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## An Awakening of Conversion

**W**hat would you say if I asked you to share your conversion story? Seriously. Put the book aside and think about what you would share. Indeed, we generally don't believe these things are one-time events, but are there some key pivotal times in your story?

Take a minute.

I sometimes ask people this question, which leads to some wonderful spiritual conversations. I've done this individually and in classes. Ask the people in your life to share their conversion stories.

I have found that when I ask people to share their conversion stories, nine out of ten times, they share their story of how they got a testimony that the Book of Mormon and the Church is true.

In the previous chapter, we explored whether a testimony is the same as the type of belief and faith that saves. Here, let's explore whether a testimony and conversion are the same thing. In classes, I have written on the white board the words *conversion* and *testimony* and then asked:

Is having a testimony the same thing as being converted?

How are they the same, and how are they different?

Is a testimony *story* and a conversion *story* the same thing?<sup>33</sup>

As previously mentioned, in the Guide to the Scriptures, *testimony* is defined as “knowledge and a spiritual witness given by the Holy Ghost.”

The definition of *Conversion*, *Convert*, is much more expansive. The guide says:

Changing one's beliefs, heart, and life to accept and conform to the will of God (Acts 3:19). Conversion includes a conscious decision to give up one's former ways and change to become a disciple of Christ. Repentance, baptism for the remission of sins, the reception of the Holy Ghost by the laying on of hands, and continued faith in the Lord Jesus Christ make conversion complete. A natural man will be changed into a new person who is sanctified and pure, born again in Christ Jesus (2 Cor. 5:17; Mosiah 3:19).

When I discuss these concepts with others, they generally say that a testimony is the spiritual things you know are true from the Holy Ghost. Conversion, on the other hand, is deciding to follow those things.

We must not conflate testimony and conversion. In an excellent message by Elder David A. Bednar called "Converted unto the Lord," he explains that gaining a testimony and becoming converted are not the same. He starts by saying, "My message focuses upon the relationship between receiving a testimony that Jesus is the Christ and becoming converted to Him and His gospel. Typically, we treat the topics of testimony and conversion separately and independently."<sup>34</sup>

Later in his message, he says, "Testimony is the beginning of and a prerequisite to continuing conversion. Testimony is a point of departure; it is not an ultimate destination. Strong testimony is the foundation upon which conversion is established."

The story of Alma the Younger illustrates the difference between testimony and conversion. Some could criticize and say, "Well, sure, he was converted. Wouldn't that be easy if an angel of God appeared to you?" But did the angel convert Alma? In Mosiah 27:14, the angel said he came "that thou mightest be brought to the knowledge of the truth; therefore, for this purpose have I come to *convince* thee of the power and authority of God" (emphasis added).

The angel gave Alma an instant testimony. Alma was immediately convinced and knew God was real and that his father's church was

God's church. But Alma was not converted to the Lord for a couple more days, until he called out to Jesus Christ for mercy. It was then that he surrendered himself to God. It was then that he repented and turned a new direction in life. Only then did Alma become a new creature and was born of God—testimony first, and then conversion.

In the story of the conversion of the Lamanites, Alma 23:6 tells us, “And as sure as the Lord liveth, so sure as many as believed, or as many as were brought to the knowledge of the truth [*a testimony*], through the preaching of Ammon and his brethren, according to the spirit of revelation and of prophecy, and the power of God working miracles in them—yea, I say unto you, as the Lord liveth, as many of the Lamanites as believed in their preaching, and were *converted unto the Lord*, never did fall away” (emphasis added).

To be fair, conversion and testimony can happen at the same time. When people I talked to were praying to know if the Book of Mormon was true, several got a strong spiritual witness and were filled with desire right then to follow God for the rest of their lives. Moroni asks us to ask God with “real intent.”<sup>35</sup> What does that mean? Are you just asking out of curiosity, or do you *intend* to do something with what you discover? Those who ask God with the intent to act and follow Christ will be much more likely to get the witness they desire.

I also found that people often say their conversions came when they were repenting. Because of sin, they were miserable and cried out to the Lord for help. They were tired of trying to live their own ways and wanted to surrender and live God's way.

Again, it is important to note that we are unlike many other churches that believe conversion is a one-time event. Over and over again, we commit ourselves to God, find ourselves wandering, repent, and recommit ourselves to God.

Some have wondered why we frequently have shallow conversions and new members who do not continue on the gospel path. Shallow conversions might happen because what we ask of investigators is shallow. Are their testimonies and conversions to the *kingdom* but not to the *King*?

When I was a missionary in the Philippines, I learned that the Filipino people are a wonderful and believing people. For this reason, they were reasonably quick to be baptized. Yet, there was a problem

with many converts becoming less active. So, much of what we did as missionaries was to encourage less active members to become active and engaged again.

At the time, it seemed strange that most less active members had not lost their testimonies. After asking them why we had not seen them at church, we would ask if they still had a testimony. We would ask questions like, “Do you still believe that Joseph Smith was a prophet? Do you still believe that the Book of Mormon is true and that this is Christ’s true Church?” Ninety percent of the time, they would say yes. And I do not believe they just said that to please or make us happy. Looking into their eyes and through the Spirit, I could tell they truly believed those things. They still had testimonies. So, what was lacking? Why weren’t they going to church?

Again, could their testimonies and conversions have been to the kingdom rather than the King? Instead of asking the questions above, we could have shared Moroni 6:3, which says, “And none were received unto baptism save they took upon them the name of Christ, having a determination to serve him to the end.” Then we could have asked, “Are you still determined to serve Jesus Christ till the end of your life?”

Would they be surprised that such a commitment to Jesus Christ was ever part of the deal? If we asked why they were baptized, they might say, “Because you asked us to be baptized when we knew the things you were teaching were true. Because I read the Book of Mormon and knew it was true and that Joseph Smith was a prophet. I got a testimony that this is the true church. But you never asked us to commit ourselves, before God, to serve Jesus Christ for the rest of our lives.”

Is a testimony that this is God’s true church all that is necessary? Having a testimony that our church is true, in and of itself, is not a good enough reason to be baptized. In fact, it is not a scriptural reason to be baptized at all. We must never assume that investigators are ready for baptism because they have received a testimony that the Church is true. Baptism is not about deciding on a church to join or deciding if that church is true or not. Throughout scripture, baptism has always been about becoming a follower of Jesus Christ, not becoming a member of His Church. Confirmation is about becoming part of the Church of Jesus Christ and receiving the gift of the Holy Ghost.

As mentioned earlier, when we look in the Topical Guide under “Baptism, Qualifications for,” we will not see that a testimony that the Church is true is one of the requirements. The standard must be what Doctrine and Covenants 20:37 says: that we “are willing to take upon [us] the name of Jesus Christ, having a determination to serve him to the end.” The Church must not be the focus; Jesus Christ must be that focus.

A person must still believe that this is Christ’s restored Church and kingdom on the earth. However, a deep testimony must be focused and built on repentance and true faith in Christ. We are not to stand as witnesses of what the Church has done for us. We are commanded to stand as witnesses of God and what He has done for us.

We have no business baptizing an investigator who has not made a conscious, deliberate decision to try their best to follow Jesus Christ for the rest of their lives.

## Converted to What?

To Latter-day members of the Church, the word *conversion* can have many meanings. However, in the scriptures, it is centered entirely on the Lord Jesus Christ. In the scriptures, you don’t get ideas like “convert to the Church,” or converted to a particular teaching, or even conversion to the gospel in general. It is always focused on Jesus Christ.

In his talk, Elder Bednar said, “Note that the Lamanites were not converted to the missionaries who taught them or to the excellent programs of the Church. They were not converted to the personalities of their leaders or to preserving a cultural heritage or the traditions of their fathers. They were converted unto the Lord—to Him as the Savior and to His divinity and doctrine—and they never did fall away.”<sup>36</sup> Conversion is always focused on the Lord Jesus Christ.

## Conversion to the Gospel

Sometimes when talking to individuals about conversion, I would follow up and ask, “Converted to what?” About half the time, the response was “to the gospel.”

“What do you mean by ‘the gospel?’”

“You know. All the teachings and everything found in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Reading your scriptures, praying, attending church, tithing, the ordinances, and everything else. It means you accept all those parts of the gospel and are trying to live those teachings.”

“What part does Jesus Christ play in all of that?”

“It is all the teachings of Jesus Christ that we are committing to live by, and Jesus helps us repent as we mess up.”

“Can you be converted to some things in the gospel and not others?”

“Sure. A testimony of the Word of Wisdom is that you know it comes from God. And to be converted to the Word of Wisdom is when you are committed to living that way.”

In our church, more often than not, when we say “the gospel,” most are referring to all teachings found in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Everything from Aaronic Priesthood to Zion. From the Word of Wisdom to patriarchal blessings. *Gospel* has come to mean *everything*.

To be blunt, it is a mistake to call “the gospel” everything we believe in. The gospel is not every teaching found in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Why not? When the gospel becomes everything, it becomes watered down. The word *gospel* then becomes weakened and meaningless.

Where does the word *gospel* come from? It is Greek and means “good news.” When someone would come with news of a military victory or the birth of a baby, they would cry out, “Gospel!”

Doctrine and Covenants 76:40–43 focuses on the gospel being the good news of Jesus Christ:

And this is the gospel, the glad tidings, which the voice out of the heavens bore record unto us—

That he came into the world, even Jesus, to be crucified for the world, and to bear the sins of the world, and to sanctify the world, and to cleanse it from all unrighteousness;

That through him all might be saved whom the Father had put into his power and made by him;

Who glorifies the Father, and saves all the works of his hands, except those sons of perdition who deny the Son after the Father has revealed him.

Jesus Christ and all He did and does for us is the *gospel*.

We need to re-enthroned the word *gospel*. It doesn't everything; it means one thing—the most important thing. The one truth that saves us. Jesus Christ has come to save us from sin and death and heals, helps, and redeems us. Jesus is the whole story. He is the A and the Z, the Alpha and Omega. Jesus is the cure to sin and death, and He invites us to surrender, follow Him, and partake of His salvation.

If the Spirit said to you, “Go share the gospel with that person over there,” maybe the most significant fear would be that we don't know what, in particular, to share.

“How am I supposed to share all the teachings found in our Church with that person?” you might ask.

People need to hear about Jesus Christ, what He has done for them, and the new life that comes with following Him. That is the gospel.

Why has it become routine in the Church to think of the gospel as including everything? Perhaps someone would preach some teaching like honesty and then, wanting to elevate the message, say, “This is the gospel truth” or “This is as much a part of the gospel as anything else.”

But again, to elevate everything to the level of the gospel (what Jesus has done for us) is to depreciate what the word *gospel* was meant to focus on—Jesus Christ.

Rather than dilute and weaken the word *gospel* to mean so many things, we must focus on and re-empower the “good news” message of Jesus Christ.

In my scripture study, I have not yet found the idea of being “converted to the gospel,” especially where the gospel means everything. Yet, if by the word *gospel* we mean Jesus Christ and the salvation He offers, then that seems like something we can be converted to.

But what about being converted to particular teachings like tithing? Again, the scriptures do not discuss conversion this way, and I see much wisdom in that. A person may be fully committed to living the teaching of tithing. But their conversion must be only on Jesus Christ.

Here is a hot take: With missionary work, we need to stop preaching the gospel! If the word *gospel* means “everything,” then we need to stop it!

We need to make our message Jesus Christ.

In the book of Acts, the Apostles and disciples of the New Testament church did this. Acts 5:42 says, “And daily in the temple, and in every house, they ceased not to teach and preach Jesus Christ.”<sup>37</sup>

The Apostle Paul said it well in 1 Corinthians 2:2: “I determined to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified.”<sup>38</sup>

And Nephi said it best: “We talk of Christ, we rejoice in Christ, we preach of Christ, we prophesy of Christ, and we write according to our prophecies, that our children may know to what source they may look for a remission of their sins.”<sup>39</sup>

Our Lord Jesus Christ is the message that has and will gather Israel.

## Converted to the Church

I enjoy and support the *Come Back Podcast*.<sup>40</sup> But the question is, come back to what? To church?

The idea of “come unto Christ” is found, in some form, in the Book of Mormon about 120 times. Not once do we find the idea of “come to church” or “come back” to church or God’s kingdom.

I think Moroni would definitely want people back in church, but first, he would say, “Come back unto *Christ*, and be perfected in Him.”<sup>41</sup>

The prophet Amaleki would likewise invite them, saying, “Come back unto *Christ*, who is the Holy One of Israel, and partake of his salvation, and the power of his redemption. Yea, come unto him, and offer your whole souls as an offering unto him.”<sup>42</sup>

I heard some friends saying, “Oh, Jerry is such a fantastic guy. Wouldn’t it be cool if he converted?”

Converted to what? The Church?

It is very common to hear a phrase like, “She’s a convert to the Church.” What does that mean?

To many, it means she has decided to become part of the Church, be baptized, and live her life according to the teachings found in the Church.

But here are some tough questions:

Can you be converted to the Church but not to Jesus Christ?

Is choosing the Church inherently choosing Christ?

Is it possible to choose the Church without choosing Christ?

Sadly, it appears that the Church can be the object of conversion for some. They commit to the entire way of life they see that the Church presents. I wonder if they feel that by choosing the Church, they must inherently be right with God.

But never do the scriptures teach that the Church is the way. Jesus is the Way. Conversion to the *kingdom* is not enough. It must eventually be conversion to the *King*. If a person starts with conversion to the Church, they will fall away if that conversion does not quickly transfer to focus on Christ.

I am “all in” and committed to God’s Church here on the earth. But I hesitate to use the phrase “converted to the Church” because it is just an idea that is not scriptural. It also seems to be a harmful use of the word *conversion* because (in the scriptures) it is a word *only* reserved for God Himself. The Church must not replace God Himself, just as the kingdom cannot be a substitute for the King. We cannot put the secondary (the kingdom) before the primary (the King).

The Book of Mormon gives us the best example of how to speak of conversion. The chapters about the conversion of the Lamanites always talk of them being “converted unto the Lord.” Christ was the focus of the conversion of those who never did fall away.<sup>43</sup>

The Book of Mormon doesn’t ever speak of being converted to the Church but says “they were *converted* unto the Lord, and were *united* unto the church of Christ.”<sup>44</sup> Rather than saying, “She’s a convert to the Church,” wouldn’t it be much better to say, “She is a convert to Jesus Christ and has united with His true church”?

Sadly, I have had too many conversations with people no longer united with the Church. As I’ve listened, more often than not, I have felt that they had been converted to the Church but not converted to Jesus Christ. All their angst was focused on the Church, but they rarely mentioned Christ or God.

When conversion, testimony, belief, faith, and trust always focus on Jesus Christ, things work out right. Then, we can make it through any challenge in life. But when we focus on anything else, like particular teachings, practices, or even the Church itself, we get lost in the weeds and are on a dangerous foundation. It is upon the rock of our Redeemer, who is Christ, that we are to build our foundation.<sup>45</sup>

The sacrament is a brilliant example of this laser focus on the Savior. If we follow the pronouns carefully, we see that we ask the Father to bless the sacrament and commit ourselves to be willing to take Christ's name upon us, always remember Christ, and keep Christ's commandments so we can have Christ's Spirit to always be with us. It is on Christ we always remember and focus on (not the Church). We see the commandments as coming from Christ (not the Church), which is the right way to see them.

In Moroni 6, we again see this perfect and correct focus on Jesus Christ. Verse 3 says, "And none were received unto baptism save they took upon them the name of Christ, having a determination to serve him to the end."

In the Church, we are good about teaching people to choose the right, but are we good at teaching them to *choose Christ*? We can't just bring up our kids in the Church. We must bring them up in Christ. And if the message of the Church is not helping them devote their lives to Christ, then the kingdom is failing in its entire mission.

## Conclusion

To have a great awakening of conversion in the Church, we must focus conversion on Jesus Christ. Commitment to the Church and its teachings is essential. But conversion should be centered on Jesus Christ and following Him for the rest of our lives.