kind introduction given by Brother Gundersen. He has been rather generous in listing positions held and personal achievements; and, as is generally the case, he made them sound more auspicious and significant than they really are. I have often wondered how the Lord reacts to such introductions when he monitors our meetings. You will recall that he, the resurrected Christ and Savior of all mankind, received this simple but profound seven-word introduction: This is My Beloved Son: Hear Him !” (Joseph Smith 2:17).

These past several weeks I have prayed and pondered at great length about this assignment and uppermost in my mind has been the thought that I must instruct by the Spirit of truth—otherwise my words will not edify nor cause you to rejoice. Uppermost in my heart has been the desire to present a message which the Prophet would approve and endorse. Also, I have felt a nagging concern for two groups of people: those who have not tasted the joy associated with missionary service, either as full-time or as stake missionaries; and those

who have served as missionaries at one time or another and have tasted the sweetness of such service, but who have since excused themselves from further involvement.

In section 123 of the Doctrine and Covenants reference is made three times to “an imperative duty.” This imperative duty, we are told, is owed to God, to angels, to our wives, to our children, to widows, to the fatherless, to all the rising generation, and to all the pure in heart. What is this duty? To establish truth, to make public the facts concerning the Church and the restoration of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Why should this be done? Why publish truth? To combat the powers of the evil one and to overcome that satanic spirit which oppresses and enslaves men. Through the Prophet Joseph Smith, the Lord spoke of

the influence of that spirit which hath so strongly riveted the creeds of the fathers, who have inherited lies, upon the hearts of the children, and filled the

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world with confusion, and has been growing stronger and stronger, and is now the very mainspring of all corruption, and the whole earth groans under the weight of its iniquity.

It is an iron yoke, it is a strong band; they are the very handcuffs, and chains, and shackles, and fetters of hell. [D&C 123:7–8]

What then, according to this scripture, is our imperative duty, our urgent and not-to-be-avoided task? It is to bring to light all the hidden things of darkness and to build the kingdom of God. It is to be ambassadors of truth and active participants in the Lord's great missionary cause.

Three weeks ago, I had the privilege of meeting a very unusual convert, a former Protestant minister. This young man, as I was told, upon completion of his training for the ministry, became a spokesman for his church against the Mormons. He studied carefully the anti-mormon literature and developed powerful presentations to discredit the Church. In time he became rather popular and famous. I am told that on one occasion he attended a lecture given by an LDS professor. He was impressed by what he heard and stayed after class to meet the Mormon instructor. He proceeded to tell the professor of his work, his special ministry in opposition to the Mormon faith. The professor listened politely and responded somewhat like this: "I suspect you should do what you think is right; however, be certain that what you teach about Mormonism is true."

The minister could not get these words of the professor out of his mind. A few days later he revisited the Mormon and invited him to read and criticize the text of his anti-Mormon talks, stating that he was sincere in his desire to teach the truth. As you might guess, the professor found a few errors in the material and proceeded to make the necessary corrections. He also suggested that the minister might obtain further truth about Mormonism by attending meetings of the Church, listening to the missionaries, and fellowshiping with the Saints in

that particular area. He did all of these things and more. The time came when truth overcame error, and prejudice was replaced by understanding and love.

Allow me to describe the concluding scene of this conversion story as it was told me. A great high priest, one of the finest missionaries I know, visited the minister and invited him to be baptized. The minister admitted that he knew the Church was true, but evaded the baptism issue by saying that he did not want to break up his marriage.

"Well," said the high priest, "have you spoken with your wife about joining the Church?"

"No," he said, "I haven't dared to do so."

"Do it now," urged the Church member.

So he did; he called his wife into the room and announced his desire to become a Mormon. The wife—and I should say that she had been fellowshipped well by the Relief Society sisters—flew across the room and jumped into her husband's arms, exclaiming, "I've been waiting weeks to hear you say this!" As I said earlier, I met and visited briefly with this remarkable couple. Their expression of testimony to me was simply, "We have never known such joy."

Over and over again the Lord has made mention of our imperative missionary duty. Do you remember that significant portion of the baptismal covenant taught among the Nephites at the Waters of Mormon? Those baptized committed to "stand as witnesses of God at all times and in all things, and in all places . . . , even until death" (Mosiah 18:9). Do you remember the commandment contained in the revelation given to the Church in 1831? Please note these words:

And again, I say unto you, I give unto you a commandment, that every man, both elder, priest, teacher, and also member, go to with his might, with the labor of his hands, to prepare and accomplish the things which I have commanded.

And let your preaching be the warning voice, every man to his neighbor, in mildness and in meekness. [D&C 38:40–41]

Do you remember the instruction found in modern revelation which reminds us of our need to warn our neighbors? It reads: “Behold, I sent you out to testify and warn the people, and it becometh every man who hath been warned to warn his neighbor. Therefore, they are left without excuse, and their sins are upon their own heads” (D&C 88:81–82). President Kimball makes frequent reference to the concluding verses found in the gospel according to Matthew:

Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost:

Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you: and, lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world. [Matthew 28:19–20]

These and other scriptures make it abundantly clear that those who find truth have the holy responsibility to share that new found truth with others. God does expect us, his children, to advance his cause. Our work and glory, like his, should be “to bring to pass the immortality an eternal life of man” (Moses 1:39). This business of saving souls is serious, and we must do whatever is within our power to save our Father’s children. It is our imperative duty.

Recognizing that the gospel was restored to the earth nearly a hundred and fifty years ago, the question is asked, “How are we doing? What progress are we making in terms of carrying the gospel to all lands and to all peoples?” In my youth I heard local priesthood leaders read and expound on many occasions the following scripture: “The keys of the kingdom of God are committed unto man on the earth, and from thence shall the gospel roll forth unto the ends of the earth, as the

stone which is cut out of the mountain without hands shall roll forth, until it has filled the whole earth” (D&C 65:2). Though these words were part of a revelation given to the Prophet Joseph Smith in 1831, and though I trusted in the scriptures and the words of my leaders, I seriously wondered whether they would ever be fulfilled. After all, at that time our numbers were comparatively few, our missionary force was small, and Church growth came slowly. In recent years, however, certain things have occurred in our proselyting effort to change my point of view from one of skepticism to one of prospect and hope. Note these interesting statistics included in a report made by President Kimball in the October 1976 general conference. I quote:

It is estimated that it took 117 years, from 1830 to 1947, to attain one million members. Then it took sixteen years, from 1947 to 1963, to reach the second million members, and then nine years, from 1963 to 1972, to attain the third million. It will probably take about four or five years to move up to the four-million mark, and then we can guess what the future holds. [Ensign, November 1976, p. 4]

Who can read such statistics and still doubt the word of the Lord?

Let me share other facts related to the Church missionary effort which provide further evidence that the stone is rolling forth to fill the whole earth. Did you know that we now have one hundred fifty-six full-time-missions in addition to the nearly nine hundred stake missions organized? We now have more than twenty-five thousand full-time missionaries in the field. Thirty years ago we boasted when we reached the three-thousand mark. We obtained upwards of 140,000 convert baptisms in 1976, a forty-eight percent increase over the missionary productivity in 1975; again, thirty years ago we were proud to reach 6,000 converts. We now have organized missions located in fifty-three countries.

Other statistics could be cited to confirm the truth that prophecy is being fulfilled, that we are engaged in the Lord's divine work. Still, however, our work must be accelerated. We must see the urgency of the missionary cause as the prophet sees it and fulfill our imperative duty of sharing the gospel with all people. If we expect to keep pace with the prophet in this business of saving souls we must accept his vision. He has declared to Church members:

We expect to have complete cooperation between the stake and full-time missionaries, and to involve the members of the Church generally in opening the gospel door to our Father's other children. . . .

I seem to envision . . . thousands . . . prepared and anxious . . . for missionary service . . . until the army of the Lord's missionaries would cover the earth as the waters cover the mighty deep.

. . . It is unrealistic to expect 19,000 or even 100,000 missionaries to cover the globe. . . . We call upon priesthood leaders to teach every family in the Church to assume its responsibilities. [Regional Representatives Seminars, April 4, 1974, and April 3, 1975]

In my mind there is one undergirding belief and one undergirding desire associated with successful missionary work; if one does not embrace this belief and desire, the challenge to be a full-time missionary or a member is just so many words. With this belief and desire, however, one's participation in missionary activities assumes a sense of urgency and excitement. The imperative duty of which I speak becomes a labor of love, not just another Church assignment. Allow me to explain. The undergirding belief of which I speak is this:

[That] *there are many yet on the earth among all sects, parties, and denominations, who are blinded by the subtle craftiness of men, whereby they lie in wait to deceive, and who are only kept from the truth because they know not where to find it. [D&C 123:12]*

A few days ago my wife and I attended a youth conference in Texas. The concluding meeting was a testimony meeting, and among the forty-five or fifty who expressed themselves was a beautiful young lady. She began by saying, "I do not belong to your church, but y'all have something great going good here and I want to be a part of it."

Another participant, a rough and tough young man, stood and said, "Y'all will have to forgive me. I ain't been a member long, and I ain't had all the rough edges cut off yet."

Earlier this year we received a touching letter from a young lady in the East. I would like to read a part of that letter.

I'm so excited and moved by the Family Home Evening program. I can hardly wait to show it to my friends. My husband and I are newlyweds — we're both college students. Having both been brought up with strong religious backgrounds, he Catholic and I Baptist [and that's an explosive combination], we're now looking for a church that will meet our needs and one where we can meet its needs. [Isn't that interesting? Note this:] By this I mean that we want to find a Church where we can expand our knowledge and get involved by giving up part of our time and ourselves. [She doesn't know what she's in for.] We don't believe in just attending church on Sunday morning, and we want to believe that we live the teachings of Jesus Christ all week long rather than just on Sunday.

[She states further,] *We know very little about the Mormon church, its history, its present, or its future hopes. We're trying now to find material to broaden our understanding and we would greatly appreciate any information you could send to us or recommend to us. [And, I assure you, that request has been filled.] We're so excited and thrilled. This is like a whole new world opening up before us and we can hardly wait to walk into it. Thank you so very much for your inspiration.*

One more illustration. A number of years ago, while presiding over the Texas North

Mission, I had occasion to fly from Dallas to Lubbock, and as I boarded the plane I looked for someone interesting to sit by. Upon entering the plane I saw a young lady seated by herself reading the Bible. At first I thought she was a lady missionary en route home from her mission; however, as I looked more closely I could see that her Bible was not the King James version. So I asked if she minded if I sat by her. She invited me to do so. Once into the air, I commented that it appeared as if she loved the scriptures. In response she held up the book and shook it in my face and said, "Mister, that book saved my life. It means everything to me."

Then she proceeded to tell me her story. Among other things she had been a dropout from her family, school, and church. In fact, she confessed that her life had become so sordid and confused that she had even entertained the idea of committing suicide. When life seemed darkest someone introduced her to the Bible, and it was the word of the Lord that turned her around. I was touched by her testimony.

In the middle of our conversation the pilot announced that Lubbock was overcast with heavy clouds and that our destination had been changed. This announcement disappointed everyone. Quietly and privately I prayed that the clouds would lift and that we would be able to land in Lubbock. I had a very special meeting that I needed to attend. A few minutes later, the pilot again interrupted the conversation by announcing that the storm had moved on and that we would land in Lubbock as scheduled. Everyone cheered. I turned to my traveling companion and said, "Now, there's a quick answer to a prayer."

"Oh," she replied, "were you praying, too?" For the rest of my life I will wonder whose prayer was heard, whose faith worked the miracle.

Many more cases and stories could be added in support of the belief that there are many good and faithful God-fearing people who are only kept from the truth because they know

not where to find it. The undergirding desire of all missionary work should be the same as that which motivated Alma and the sons of Mosiah in their labors. It was said of them: "They were desirous that salvation should be declared to every creature, for they could not bear that any human soul should perish; yea, even the very thoughts that any soul should endure endless torment did cause them to quake and tremble" (Mosiah 28:3). It has been my experience that most new converts to the Church share this desire. Having tasted of the gospel fruits, they desire that others, particularly family members, partake of it also. For they know, as Lehi knew, that it is desirable above all other fruit. One young convert expressed his desire to share the gospel when he said about his family members: "I want them to know as I know. I want them to feel as I feel. I want them to do what I have done."

I feel that the undergirding belief and desire of missionary work that I have discussed constitutes the spirit of missionary service. Can one sit back and do nothing about gospel-sharing when he recognizes the value of souls and knows that these souls thirst for truth? I think not. I have spent many hours pondering the problem of member involvement in missionary work, including my own; and gradually I have reached the conclusion that productive participation in the Lord's proselyting effort begins with the spirit, grows as confidence is gained, and matures through full involvement in friendship and fellowship activities. I do not have the time to discuss this involvement process in great detail, but I would like to outline three simple steps.

The first step is to catch the spirit by sustaining the missionary effort. This step invites members to sustain the missionary effort by modeling the gospel, by fasting and praying that the doors to nations and hearts of men will be opened, and by supporting full-time and stake missionaries. Such sustaining actions

are rather simple but very important. Almost invariably, it seems, modeling of the truth by a Church member is chapter one in conversion stories.

Not long ago I attended a stake conference where a recent convert was called upon to bear his testimony. He began his story by saying that his initial interest in the Church was sparked by a business associate—a member of the stake presidency. After relating the incidents leading to his conversion the man said, pointing to the counselor, “I’m here because of him. Thank God he modeled the gospel and caused me to want to be like him.”

We must also remember the precious nature of souls and the power of prayer and thus request God’s help in obtaining success in labors with others. We need to lift our voices to heaven as Alma did and cry,

O Lord, wilt thou grant unto us that we may have success in bringing them again unto thee in Christ.

Behold, O Lord, their souls are precious, and many of them are our brethren; therefore, give unto us, O Lord, power and wisdom that we may bring these, our brethren, again unto thee. [Alma 31:34–35]

Many times I have heard President Kimball invite Church members to pray that our work will succeed, that doors will be opened. By doing these and similar things we direct our thoughts beyond ourselves toward others and become concerned for the welfare. In this way the missionary spirit is felt and caught.

Speaking of the power of prayer and the power of fasting and the redemption of souls, let me share this story. Recently I interviewed a prospective missionary with a very unusual history. At age seventeen she ran away from home and lived with a man without bothering with a formal marriage. Her partner was an evil, conniving, conspiring businessman. He used the young lady in various ways to gain

business advantages. On many occasions he arranged for her to sleep with clients. After two years of such wallowing in sin, the young lady woke up with a start one morning, wondering, “What am I doing? What is this doing to my family? Where is this leading?” She had not entertained thoughts like this before—it came new. It bothered her to the point that she dressed, left the apartment, and wandered the streets. She was confused and wondered what she should do. Finally, she determined that she should return home, like the prodigal son, and seek help from loved ones. Upon her return home she learned that her parents, brothers and sisters, and others were fasting and praying at that moment that she would find her way home. A loving father and serviceable bishop accepted her confession and did what was necessary to help her clean up her life. In fact, they put her on a cleanup program that lasted three years.

As this young and beautiful lady completed her program and was accepted back into the Church in full fellowship, her one desire was to serve the Lord as a full-time missionary. She explained to me that she had received many proposals, but that she had turned them down because, as she stated, “I have a debt to pay. I was reclaimed through the grace of God and I want to do something in return.” There is power in fasting and prayer and it should be applied in our efforts to redeem souls. We should fast and pray that all of God’s children will find their way home.

Once the spirit of the work is with us we generally want to share our blessings with others. This is the second step, in which we build confidence by sharing. The desire to share should motivate us to serve missions if we are the proper age and have not served previously, to prepare our sons and daughters for missions, to send our money on missions by contributing to the missionary fund, to share copies of the Book of Mormon, to share subscriptions to Church magazines, and to seek referrals. These

sharing actions tend to build confidence in the program, and they can be done by the most timid of us. I thrill each time I reflect upon the sharing exemplified in the James R. Boone family of Jacksonville, Florida. Brother Boone, his first wife, and thirteen sons and daughters have all served full-time missions. A second wife also served a mission. Just imagine, sixteen returned missionaries in one family—what joy and confidence they have reaped!

Each time I think of sharing a copy of the Book of Mormon, I am reminded of a young lady in Texas who was introduced to the gospel by my daughter. This prospective convert had a difficult time accepting the teachings presented by the missionaries in the first few discussions, and at one time—when informed that her previous baptism, conducted by a Protestant church, was invalid—walked away from the mission home vowing never to return. Weeks later, however, because of some faith-promoting experiences, the young lady did return to hear more and was baptized into the Church.

After her baptism I asked, “What brought you back?”

“It was the book,” she said, “the Book of Mormon.” The Book of Mormon and Church magazines are great missionary tools—they should be shared liberally with others. They help to teach and testify of the truth even while you and the missionaries sleep.

Steps one and two should promote a desire to become fully involved in friendship and fellowshiping of nonmember families, which is step three. Regardless of the number in your family unit, regardless of where you are living, the process is the same: You prayerfully select a nonmember friend or family, plan friendship activities, invite them to learn more about the Church, and continue fellowshiping those friends or families after they become members of the Church. I was thrilled when we lived in Hawaii—our son brought home an associate of his, one that he had met at work, and invited him to share a family home evening

with us. I have to admit that he did not look all that clean, and I wondered why our son was associating with him; but it was no long at all, after some friendshiping and fellowshiping activities, that this young man cleaned himself up and was baptized into the Church. What a thrill it was for me, a few months ago when I visited the California Arcadia Mission, to see this young man sitting with the missionaries. He is there serving a full-time mission.

I have a friend, Brother George Goff, who attributes his conversion and continued growth in the Church to this kind of friendshiping and fellowshiping. Let me read a part of his story.

When my wife, Linda, and I moved to Waco, Texas, in 1969, I could feel something unusual was going to happen. We were active Southern Baptists and had a conservative life-style. When we attended our first company party, we felt a little uneasy, but soon identified with some people who felt as we did. When Leo Weidner entered, the group started to ask him jokingly if he had brought his own root beer again. It soon became apparent that he didn't need alcohol to have a good time. I was impressed with his jovial spirit and the next day asked him about his religious beliefs. He immediately told me he was a Latter-day Saint and invited us to his ward to a missionary meeting on the Book of Mormon.

As soon as I heard the Joseph Smith story and saw his picture in the grove, I knew the Church was true. I bore my testimony to family and friends and they expressed how disturbed they were with my “odd behavior.”

Brother Weidner gave us constant attention and soon introduced us to a new couple who had joined the home office. This couple, Del and Vergie Rogers, became a tremendous force in our conversion. They became our friends and discovered our individual needs. Although the Spirit had touched me, I still had an unquenchable desire to know doctrine. They supplied full-time missionaries, standard works, missionary seminars, and everything possible to help us gain this knowledge.

Linda made it apparent that she really wasn't interested in changing churches. Vergie Rogers told us later that she decided to "just become Linda's good friend and not mention religion anymore." Through this friendship she found that Linda had a great interest in genealogy and food storage. Linda even became so enthusiastic that we bought a full year's supply of food before we joined the Church.

Because Texas was our home and there were few Latter-day Saints in our area, these three people had tough resistance in convincing us to make a religious change. They fellowshipped us constantly for a year before we were baptized. Almost every week we were invited to their homes for dinner or ice cream, or we were invited to movies, Church socials, and Church meetings. They were so sincerely interested in us that we really couldn't feel intimidated. At our baptism and afterwards we had total evidence of the sincerity of these Saints:

1. A former mission president (Sanford Eliason) traveled 120 miles to speak at our baptism.

2. The new mission president (Carlos E. Asay) wrote a letter of congratulations and gave us constant encouragement after our baptism.

3. Del and Vergie Rogers traveled 1,400 miles to attend the Los Angeles Temple with us a year after our baptism.

4. Recently Leo Weidner told me how he considered me as a brother and has really proved it by being close when I needed a helping hand.

Everyone who fellowshipped us has shown as much help and friendship over the last seven years as they did before our baptism.

Although the Spirit moved with us quickly, we could have never had the strength to face the adversity of leaving family beliefs and old friendships without these new friends. No material goods ever replace the true and sincere friend. And these friendships have survived even though hundreds of miles now separate all of us. [Ensign, October 1977, pp. 18–19]

Isn't that beautiful? I would that this story were repeated hundreds and thousands of time over. Too often, I fear, members avoid

or procrastinate their missionary opportunities because they do not know how to become involved. They do not understand the process which I have described; consequently, they deny themselves choice blessings and experiences. I invite you, even though many of you have served full-time missions, to think about the three steps I have outlined. I encourage you to take careful inventory of your circle of friends and to carry on with your missionary activities. In this way enthusiasm will replace apathy, confidence will overcome fear, and involvement will crown your efforts with success.

Occasionally, I fear, returned missionaries excuse themselves from member missionary activities by saying that they have served and done their part. To such persons I say: "Repent; repent before you lose the sharing spirit of the gospel of Jesus Christ." When I served as a mission president I included in my termination interviews this practice: I would ask the missionary to reflect upon his experiences and to list the habits formed over the one-and-one-half-year or two-year period. Almost without exception the missionary would compile a list of twenty or more habits, including rising early, retiring early, daily scripture study, daily prayers, good dress and grooming, and on and on. Then I would ask the missionary to cross off his list those habits which would have no application in his postmission life. Generally only one or two would be eliminated: tracting and other things like that. I would discuss with the missionary the relationship between character and habits and I would encourage him to cling to those habits associated with the missionary character and the Christlike life. My intent was to draw from the missionary a firm resolve to live and serve throughout life so that the benefits of his full-time mission experience would not be wasted.

What a waste of time and effort and energy and money when a missionary returns home and abandons his missionary habits and character! We should strive to claim on a lifetime

basis the benefits of serving as missionaries. We should always be missionaries. I love this thought expressed by Amasa M. Lyman when he said:

I am not glad to be here because my mission is ended, for such I do not consider to be the case at all. We often say we have been on a mission, and have fulfilled a mission, and have returned as though that something had been completed and accomplished. . . . I have been on a mission; I have come home from a mission; I am still on a mission. The obligations of that mission, I feel, are not ceasing, not becoming less, but they increase from day to day and from year to year with the increase of knowledge and understanding and the apprehension of the principles of truth. [Journal of Discourses 10:83]

The imperative duty to share the gospel takes on greater urgency when we understand that our salvation is intertwined with the salvation of others. One writer expressed his thought in these words: “Heaven’s gate is shut to him who comes alone; Save thou a soul, and it shall save thy own” (John Greenleaf Whittier, “The Two Rabbis”). It was President John Taylor who warned: “God will hold you responsible for those whom you might have saved had you done your duty” (*Journal of Discourses* 20:23). This warning must not be taken lightly.

At the beginning of this talk I made reference to the 123rd section of the Doctrine and Covenants. Let me turn back to that reference once again. In it we read this conclusion:

Therefore, . . . we should waste and wear out our lives in bringing to light all the hidden things of darkness, wherein we know them; and they are truly manifest from heaven—

These should then be attended to with great earnestness.

. . . Let us cheerfully do all things that lie in our power; and then may we stand still, with the utmost assurance, to see the salvation of God, and for his arm to be revealed. [D&C 123:13–14, 17]

I pray that we will understand our imperative duty and that we will take seriously our responsibility to share the gospel of Jesus Christ always. May we follow one of the greatest missionary prophets of all time, President Spencer W. Kimball. May we catch his vision of this great work and move forward to fulfill holy prophecy. I bear you my testimony that it is our sacred responsibility to establish truth, and to be ambassadors of truth and righteousness and saviors of men. I know that God lives, that we are his children, and that we must do everything within our power to qualify us to return to his presence. I bear you that testimony humbly and sincerely and in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.