

Deepening our Conversion to the Savior

We sometimes hear the saying "I'm spiritual but not religious." What does this mean? Is there really a way to be one without the other? This statement rings hollow. I think it is a way of staying non-committal in a world so filled with religious differences.

Much of my talk today comes from Elder Donald L Hallstrom of the Seventy's April conference talk entitled "Converted to His Gospel through His Church".

Elder Hallstrom begins by saying "Sometimes we use the terms gospel and Church interchangeably, but they are not the same. They are, however, exquisitely interconnected, and we need both. The gospel is the glorious plan of God in which we, as His children, are given the opportunity to receive all that the Father has. This is called eternal life and is described as "the greatest of all the gifts of God." End quote

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is a very impressive organization. It is recognized all over the world for its efficiency & organization. I can see many aspects of our church that would appeal to many different people.

Activist--- humanitarian efforts

Single parents/ or stressed parents --- Youth groups

Religious Zealot --- Missionary zeal

Scriptorian --- Doctrine

And finally anyone who is looking for a place to belong --- Social connection the church brings

Elder Hallstrom talked of his childhood. "The Church was everything to us. We went to lots of meetings, even more than we have today. We attended Primary Thursday afternoons. Relief Society meetings were on Tuesday mornings. Mutual for the youth was Wednesday night. Saturday was for ward activities. On Sunday, men and young men would go to priesthood meeting in the morning. Midday we would attend Sunday School. Then in the evening we returned for sacrament meeting. With comings and goings

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and meetings, it seemed our time was consumed with Church activities all day Sunday and most other days of the week." End quote

As a daughter of a father who served 18 years in the Stake Presidency, I can say first-hand how busy the church can make us. It is a positive fulfillment, but it definitely fills our lives nonetheless.

Elder Hallstrom continues: "Some have come to think of activity in the Church as the ultimate goal. Therein lies the danger. It is possible to be active in the Church and less active in the gospel. Let me stress: activity in the Church is a highly desirable goal; however, it is insufficient. Activity in the Church is an outward indication of our spiritual desire. By contrast, the things of the gospel are usually less visible and more difficult to measure, but they are of greater eternal importance." End quote

What this means is one can appear to be a very committed member- of full activity- who is not truly converted to the gospel

Elder Hallstrom addresses this as he stated: "We often wonder: How can someone be fully active in the Church as a youth and then not be when they are older? How can an adult who has regularly attended and served stop coming? How can a person who was disappointed by a leader or another member allow that to end their Church participation? Perhaps the reason is they were not sufficiently converted to the gospel-- the things of eternity." End quote

How many of us know of someone or has heard of someone who served as R.S President, or Elders Quorum President, or Bishop, Stake President or Mission President who has fallen away from the Church or simply stopped coming?

We might ask "How did that happen?" These individuals certainly were converted to the church.-- You can't give up so much of your free time if you aren't. What they lacked was the deeper conversion to the gospel. Or perhaps they had one, but spent more time focusing on their testimony of the Church as an organization & their role in it, that they lost focus of their deeper testimony to the gospel.

Let's focus on the deeper testimony of the gospel. What is it exactly? How does one gain it?

In Charles Dickens classic novel "A Christmas Carol" Ebenezer Scrooge made a beautiful statement upon waking after the 3rd ghost had visited him in the night.

"I don't know what day of the month it is," said Scrooge. "I don't know how long I've been among the Spirits. I don't know anything. I'm quite a baby. Never mind. I don't care. I'd rather be a baby. Hallo! Whoop! Hallo here!"

Scrooge referred to himself as a baby. How many of us have heard the term being born again? Certainly you hear about it with Born Again Christians and it is something we read about in the scriptures. But what exactly does it mean?

In Alma 5:14, Alma the younger asks the people of the church in Zarahemla: "...have ye spiritually been born of God? Have ye received his image in your countenances? Have ye experienced this mighty change in your hearts?"

Elder Bruce R. McConkie, wrote of this change in our hearts in Mormon Doctrine: "To gain salvation every accountable person must receive two baptisms. They are baptisms of water and of the Spirit... the cleansed person becomes literally a new creature of the Holy Ghost; He is born again. The baptism of fire is not something in addition to the receipt of the Holy Ghost; rather, it is the actual enjoyment of the gift which is offered by the laying on of hands at the time of baptism." End quote

When we are baptized at the age of 8 or as a new member, we are converts of the church. Our names are recorded in SLC & we are recognized as members.

When we are converted to the gospel, the light of Christ burns within our souls and we are baptized with fire. -- From this one is born again as a true disciple of Christ.

So when Brother Hallstrom spoke of conversion to the Gospel, this is the same thing as being born again, or baptism by fire. They are one and the same.

There are many examples in the scriptures of this conversion= being born again = baptism by fire.

1. Alma
2. Alma the Younger
3. King Lamoni
4. Enos
5. Saul

In modern fiction we see this as well with

1. Ebenezer Scrooge in "A Christmas Carol"
2. Jean Valjean in Les Miserables

An example can also be found in Church History. This is a quote from President Lorenzo Snow. "...immediately the Spirit of God descended upon me, completely enveloping my whole person, filling me from the crown of my head to the soles of my feet, and o, the joy and happiness I felt! No language can describe the almost instantaneous transition from a dense cloud of mental and spiritual darkness into a refulgence of light and knowledge that God lives, that Jesus Christ is the Son of God, and of the restoration of the holy priesthood and the fullness of the gospel. It was a complete baptism-- a tangible immersion in the heavenly principle or element, the Holy Ghost; and even more real and physical in its effects upon every part of my system than the immersion of water;"

What do all of these examples of individuals being born again have in common?

They are all very dramatic and quite instantaneous. This happens very rarely.

More common experience is that of a sunrise.

1. The first rays of light appear over the horizon
2. The sun becomes fully visible
3. Noon day sun when all the earth is bathed in sunlight and there are no shadows.

Just as the whole experience is the sunrise... it is the same with most people's deeper conversion to the Gospel. As new members we have glimpses of it, and this continues to deepen overtime. The speed at which it comes is not important. We

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all can't, nor should we expect an experience like Alma the Younger. The key is that we need to be on the Road of Progression.

Elder Hallstrom addressed 3 ways how we ensure we are on this road-- or how we deepen our conversion to Christ's Gospel.

1. Deepen our understanding of Deity. "A sustained knowledge of and love for the three members of the Godhead are indispensable." As we study the scriptures and ponder and pray to the Father in the name of the Son, and seek direction from the Holy Ghost, we can "build unshakable faith in Jesus Christ."
2. Focus on the ordinances and covenants. "If there are any of the essential ordinances yet to be performed in your life, intently prepare to receive each of them. Then we need to establish the discipline to live faithful to our covenants, fully using the weekly gift of the sacrament." My grandfather passed away when I was around 3 or 4. I only have a few memories of him, but my dad has shared some special memories with us about his dad. His mom and dad were members of the church, but had not been married in the temple. His dad had a problem with the Word of Wisdom. It took some time, but he made the changes he needed to in life, so that they could be sealed in the Temple as an Eternal family. What an impact this had on my dad!
3. Unite the gospel with the Church. This is truly the central point of it all. Earlier in Elder Hallstrom's talk, he made the distinction between the Gospel and The Church. The Church = The Organization, The Gospel = The Essential Plan of Salvation.

One can have a testimony of the Church without a testimony of the Gospel-- but it is impossible to have a true testimony of the Gospel without a testimony of the Church. This is why the saying "I'm spiritual, but not religious" rings hollow. Because when you are truly spiritual, when you are truly converted to the Gospel, when you have truly been baptized by fire, when you have truly been born again... When all these things happen: you BECOME true disciples of Christ and WANT to be actively involved in His Church. -- One cannot be passive after such an experience, as it changes them and they then strive to make a difference.

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In conclusion I add once again the words of Charles Dickens at the end of "A Christmas Carol"

-----Scrooge was better than his word. He did it all, and infinitely more; and to Tiny Tim, who did not die, he was a second father. He became as good a friend, as good a master, and as good a man, as the good old city knew, ... Some people laughed to see the alteration in him, but he let them laugh, and little heeded them; ... His own heart laughed: and that was quite enough for him.-----

Just as Scrooge experienced the transformation of being born again, I hope that we will strive to do so as well. May we strive for and gain that deeper testimony of the Savior and His Gospel.

-Testimony-

My testimony has come gradual- just like the light of a sunrise. Grew up in a home where gospel was a part of our life. I graduated from Seminary & Institute. I read the Book of Mormon. I had a testimony of the Gospel. This led me with the desire to serve a mission. As I found myself in the MTC, I had to stop & truly ask myself what I really knew. I had to do the reading and pondering & praying Elder Hallstrom mentioned in his talk. It was like "I thought I knew these thing... but now I REALLY know!" Throughout my mission my testimony continued to grow, but it didn't stop there. When I returned home & married and with each baby that was born, this testimony was deepened & strengthened. With each new callings, my testimony is strengthened. With each trial & challenge, specifically the experience we had with Jamie's health scare--- I had to truly put my faith & trust in the Lord, and learn to truly say "Thy will be done". All of these things have strengthened my testimony.

I have a testimony of the gospel and of this Church. I know that God lives, and is our Father. Jesus Christ is our Savior. The scriptures are the word of God. Through Joseph Smith, the Christ's church was restored on the Earth. Pres. Monson is our Prophet today. This is the truly God's church, and I am so grateful for my membership in it.

In the name of Jesus Christ, amen