

SEVEN LESSONS ON SHARING THE GOSPEL

By Elder Clayton M. Christensen and Christine Quinn Christensen,
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Prior to His ascent to heaven, the Savior charged His tiny band of disciples: “Go ye therefore, and teach all nations” (Matt. 28:19). Although this task seems overwhelming, President Boyd K. Packer, Acting President of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, has called us to act with faith: “Some who measure that challenge quickly say, ‘Why, that’s impossible! It cannot be done!’ To that we simply say, ‘Perhaps, but we shall do it anyway.’”¹

The ability to share the gospel isn’t a “gift” that has been given to only a few Latter-day Saints and denied to the rest. We have concluded from our own experiences and from watching others that finding people for the missionaries to teach can be easy and natural for *all* of us—if we go about it the Lord’s way. Here are seven of the lessons we’ve learned about what His way is.

“Ideal Mormons” and “Deep Friendships”

The first two lessons, which we learned early in our efforts to be good member missionaries, have made sharing the gospel much easier: *We simply can’t predict who will or won’t be interested in the gospel, and building a friendship is not a prerequisite to inviting people to learn about the gospel.* We discovered these principles when we were newlyweds and the missionaries in our ward asked us to make a list of people with whom we could share the gospel. We were to start with those at the top of our list and begin “preparing” them through a twelve-step process. First, we were to invite them to our home for dinner and follow that by going to a cultural event together. The sixth, seventh, and eighth steps were to invite them to church, give them a copy of the Book of Mormon, and ask them to take the missionary discussions. The program culminated in the twelfth step—baptism.

We dutifully made this list, placing those we thought most likely to be interested in the gospel at the top. They looked like “ideal Mormons”—people whose values, such as clean living and commitment to family, mirrored our own. We then began building deeper friendships with them, adding additional social events to our already busy lives. One by one, those we thought might be interested in learning about the gospel declined our invitations when we got to steps six through eight. Our invitations didn’t offend them, but in their own way they told us they were happy in their present approach to religion. After much work over many months, we didn’t find anyone who was interested in learning more about the gospel.

New missionaries were then transferred to our ward. Knowing nothing of our history, they came to our home, unfolded an identical chart on our table, and asked us to make a list of people with whom we could cultivate friendships in preparation to teaching them the gospel. We protested, “We’ve tried this. It took a long time and didn’t work.” We explained that we felt we had honestly tried with everyone we thought was a candidate for hearing the discussions.

Desperate for a referral, the missionaries pleaded, “Don’t you know *anyone* we could visit?” We gave them the names of four couples we had excluded from our initial list. Among them were the Taylors (names have been changed). We warned that while the elders certainly could knock on the Taylors’ door, it would be a waste of time. Ken had bad feelings about organized religion of any kind. In addition, he was a tough rugby player and a high-volume consumer of ale.

The elders later returned, jubilant. The Taylors had invited them in, listened to the first discussion, and invited them back for the second. We subsequently became close friends with the Taylors as we studied the missionary discussions together. We would never have imagined that they would have had any interest in the gospel.

We learned from this experience that we simply cannot know in advance who will and will not be interested in learning about the Church. We thought we could judge and therefore excluded from our list many people whose lifestyle, habits, or appearance made them seem unlikely candidates. As we reflect upon those who have joined the Church, however, it is clear that few of them would have been on our list of “likely members” when they first encountered the Church.

Many who accept the gospel are troubled or needy (see Alma 32:2-3). Living the gospel transforms them. The only way *all* people can have the opportunity to choose or reject the gospel of Jesus Christ is for us, without judgment, to invite them to follow the Savior.

This experience also taught us that in most cases we don’t need to transform our relationships into deeper friendships as a prerequisite to inviting others to learn about the gospel. For most of our neighbors, classmates, work associates, store clerks, and those riding on the same bus, this was not necessary.

Full-time missionaries, for example, don’t wait to become friends with their contacts. They talk with everyone. A relationship of trust is built when they have the chance to teach. Over the past 20 years, we have observed no correlation between the depth of a relationship and the probability that a person will be interested in learning about the gospel. But the reverse is almost always true: Everyone who accepts an invitation becomes a closer friend, regardless of whether or not he or she ultimately accepts baptism. We have also learned that even when people decline our invitations, they are not offended if they can feel our love and God’s love when we invite them to learn about Christ’s gospel. They typically have expressed gratitude that we cared enough about them to want to share something so personal and important.

Trust the Missionaries

We learned a third lesson as the missionaries were in our home teaching Jack, a colleague of Clayton’s. One elder was newly arrived on his mission, and his senior companion from Argentina was still struggling with English. As a result, when questions arose, Jack would instinctively ask Clayton, who answered—confident that he could answer more clearly and convincingly than these elders could. We got into a rhythm in which the elders would teach a concept, Jack would ask a question, Clayton would answer it, and then the elders would teach the next concept. Jack then asked a difficult question for which Clayton had no ready answer. And as Clayton paused, the Argentine elder offered a profound answer, given by the Spirit. When Jack asked the next question, Clayton waited to see if this elder could do it again—and he did. We learned an important lesson about sharing the gospel. Despite their inexperience, *we can trust the missionaries to teach the gospel well*, because whom the Lord calls, He qualifies.

People Need to Be Needed

The fourth insight coalesced as we moved an old, heavy refrigerator from the basement of an elderly sister Clayton home taught. We had tried to find another ward member to help us but could not. Desperate, we asked Jim, a nonmember neighbor, who happily agreed to help. It was a hot, horribly humid summer day, and soon our clothes were soaked with perspiration. When we reached the first turn in the staircase and had balanced the fridge on the landing, Jim said, “So tell me about the Mormon Church.”

Mopping his brow, Clayton responded, “Frankly, this is it.” He then explained how home teaching works and noted how much this sister needed us. We also told him that because graduate students and their families were moving in and out of our area all the time, our family was often helping someone load or unload a rental truck.

Jim was incredulous. “At our church we just listen to the sermon and go home. I have no idea who might need my help. They never ask, and there’s no way for me to offer. Will you ask for my help again when you need an extra pair of hands? I like this kind of thing.” Although Clayton had

tried unsuccessfully to engage Jim in discussions about religion in the past, Jim was uninterested. But he was interested in opportunities to help others.

Here's what this experience taught us: Many people who are satisfied with their lives feel a need to give service. The Light of Christ creates this desire to help. When our invitations to investigate the Church emphasize doctrine, we often do not connect with what people are looking for at the outset. When we involve them with us in serving others, they often find that the Church addresses an important need.

Inviting others to help us with our work in the Church helps them feel needed and helps them feel the Spirit. When these feelings come, many people often then realize that something *has* been missing from their lives. By helping us do God's will, Jim learned far more about what the Church feels like than he ever could have through a conversation or from attending a ward social. As a result, Jim subsequently accepted our invitation to take the missionary discussions.

What Is Success?

Despite seeing much truth and goodness in our Church, Jim decided after the third discussion not to continue his investigation. Even though we know that many who discontinue investigating will later listen and accept the gospel, we were disappointed. But this taught us our fifth valuable lesson about member missionary work—we realized we had *succeeded* as missionaries. Jim had become a great friend, and we had given him the opportunity to understand the gospel of Jesus Christ more deeply. Whether or not he ever enters the waters of baptism, he has taken a step along the path of his own eternal progression and has made some important correct choices. Most of us fear failure. Once we realized that *we succeed as member missionaries when we invite people to learn and accept the truth*, much of the fear that kept us from sharing the gospel vanished.

Deadlines

Following the counsel of Elder M. Russell Ballard of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles has taught us our sixth lesson: *Because we have so much to do in our busy lives, we need deadlines.* Like it or not, we tend to postpone activities without deadlines, while things that need to be finished by a particular time seem to get done. Without explicit deadlines, even rewarding responsibilities of eternal import—like missionary work—can easily get preempted.

To help us, Elder Ballard has asked us to regularly “write down a *date*.” He explicitly counseled us that we need not write down a name. Rather, Elder Ballard challenged us to pick a date as a commitment to the Lord. He promised that if we then seek every opportunity to speak about the gospel with as many people as we can, the Lord will bless us by that date to meet someone who will accept our invitation to listen to the missionaries.² Together we have accepted Elder Ballard's challenge and have found someone for the missionaries to teach every year. Each time we have prayerfully set a date, the Lord has provided someone for us to teach.

But the people we have found have rarely been discovered easily. It has required daily prayer, frequent fasting, and creating opportunities to have gospel conversations. We have found it helpful to use “Mormon” phrases in our conversations—referring to activities at church, our children who are serving missions, experiences we've had in Church assignments, and so on. When we use these phrases, it is as if we are opening a door, inviting the other person to walk in and talk about the Church. Most people choose not to come through that door, and that's fine. But sometimes they ask us about the Church. We then answer their questions. And if it seems appropriate, we open a second door—inviting them to a Church meeting or to come to our home so we can tell them more. Most of those we have invited decline, but some accept. Regardless of the outcome, we have found that if they feel our love, they often express gratitude that we would care enough to invite them.

Several years ago Elder Christensen set a date of January 31. Early January came, and despite having initiated conversations with dozens of people and inviting several of them to meet the

missionaries, he failed to find anyone who was interested. He was scheduled to travel to Honolulu, Hawaii, for an academic conference on January 20, and the way his schedule looked, it seemed clear that he had to meet the person he could introduce to the missionaries on his flight to or from Hawaii. There was no other time. He pleaded in daily prayer that God would cause a person to sit next to him on the plane who would accept his invitation.

After all that effort, he couldn't believe his eyes when he saw his seatmate—a man named Vinnie who was wearing a loud Hawaiian shirt unbuttoned to his sternum, sporting three gold chains on his hairy chest. Vinnie explained that he worked 11 months every year to save enough to escape to Hawaii for a month in winter to chase women. Clayton was so disappointed. He had tried and prayed so hard to find someone—and instead he got stuck next to a man who didn't seem to have a religious bone in his body. Discouraged, Clayton turned to some reading.

When the flight attendant brought lunch, Clayton put his reading down and made small talk with his seatmate. Vinnie asked Clayton if he had been to Hawaii before, and Clayton responded that he had attended a language training school in Laie en route to a mission he had served for The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in Korea. Surprisingly, Vinnie put his fork down and said, “So you're a Mormon? The funniest thing has happened to me over the past year. I've never had any interest in religion, but I've had this growing curiosity to know more about Mormons. I don't know why. Could you tell me a little about your church?”

For the next three hours, enveloped by a wonderful spirit, they discussed the gospel of Jesus Christ, article of faith by article of faith. Several times on the remainder of the flight, Vinnie interrupted to say thanks for telling him about the Church. As the plane landed, Clayton told Vinnie there were missionaries in his hometown and asked if they could visit him when he returned. Vinnie asked if there were missionaries in Honolulu. Clayton received this golden answer to his prayers by using a “Mormon” phrase to open the door to a conversation and by suspending his judgment of what might be in Vinnie's heart.

Constants and Variables

We learned a seventh lesson from this experience: *When we are busy serving in the Church, we can expect God to bless us with miracles when we go and do the things He commands* (see 1 Ne. 3:7). In the equation that determines whether we can find people for the missionaries to teach, God's role is a constant, not a variable. He always keeps His promises. The only variable is whether we have the faith to commit, obey, and expect miracles. Even more than other members, the busy men and women who lead our wards and stakes (or branches and districts) need to exercise this simple faith—because if they cannot speak in present-tense verbs and first-person pronouns about sharing the gospel, they cannot inspire others to fulfill our prophet's member missionary call.

Blessings

Many of us know people who seem to be “natural missionaries,” almost as if they have an innate gift that makes sharing the gospel easy for them. We certainly are *not* naturals at this. We found the work to be uncomfortable and intimidating at the outset, but learning and following these lessons has helped us share the gospel in ways that have become natural.

The blessings that have come to our family from doing this work have been incalculable. Missionary work has brought the Spirit of God into our home and our hearts. About four years ago, for example, we invited one of Clayton's former students, Sunil, to take the missionary discussions in our home. The missionaries did a wonderful job, and at the close of the discussion they both testified of the truths they had taught us. We both bore our testimonies, and Clayton asked one of the missionaries to close with prayer. Just then our son Spencer raised his hand. “Dad, can I say something?” He then rose to his feet and, looking at Sunil with the purest gaze, said, “Sunil, I'm only 11 years old. But I want you to know that the things the missionaries have

told you tonight are true. I know that God lives. I know that you and I are His sons and that Joseph Smith was truly a prophet of God.” As he shared his feelings, a sweet, powerful spirit came into the room.

The next day Sunil sent an e-mail saying that while he had appreciated the clear explanation of our beliefs that the missionaries and we had provided during the discussion, “when your son stood and said those words, I felt something inside that I have never felt before. This must be what you mean when you speak of the Spirit of God.”

Many blessings and friendships have come into our lives from trying to share the gospel. But this blessing has been one of the best: Having the missionaries regularly help us as a family teach the gospel to new and old friends through the power of the Holy Ghost has profoundly affected the faith of our five children and brought the Spirit of God into our home.

Notes

1. “The Redemption of the Dead,” *Ensign*, Nov. 1975, 97.
2. See “Write Down a Date,” *Ensign*, Nov. 1984, 15–17; see also “We Proclaim the Gospel,” *Ensign*, Nov. 1986, 31–33.