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Come Back and Feast at the Table of the Lord

*“Reach out to the less active and realize the joy
that will come to you and those you help.”*

From the Life of Howard W. Hunter

The day after Howard W. Hunter became President of the Church, he extended this loving invitation to Church members who were not actively participating:

“To those who have transgressed or been offended, we say, come back. To those who are hurt and struggling and afraid, we say, let us stand with you and dry your tears. To those who are confused and assailed by error on every side, we say, come to the God of all truth and the Church of continuing revelation. Come back. Stand with us. Carry on. Be believing. All is well, and all will be well. Feast at the table laid before you in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and strive to follow the Good Shepherd who has provided it. Have hope, exert faith, receive—and give—charity, the pure love of Christ.”¹

In his first general conference address as President of the Church a few months later, President Hunter said he felt impressed to continue this emphasis. “Come back,” he repeated. “Take literally [the Savior’s] invitation to ‘come, follow me.’ . . . He is the only sure way; he is the light of the world.”²

Throughout his life, President Hunter helped many Church members return to activity. Relating such an experience from early adulthood, he said:

“My ward bishop assigned me as a ward teacher to a brother who boasted he was the oldest deacon in the Church. Home teaching

was ward teaching in those days. His problem was that he loved to play golf on Sunday. It was discouraging to meet month after month with him and his wife and see no apparent progress. But finally, the right word was said to him and it struck a responsive chord. The word was *covenant*. We asked him, ‘What does the covenant of baptism mean to you?’ His expression changed, and for the first time we saw a serious side to him. Eventually he came to our classes, gave up golf, and took his wife to the temple.”³

Teachings of Howard W. Hunter

The parable of the lost sheep teaches us to seek after those who are lost.

The First Presidency [extended] to the membership of the Church a significant invitation . . . :

“To those who have ceased activity and to those who have become critical, we say, ‘Come back. Come back and feast at the table of the Lord, and taste again the sweet and satisfying fruits of fellowship with the Saints.’

“We are confident that many have longed to return, but have felt awkward about doing so. We assure you that you will find open arms to receive you and willing hands to assist you.” (*Ensign*, March 1986, p. 88.)

I think all of us were impressed by this magnanimous appeal akin to what the prophet Alma stated in the Book of Mormon regarding an invitation that was extended by the Lord. He said:

“Behold, he sendeth an invitation unto all men, for the arms of mercy are extended towards them, and he saith: Repent, and I will receive you.

“Yea, he saith: Come unto me and ye shall partake of the fruit of the tree of life; yea, ye shall eat and drink of the bread and the waters of life freely;

“Yea, come unto me and bring forth works of righteousness.” (Alma 5:33–35.)

Each of us should read and reread the parable of the lost sheep found in the fifteenth chapter of Luke, commencing with the fourth verse:

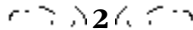
“What man of you, having an hundred sheep, if he lose one of them, doth not leave the ninety and nine in the wilderness, and go after that which is lost, until he find it?”

“And when he hath found it, he layeth it on his shoulders, rejoicing.

“And when he cometh home, he calleth together his friends and neighbours, saying unto them, Rejoice with me; for I have found my sheep which was lost” [Luke 15:4–6]. . . .

The Prophet Joseph Smith significantly altered one verse in the Joseph Smith Translation. It reads: “What man of you, having an hundred sheep, if he lose one of them, doth not leave the ninety and nine *and go into the wilderness after that which is lost*, until he find it?” (JST, Luke 15:4; italics added.)

That translation suggests that the shepherd leave his secure flock and go out into the wilderness—that is, go out into the world after him who is lost. Lost from what? Lost from the flock where there is protection and security. I hope the message of that parable will be impressed on the hearts of each of us.⁴



**The Lord expects us to be His undershepherds
and recover those who are struggling or lost.**

What should we do to help those who have lost their way in the wilderness?

Because of what the Master has said about leaving the ninety-nine and going into the wilderness to seek the one that is lost, and because of the invitation of the First Presidency to those who have ceased activity or have been critical to “come back,” we invite you to become involved in saving souls. Reach out to the less active and realize the joy that will come to you and those you help if you and they will take part in extending invitations to come back and feast at the table of the Lord.

The Lord, our Good Shepherd, expects us to be his undershepherds and recover those who are struggling or are lost. We can't tell you how to do it, but as you become involved and seek inspiration, success will result from efforts in your areas, . . . stakes, and wards. Some stakes have responded to previous pleadings and have had remarkable success.

The words of a familiar hymn contain the Savior's appeal to us:

*Hark! he is earnestly calling,
Tenderly pleading today:
"Will you not seek for my lost ones,
Off from my shelter astray?"*

And that hymn, sung often, indicates what our response should be:

*"Make us thy true undershepherds;
Give us a love that is deep.
Send us out into the desert,
Seeking thy wandering sheep."
(Hymns, 1985, no. 221.)*

If we do this, eternal blessings will come to us.⁵

Seeking after the lost, the wayward, and the straying is the Lord's business. . . . The prayerful plea of Alma is a good reminder of the sacredness of our task:

"O Lord, wilt thou grant unto us that we may have success in bringing [souls] again unto thee in Christ.

"Behold, O Lord, their souls are precious." (Alma 31:34–35.)⁶

**Our grand objective is to help people
return to God's presence.**

Over the years the Church has made some monumental efforts to recover those who are less active. . . . And all to what end? It is to save the souls of our brothers and sisters and see that they have the ordinances of exaltation.

While I was serving as a stake president in the Los Angeles area, my counselors and I asked our bishops to carefully select four or



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five couples who wanted to further their progress in the Church. Some were less active, others new converts—but they were motivated to spiritually progress. We got them together in a stake class and taught them the gospel. Rather than emphasizing the temple, we stressed a better relationship with our Heavenly Father and his Son, Jesus Christ. Our careful selection process assured success, and the majority of these couples did become active and go to the temple.

Let me share [another] experience. . . . We had a brother in one of the wards who didn’t attend any meetings. His wife was not a member. She was somewhat hostile, so we could not send home teachers to the home. The bishop approached this brother by telling him that the brother had a relationship with the Savior he needed to expand and enlarge. The brother explained to the bishop the problem with his nonmember wife, so the bishop talked to her, emphasizing the same approach—a relationship with the Lord that needed to be expanded. She still was not receptive but was happy to learn that Latter-day Saints believed in Christ, and consequently dropped some of her defenses.

Success did not come immediately, but those who visited the home kept stressing the couple's relationship with the Lord. In time she became friendly, and finally consented to come with her husband to the stake class taught by members of the high council. We stressed the covenant one makes at baptism and other covenants. Eventually she became a member of the Church and he became a productive priesthood leader. . . .

I am impressed by a statement on the title page of the Book of Mormon that describes one of the purposes of that sacred book: "That they [the House of Israel in the latter days] may know *the covenants of the Lord*." (Italics added.) That was the emphasis we as a stake presidency felt impressed to make to those less active. We tried to appeal to them on the basis of the importance of the covenants they had made with the Lord; then we taught them the importance of the covenant of baptism and additional covenants that they could make which would unite them as an eternal family.⁷

The whole purpose of the Church operating smoothly at the local level is to qualify individuals to return to the presence of God. That can only be done by their receiving the ordinances and making covenants in the temple.⁸

Our efforts focus on making the saving covenants and ordinances of the gospel available to all mankind: to the nonmember through our missionary work; to the less-active through fellowshipping and activation efforts; to active members through participation and service in the Church, and to those who have passed beyond the veil through the work of redemption for the dead.⁹

We are leading toward one objective for each individual member of the Church. That is for all to receive the ordinances of the gospel and make covenants with our Heavenly Father so they may return to his presence. That is our grand objective. The ordinances and covenants are the means to achieving that divine nature that will return us into his presence again. . . .

Keep in mind the purpose: to invite all to come unto Christ. . . .

I testify, my brethren and sisters, to his divinity and power to save those who will come to him with broken hearts and contrite

spirits. Through the ordinances and his Holy Spirit, each individual may become clean.¹⁰

Suggestions for Study and Teaching

Questions

- President Hunter encourages every Church member to read and reread the parable of the lost sheep (see section 1; Luke 15:4–7). What messages do you receive from that parable and the other teachings in the first section? Consider how those teachings can guide you as you serve in the Church.
- What is our responsibility as the Lord’s undershepherds? (See section 2.) How can we help people return to Church activity? How have you (or someone you know) been blessed by a person who reached out to you when you were “struggling or lost”?
- What can we learn from the experiences that President Hunter relates in section 3? How can an emphasis on covenants help Church members return to activity?

Related Scriptures

Ezekiel 34:1–16; Luke 15:11–32; John 10:1–16, 26–28; 13:35; 1 John 1:7; Mosiah 18:8–10; Helaman 6:3; 3 Nephi 18:32; Moroni 6:4–6; D&C 38:24

Study Help

A principle is a truth that guides decisions and actions. “As you read, ask yourself, ‘What gospel principle is taught in this passage? How can I apply this in my life?’” (*Teaching, No Greater Call* [1999], 17).

Notes

1. In Jay M. Todd, “President Howard W. Hunter: Fourteenth President of the Church,” *Ensign*, July 1994, 5.
2. “Exceeding Great and Precious Promises,” *Ensign*, Nov. 1994, 8.
3. “Make Us Thy True Undershepherds,” *Ensign*, Sept. 1986, 9.
4. “Make Us Thy True Undershepherds,” 7–8.
5. “Make Us Thy True Undershepherds,” 9.
6. “The Mission of the Church” (address given at the regional representatives’ seminar, Mar. 30, 1990), 4.
7. “Make Us Thy True Undershepherds,” 8–9.
8. *The Teachings of Howard W. Hunter*, ed. Clyde J. Williams (1997), 218.
9. *The Teachings of Howard W. Hunter*, 245–46.
10. *The Teachings of Howard W. Hunter*, 218.