

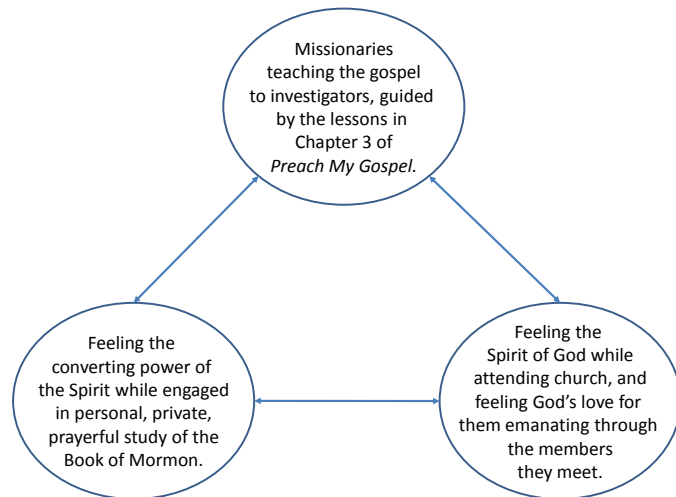
# Truly Converted Converts

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In the February 2005 *Ensign* we summarized seven lessons we had learned from our efforts as member missionaries to share the restored gospel of Jesus Christ with others. Within the past several years we and other members of the church in our area have had some extraordinary experiences while sharing the gospel with our associates, from which we learned several additional and very valuable lessons about how to help those with whom we are sharing the gospel become truly converted Latter-day Saints.

The bottom line: as depicted in the diagram to the right, there are three venues or occasions in which those investigating the gospel need to feel the converting power of the Holy Ghost:

1. When meeting with the missionaries;
2. When engaged in private, personal and prayerful study of the Book of Mormon; and
3. When worshipping on the Sabbath day with members of the Church.



We'll refer to these occasions as *sources of testimony*. We have concluded that an important reason why many of those to whom we have begun teaching the gospel choose not to be baptized; and why too many who are baptized fall away from the church, is that we've been relying excessively on the first of these sources of testimony. We and our missionaries have not been spending nearly enough of the available lesson time with investigators teaching them *how* to read and pray about the scriptures. And we have not taught our investigators and the leaders and members of our wards what they need to do to cause attending church to be a fantastic spiritual experience for each investigator. To become truly converted, every new convert needs to have felt the Spirit in a balanced way in each of these three sources. Because most missionaries do a great job in the first, we'll focus our comments below on what we've learned about the second and third.

## Personal, Private, Prayerful Study of the Book of Mormon

We got a deeper appreciation of the importance of personal, private, prayerful study of the Book of Mormon through an experience a couple of years ago with a friend we'll call Brian. Clayton had known Brian for several years as a business associate. When Brian expressed curiosity about our church's views, Clayton invited him to our home to discuss these with the missionaries over dinner. In extending the invitation, Clayton said, "Rather than our telling you what we want you to know about our church, could you please come with a list of questions

about religion that you've not been able to find satisfactory answers to? Then we can give our views on those issues. We just want to be sure we're responsive to what's on your mind."

Brian came on a Thursday evening with a typed list of *very* thoughtful questions, in which he puzzled about the concepts of original sin and infant baptism, among others. We talked about these over dinner, to be sure we understood why these were important to him, and how he previously had tried to find answers through other means. We then adjourned to our living room, and asked the missionaries to answer several of the questions at the top of his list. They skillfully drew upon the four lessons in Chapter 3 of *Preach My Gospel* to do so. They then described the Book of Mormon; testified that it contained answers to all of Brian's questions; handed him a copy, and asked if he would read it. Brian was highly educated and had been raised in a Christian home, but he pushed the book away, saying, "Somebody gave me one several years ago. I tried to read it, but it's weird and I just couldn't get motivated to understand it."

As Brian said those words, we felt a strong impression that possibly the reason why Brian had this experience was that while he was certainly literate and had attended other churches, Brian might never have learned *how* to read the scriptures or *how* to pray.

So Clayton, who is a teacher, said, "Brian, when we read novels and textbooks in school, we learned to begin at the beginning and end at the end. But that's not how you should read the scriptures. To help you read in the right way, we're going to give you a homework assignment, which you'll need to turn in when we meet next week. We're going to write it down. This will take you about two hours to complete, so you should block off time to do this on some evening or next Sunday. It should be quiet time where you can be alone and not be interrupted."

The assignment we gave Brian was: Read just two chapters in the Book of Mormon: Mosiah 18:1-16; and Moroni 8. Then write a 2-paragraph answer to each of these three questions:

1. Why does it make God so angry when people baptize little children?
2. What does baptism mean and why does God want us to be baptized? and
3. What is the process by which we come to be forgiven of our sins?

We picked these because questions about the doctrines of his church on infant baptism and original sin were on the list Brian had brought; and the answers are included in these chapters. We then described the process Brian needed to follow when doing this "homework." It entailed seven steps, so we wrote it down underneath the questions:

1. Pray, on your knees, aloud, telling God that you got this homework assignment from your friends. Ask him to help you understand the chapters as you read them.
2. Read the chapters.
3. Write your answers, in draft form, to the three questions.

4. Kneel again in verbal prayer. Explain to God the answers you have written, just as if you were talking to him face to face. Then tell him you're going to read the chapters one more time. Ask him again please to help you understand even more deeply the answers that *He* would want you to give to these questions, as you read.
5. Read the chapters again.
6. Revise your answers, based upon your deeper understanding. This is the "homework" you need to give us when we meet next.
7. Then kneel again and pray a third time. But the purpose of this prayer will be different. *This time you need to ask God if the things that you have written, and the things that you have read, are true.*

After reviewing the assignment to be sure Brian understood it, we read Moroni 10:3-5, and said, "Now we want to teach you how to give that prayer in step #7. We pointed to the first sentence of verse 3 and asked, "Brian, why does God want you to take a few minutes before offering this prayer to think about how richly he has blessed you?"

After a pause Brian answered, "I guess it will help me feel how much God loves me, and how much I love him."

"That's exactly right," we agreed. "So please remember to do this." We then continued reading and paused again toward the end of verse 4, asking, "What does it mean to pray with *real intent*?"

Brian responded, "I suppose it means I need to be sincere about it."

"Not exactly," we said. "Sincerity is covered in the prior phrase. Praying with real intent means that you need to tell God what you intend to do if he answers your prayer." We discussed the implications that knowing the truth about these questions might have on the way Brian might conduct his life. We then read verse 5, and explained how God answers prayers, through thoughts that come into our minds and feelings in our heart. We concluded, "Will you do this assignment, Brian?"

Brian said he would. By the time Brian stood to leave, we had spent about 70% of our time in the living room understanding and answering Brian's questions, and 30% teaching him *how* to get his own answers in personal, private, prayerful study of the Book of Mormon. The missionaries telephoned Brian on Saturday, asking if he had any questions about the homework assignment. Brian responded that he had blocked out two hours on Sunday evening to do it.

Following the opening prayer in our meeting with Brian on the following Tuesday, proudly and with a smile on his face, Brian handed typed copies of his homework to the Elders and to us. "Let me tell you what I learned," Brian began. He read his answer to the first question aloud. It began, "It makes God angry when people baptize infants because it trivializes the atonement of Jesus Christ." He then explained how he had come to his conclusions. For ten minutes, he explained how he had distilled his answer from Moroni 8.

“How’d I do?” Brian asked, after finishing his explanation.

“Brian,” I exclaimed, “That’s a better answer than I could ever have written, and I’ve read the Book of Mormon maybe 20 times!”

“I’m glad,” Brian responded. “I worked hard on it. And thank you for asking me to write it down. I *hate* to write, but writing it forced me *think* about it. It really, really was helpful.” Brian then went through the same process with his answers to the second and third questions – reading his answers aloud, and then explaining how he had come to those conclusions from the two chapters. The answers were similarly insightful.

When Brian had finished reviewing his homework, he concluded, “And do you know what? I really believe that these things are true. I finally understand it in my head, and as I prayed I could feel in my heart that it is true.”

We then asked, “Brian, now that you know this is true, will you be baptized?”

“I thought about it, and I actually *want* to be baptized,” Brian responded. “You told me that I needed to tell God what I intended to do, so I did. At first I thought I should wait until all my questions about the Mormon Church have been answered. But then I realized that’s not the purpose of baptism. If I wait until all my questions are answered, I’ll be waiting forever. See, it says right here,” he said, pointing at his answer to the second question. “The purpose of baptism is to make a commitment to God that we’ll follow him. Baptism is the start, not the finish.” We agreed on a baptismal date of December 17.

Our friend, the investigator, had taken the first 35 minutes of the 45-minute lesson time to teach *us* the gospel, and to bear *his* testimony to *us*. The missionaries could only briefly summarize the longer lesson they had prepared, but it didn’t matter that there was little time. We all learn things more deeply when we teach them to others than when we listen; and Brian had spent 35 minutes teaching the missionaries and us the first principles and ordinances of the gospel.

We then wrote down another homework assignment to help him find answers in the Book of Mormon to other of his questions. When Clayton began to write the seven steps on that sheet of paper, Brian said, “You don’t need to write those again. I’ve got them down cold. Pray, read, write. Pray, read write. Then pray again. It’s a great system.”

We learned several lessons from this extraordinary experience with Brian, which we’ve applied in each of the subsequent opportunities we’ve had with the missionaries to study the gospel with our acquaintances in our home.

First, we have begun asking each person to come to these discussions with a list of questions about religion to which they’ve not been able to find satisfactory answers to. The missionaries are taught there that they should start with questions, so that they can “liken the scriptures unto themselves” (1 Ne. 19:23-24). They are then taught to prayerfully search for answers in the scriptures; write down the thoughts and impressions that come to their minds as they study; and then to pray to know if the things that they have concluded are true.

Second, in our prior experiences sharing the gospel with others, we had somehow just assumed that those we have teaching knew *how* to read the scriptures, and knew *how* to pray about them. So we and our missionaries had always spent a very large share of the time with our friends and investigators *teaching them*. We had behaved as if the *primary* occasion in which conversion occurs is when the missionaries are teaching the lessons to investigators – and as a consequence 90% of the time spent in those discussions was consumed by the missionaries teaching and testifying. Meetings with the missionaries comprise a very important venue, of course. But we now see clearly that there is a second venue in which the converting power of the spirit can come into the hearts of those who are investigating the gospel. We and our missionaries now spend a significant portion of our time with investigators teaching them how to engage in personal, private, prayerful study of the Book of Mormon. And we spend a significant portion of our discussions with them asking *them* teach and testify to *us* of the things they learned and felt while studying and praying.

We learned that we had “discovered” that the way we helped Brian gain his testimony in fact is the way that our young missionaries, on pp. 107-114 of *Preach My Gospel*, are taught how *they* should study the Book of Mormon. They are taught to begin with questions – because that is how they can liken the scriptures unto themselves. Then they are urged to find and study passages of scripture that contain answers to those questions; to write their answers and insights about those questions in their scripture study journal; and then to pray to know of the truth of the things that they have read and written. This isn’t just the way that *missionaries* should read the Book of Mormon. It *really* helps investigators, too!

Third, we have learned that a key reason why some of those we had invited to learn the gospel had declined our invitations, and why others had chosen to stop studying with our missionaries before baptism, sometimes is that typically had been attempting to tell them what *we* thought *they* needed to know – and if our answers didn’t correspond with their questions, they judged the gospel to be irrelevant to their lives. By organizing each of our missionary lessons and the “homework” assignments we give them around questions that they’ve been trying to find answers to, many more of those we’ve invited have accepted our invitations. And they progress more naturally towards baptism, because we’ve been teaching them how to have a great experience with the spirit while distilling answers to their questions in personal, private, prayerful study of the Book of Mormon.

### **Great Experiences While Attending Church**

By watching recently how three bishops and their ward councils in our area have been leading their wards’ missionary efforts, we’ve learned several important lessons about how to make the third source of testimony – attending church – a powerful influence on the lives of those who are investigating the gospel. If we prepare properly, each of them can feel the Spirit of the Lord, and feel God’s love for them emanating through the members that they meet, every time they attend church. If bishops, ward councils and missionaries can make a few simple changes in the way they do their work, it can make a huge difference in the probability that someone investigating the gospel will become truly converted. In the account below we’ll tell the story of the “Hopkinton Ward,” a disguised identity under which we’ve distilled what we’ve seen in these three wards.

At the beginning of a recent year the bishop and ward council of the Hopkinton Ward confronted a sobering truth: despite the fact that the prophet Daniel had foreseen the restored gospel breaking loose like a stone from a mountain and rolling forth to fill the earth, this wasn't happening in Hopkinton. Despite the efforts of missionary after missionary and home teacher after home teacher, it seemed that for every person who joined the church and for each inactive member who starting attending actively again, another stopped attending. The number of people attending sacrament meeting in the Hopkinton Ward had been stagnant for years.

The ward leaders then made a ward- and life-changing decision: from that time on, they would never allow anyone to be baptized into the Hopkinton Ward unless they *already* had been integrated into the ward – and they also would never ask the missionaries to delay the baptism of anyone. That meant, therefore, that as soon as the name of a person appeared on the list of “progressing investigators” that the missionaries brought to each ward council and priesthood executive committee meeting, the members needed to begin integrating them into the ward as quickly and effectively as possible, *before* baptism.

To help them with their resolve to integrate new members before baptism, the ward council established several rules. The bishop took the lead. He set up a regular meeting at his home with the full-time missionaries every Saturday morning. The purpose was for him to become fully informed about each progressing investigator, so that in PEC or ward council meeting the next day, *he*, rather than the missionaries, could lead a productive discussion about how members of the ward could begin integrating each person into the ward. Previously, the bishop realized, he and the other ward leaders had been passive, simply giving time in these meetings for the missionaries to give the ward leaders information about their investigators.

The second resolve the ward leaders made was to get each new member to the temple within two months after baptism, with as many other ward members as possible, to be baptized for his or her ancestors. To do this, they agreed that the ward family history consultant would begin working with each investigator before baptism to complete his or her four-generation charts. The bishop pledged to add an additional topic to his interview of each new convert at the time of baptism: “It’s not just your eternal life that is at stake here. You have hundreds and hundreds of ancestors in the spirit world who have accepted the gospel, but they’ve not been able to progress because nobody has done their temple work. Now, finally, one of their descendents has joined the church and can do this work for them in the temple. After baptism you’ll be tempted to go back to some old habits. You’ll be tempted to skip church sometimes. But you’ve *got* to hang on, because all of these ancestors are counting on you. Six weeks from now I’m going to interview you again in order to give you a temple recommend to do these baptisms in the temple. I’m going to ask you these questions, and you need to be able to say ‘Yes’ to each of them. So you’ve *got* to hang on. Hundreds of people are counting on you to do this work for them in the temple.”

Third, the ward council members agreed that each new member would not just have home teachers assigned at the time of baptism. Rather, each would already have been home taught at least once *before* baptism. was the primary we had viewed Elder Quinn then handed Brian another sheet of paper. “Elder Adams and I prepared another homework assignment for you, if you don’t mind. Next time we’re going to talk about the purpose of this life and God’s plan of salvation for us. We’d like you to read 2 Nephi chapter 2, and 3 Nephi chapters 11 and

17. Here are the questions we'd like you to answer, again in 2 paragraphs each. (This assignment is reproduced in Exhibit 2.) And we'd like you go use the same seven steps that you followed last time."

"You don't need to write the seven steps down again," Brian responded. I have them down cold: pray, read, write; pray, read, revise; and pray again. It's a good system."

The subsequent meetings with Brian went just as the first one had. Elder Adams called between the meetings to be sure Brian understood and was doing his homework. Brian took the first 20-25 minutes of the meeting to review what he had learned by doing his homework; and the missionaries taught for about 25 minutes. They spent the last 15 minutes explaining his next assignment and being sure Brian understood the other commitments that they were asking him to make. Brother Allen baptized his friend Brian on December 17 in the Camden chapel.

One of the most important of these lessons is that as member missionaries, we succeed when we *invite*. The Lord cautioned us (Matthew 7:1) not to judge whether someone is or is not prepared to investigate and accept the gospel. Instead, we need to extend to everyone the chance to exercise the agency God has given them. Satan waged war in the pre-existence to deprive us of free agency. He continues to advance his agenda against agency on this earth each time he intimidates a Latter-day Saint from inviting someone to learn of the truth – because if they don't know what it is and where to find it, they cannot choose to accept it (2 Nephi 2:16; D&C 123:12). Not everyone we invite will accept our invitations – and that's okay. Our responsibility is to give them an opportunity; and their responsibility is to choose the right.

While some of those we invite will decline our invitations, others will accept the chance we've offered them to learn of the truth; and as the missionaries join with us in teaching them the gospel our hopes grow that they will feel the spirit and choose to join the Lord's church. As we and the missionaries in our ward have continued our efforts to share the gospel, we've gleaned some additional insights about how to help more of those who have begun to study the gospel accept baptism, and then grow to become truly converted, committed Latter-day Saints.

There are three important occasions in which those who are learning the gospel can feel the witness of the Holy Ghost telling them that the gospel is true:

1. When the missionaries, assisted when possible by members, are teaching them the truths summarized in Chapter 3 of *Preach My Gospel*;
2. At home in personal, private and prayerful study of the Book of Mormon; and
3. Attending church, as they feel the spirit of the Lord during the talks and lessons, and as they feel the love of God for them emanating through the members they meet.

We have found that when we teach those who are investigating the gospel *how* to feel the spirit in each of these three occasions in a balanced way, the probability that they will become strong and committed Latter-day Saints is remarkably high. We have found that when investigators choose not to be baptized; or when newly baptized members fall away from active

participation in the church, it often is because the members and missionaries behaved as if the lesson with the missionaries was the primary occasion where testimony is developed – and they neglected the second and third occasions. Furthermore, we have learned that when people don't feel the spirit in the second and third venues – while prayerfully studying the Book of Mormon and while attending church – it often is because we did not teach them *how* to study, pray and feel the spirit at church. In this article we'll recount several experiences in our own efforts to share the gospel with others, from which we have drawn these conclusions.

**Teaching *how* to study and pray**