

Missionary, Family History, and Temple Work

Preaching the gospel and seeking after our dead are complementary parts of one great work—a labor of love intended to change, turn, and purify the hearts of honest seekers of truth.



By Elder
David A. Bednar
Of the Quorum of
the Twelve Apostles

At a solemn assembly held in the Kirtland Temple on April 6, 1837, the Prophet Joseph Smith said, “After all that has been said, the greatest and most important duty is to preach the Gospel.”¹

Almost precisely seven years later, on April 7, 1844, he declared: “The greatest responsibility in this world that God has laid upon us is to seek after our dead. The apostle says, ‘They without us cannot be made perfect’ [see Hebrews 11:40]; for it is necessary that the sealing power should be in our hands to seal our children and our dead for the fulness of the dispensation of times—a dispensation to meet the promises made by Jesus Christ before the foundation of the world for the salvation of man.”²

Some individuals may wonder how both preaching the gospel *and* seeking after our dead can be simultaneously the greatest duties and responsibilities God has placed upon His children. My purpose is to suggest that these teachings highlight the unity and oneness of the latter-day work of salvation. Missionary work and family history and

temple work are complementary and interrelated aspects of one great work, “that in the dispensation of the fulness of times he might gather together in one all things in Christ, both which are in heaven, and which are on earth; even in him” (Ephesians 1:10).

I pray the power of the Holy Ghost will assist you and me as we consider together the marvelous latter-day work of salvation.

Hearts and Priesthood Ordinances

Preaching the gospel and seeking after our dead are two divinely appointed responsibilities that relate to both our hearts and to priesthood ordinances. The essence of the Lord’s work is changing, turning, and purifying hearts through covenants and ordinances performed by proper priesthood authority.

The word *heart* is used over 1,000 times in the standard works and symbolizes the inner feelings of an individual. Thus, our hearts—the sum total of our desires, affections, intentions, motives, and attitudes—define who we are and determine what we will become.



The Lord’s purpose for missionary work is to invite all to come unto Christ, receive the blessings of the restored gospel, and endure to the end through faith in Christ.³ We do not share the gospel merely to increase the numerical size and strength of the latter-day Church. Rather, we seek to fulfill the divinely appointed responsibility to proclaim the reality of the Father’s plan of happiness, the divinity of His Only Begotten Son, Jesus Christ, and the efficacy of the Savior’s atoning sacrifice. Inviting all to “come unto Christ” (see Moroni 10:30–33), experiencing the “mighty change” of heart (see Alma 5:12–14), and offering the ordinances of salvation to individuals in mortality not yet under covenant are the fundamental objectives of preaching the gospel.

Enabling the exaltation of the living and the dead is the Lord’s purpose for building temples and performing vicarious ordinances. We do not worship in holy temples solely to have a memorable individual or family experience. Rather, we seek to fulfill the divinely appointed responsibility to offer the ordinances of salvation and exaltation to the entire human family. Planting in the hearts of the children the promises made to the fathers, even Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; turning the hearts of the children to their own fathers; and performing family history research and vicarious ordinances in the temple are labors that bless individuals in the spirit world not yet under covenant.

Priesthood ordinances are the pathway to the power of godliness:

“And this greater priesthood administereth the gospel and holdeth the key of the mysteries of the kingdom, even the key of the knowledge of God.





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“Therefore, in the ordinances thereof, the power of godliness is manifest.

“And without the ordinances thereof, and the authority of the priesthood, the power of godliness is not manifest unto men in the flesh” (D&C 84:19–21).

Please consider the sobering significance of these verses. An individual *must* first pass through the gate of baptism and receive the gift of the Holy Ghost—and then continue to press forward along the path of covenants and ordinances that leads to the Savior and the blessings of His Atonement (see 2 Nephi 31). Priesthood ordinances are essential to fully “come unto Christ, and be perfected in him” (see Moroni 10:30–33). Without the ordinances, an individual cannot receive all of the blessings made possible through the Lord’s infinite and eternal atoning sacrifice (see Alma 34:10–14)—even the power of godliness.

The Lord’s work is one majestic work focused upon hearts, covenants, and priesthood ordinances.

Implications

This divine doctrine suggests two important implications for our work in the Church.

First, we may often give undue emphasis to separate categories of the work of salvation and the associated policies and procedures. I fear that many of us may focus so exclusively and intensely on specific facets of the Lord’s work that we fail to garner the full power of this comprehensive labor of salvation.

While the Lord seeks to gather all things together in one in Christ, we may often segment and specialize in ways that limit

our understanding and vision. When carried to an extreme, priority is given to managing programs and enhancing statistics over inviting individuals to enter into covenants and receive ordinances worthily. Such an approach constrains the purification, the joy, the continuing conversion, and the spiritual power and protection that come from “yielding [our] hearts unto God” (Helaman 3:35). Simply performing and dutifully checking off all of the things on our lengthy gospel “to do” list does not necessarily enable us to receive His image in our countenance or bring about the mighty change of heart (see Alma 5:14).

Second, the spirit of Elijah is central in and vital to the work of proclaiming the gospel. Perhaps the Lord was emphasizing this truth in the very sequence of events that occurred as the fulness of the gospel was restored to the earth in these latter days.

In the Sacred Grove, Joseph Smith saw and talked with the Eternal Father and Jesus Christ. This vision ushered in the “dispensation of the fulness of times” (Ephesians 1:10) and enabled Joseph to learn about the true nature of the Godhead and of continual revelation.

Approximately three years later, in response to earnest prayer on the evening of September 21, 1823, Joseph’s bedroom filled with light until it was “lighter than at noonday” (Joseph Smith—History 1:30). A personage appeared at his bedside, called the young boy by name, and declared “he was a messenger sent from the presence of God . . . and that his name was Moroni” (Joseph Smith—History 1:33). He instructed Joseph about the coming forth of the Book



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of Mormon. And then Moroni quoted from the book of Malachi in the Old Testament, with a little variation in the language used in the King James Version:

“Behold, I will reveal unto you the Priesthood, by the hand of Elijah the prophet, before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the Lord. . . . And he shall plant in the hearts of the children the promises made to the fathers,

and the hearts of the children shall turn to their fathers. If it were not so, the whole earth would be utterly wasted at his coming” (Joseph Smith—History 1:38–39).

Moroni’s instructions to the young prophet ultimately included two primary themes: (1) the Book of Mormon and (2) the words of Malachi foretelling the role of Elijah in the restoration “of all things, which God hath spoken by the mouth of all his holy prophets since the world began” (Acts 3:21). Thus, the introductory events of the Restoration revealed a correct understanding of the Godhead, established the reality of continuing revelation, emphasized the importance of the Book of Mormon, and anticipated the work of salvation and exaltation for both the living and the dead.

Please now consider the role of the Book of Mormon in changing hearts—and of the spirit of Elijah in turning hearts.

The Book of Mormon in combination with the Spirit of the Lord is “the greatest single tool which God has given us to convert the world.”⁴ This Restoration volume of scripture is the keystone of our religion and is essential in bringing souls to the Savior. The Book of Mormon is another testament of Jesus Christ—a vital confirming witness of the divinity of the Redeemer in a world that grows ever more secular and cynical. Hearts are changed as individuals read and study the Book of Mormon and pray with real intent to learn of the truthfulness of the book.

The spirit of Elijah is “a manifestation of the Holy Ghost bearing witness of the divine nature of the family.”⁵ This distinctive influence of the Holy Ghost bears powerful witness of the Father’s plan of happiness and draws people to search out and cherish their ancestors and family members—both past and present. The spirit of Elijah affects people both inside and outside of the Church and causes hearts to turn to the fathers.

Six videos are a part of this article at lds.org/go/familyNE10. Watch the first video of a story demonstrating this principle.

The time has come for us to capitalize more effectively on the potent combination of the mighty change



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of heart, made possible primarily by the spiritual power of the Book of Mormon, and the turning of hearts to the fathers, accomplished through the spirit of Elijah. A yearning for connection to our past can prepare an individual to receive the virtue of the word of God and fortify his or her faith. A heart turning to the fathers uniquely helps an individual withstand the influence of the adversary and strengthen conversion.

Watch the second video to view a story demonstrating this principle.

Principles

I now want to identify four principles about the spiritual power that results from changing and turning hearts.

1. Hearts and conversion. Turning to the fathers awakens and prepares a heart for the mighty change. Thus, the spirit of Elijah helps in conversion.

Watch the third video to view a story demonstrating this principle.

2. Hearts and retention. Turning to the fathers sustains and strengthens hearts that have experienced the mighty change. Thus, the spirit of Elijah helps in retaining new converts.

Watch the fourth video to view a story demonstrating this principle.

3. Hearts and reactivation. Turning to the fathers softens a heart that has become hardened after experiencing the mighty change. Thus, the spirit of Elijah is key in reactivation.

Watch the fifth video to view a story demonstrating this principle.

4. Hearts and valiant missionaries.

A missionary who has experienced both the mighty change and the turning of the heart will be a more converted, consecrated, and valiant servant.

Watch the sixth video to view a story demonstrating this principle.

With a rapidly expanding and better-prepared missionary force, we simply cannot rely exclusively on past proselyting successes to determine our course and methods for the future. The Lord has inspired technologies and tools that enable us to benefit from the oneness of missionary work and temple and family history work more than at any previous time in this dispensation. And it is no coincidence that these innovations have come forth at precisely the time they are so needed to advance missionary work all over the earth. The Lord's work is one majestic work focused upon hearts that change and turn, on sacred covenants, and upon the power of godliness manifested through priesthood ordinances.

Summary and Testimony

The Lord declared, "I am able to do mine own work" (2 Nephi 27:21), and "I will hasten my work in its time" (D&C 88:73). We are witnesses of His hastening of His work.

We live and serve in the dispensation of the fulness of times. Recognizing the eternal importance of the distinctive dispensation in which we live should influence all that we do and strive to become. The work of salvation to be accomplished in these last days is grand, vast, essential, and urgent. How grateful each of us should be for the blessings and



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responsibilities of living in this specific season of the final dispensation. How humble we should be knowing that “unto whom much is given much is required” (D&C 82:3).

Preaching the gospel and seeking after our dead are complementary parts of one great work—a labor of love intended to change, turn, and purify the hearts of honest seekers of truth. The artificial boundary line we so often place between missionary work and temple and family history work is being erased; this is one great work of salvation.⁶

Can we begin to understand the role of temple and family history work in helping an investigator or a less-active member obtain a deeper understanding of the plan of salvation? Do we recognize that one of the greatest influences on convert retention is the spirit of Elijah? Can we more fully appreciate the importance of heart-turning

moments occasioned by the sharing of family stories as a means of finding people to teach by both members and missionaries? Can we help those we serve access more often the powers of godliness by participating worthily in ordinances such as the sacrament and baptisms and confirmations for the dead?

May you see clearly, hear unmistakably, and ever remember the importance of your service in the Lord’s work of changing, turning, and purifying hearts. **NE**

From an address given at the seminar for new mission presidents on June 25, 2013.

NOTES

1. *Teachings of Presidents of the Church: Joseph Smith* (2007), 330.
2. *Teachings: Joseph Smith*, 475.
3. See *Preach My Gospel: A Guide to Missionary Service* (2004), 1.
4. Ezra Taft Benson, “A New Witness for Christ,” *Ensign*, Nov. 1984, 7.
5. Russell M. Nelson, “A New Harvest Time,” *Ensign*, May 1998, 34.
6. See Spencer W. Kimball, “The Things of Eternity—Stand We in Jeopardy?” *Ensign*, Jan. 1977, 3.