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ALMA'S REFORM OF ZARAHEMLA:  
A MODEL FOR ACTIVATION*Terry B. Ball*

Certainly one of the most remarkable missionary efforts ever recorded in scripture was that of the sons of Mosiah as they labored among their Lamanite brothers to “bring them to the knowledge of the Lord their God” (Mosiah 28:2; see Alma 17–26).<sup>1</sup> Today we encourage our missionaries to pattern their preparation and efforts after that of the sons of Mosiah. Modern missionaries can learn much from their example.

Equally as remarkable and instructive as the labors of the sons of Mosiah among the Lamanites was another work conducted among the Nephites at the same time by their companion in conversion, Alma the Younger.<sup>2</sup> While the sons of Mosiah worked to convert the Lamanites, Alma labored to reconvert or activate the hardened and apostate Nephite nation in the land of Zarahemla. At that time even the Church itself had fallen into wickedness, so much so that their wickedness was a “stumbling-block” to conversion for those who had not joined (Alma

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4:10). Seeing this great wickedness, Alma set out to reclaim and reform the Church (see Alma 4:6–20).<sup>3</sup>

Just as modern missionaries can learn much from the methods of the sons of Mosiah, we can learn much about strengthening wavering members from the example of Alma the Younger in his remarkable reform of the Nephites in Zarahemla. A careful study of Alma 4–16 shows that Alma the Younger models many important principles of activation that are helpful to us today. This study examines principles of activation derived from the account of Alma's labors among the apostate Nephites, particularly in the city of Zarahemla in Alma 4 and 5.<sup>4</sup>

## PRINCIPLES MODELED BY ALMA

*Build Trust*

Alma began his labors by making a considerable sacrifice in order to do the work. Nine years earlier he had been appointed the first chief judge of the Nephites, the highest political office in the nation (see Mosiah 29:42). This was a demanding position that gave him great authority and prestige among the people, yet he determined that to bring the people back into righteousness, he would have to surrender his political office and devote himself full time to the effort. Accordingly "he delivered the judgment-seat unto Nephiah," a man he deemed a competent successor (Alma 4:18). Certainly that act must have sent a clear signal to the Nephites of how important the gospel and their salvation were to Alma. Considering what he gave up in order to teach the people, none could question his sincerity or the depth of his conviction. With this great sacrifice, Alma accomplished one of the most important and difficult steps in helping others regain their testimonies and commitment to the gospel. He established a relationship of trust by showing how much he genuinely cared about them and the gospel he wanted to share with them. Perhaps many who listened to him afterward did so simply to try to understand why he cared so much about them and his faith.

Today, too, our activation efforts can be enhanced by establishing a relationship of trust with those we hope to help. Unfortunately, few of

us can so quickly communicate our sincerity and commitment by making a great and public sacrifice as did Alma, yet if we consistently, persistently, and sincerely fellowship, opportunities to serve and communicate our genuine faith and interest will come. As we take advantage of such opportunities, those we seek to help may eventually come to trust and appreciate our relationship. It typically takes time. I recall having been given the privilege of home teaching a man who had not been to church for decades. He was a good and friendly man, easy to like, but he had no interest in the gospel. After several months of visiting with him in his home and having made little progress, I one day simply asked him, “Why don’t you come to church?” He told me that Sunday was his only day off and the only day to get his chores done at home. Seeing an opportunity to show the man that I really cared about his family and the gospel, I volunteered to come to his home early the next Sunday morning and help him get his chores done so he could go to church with me. He laughed at the idea. I don’t think he believed me. The next Sunday at 7:00 A.M. I was on his doorstep in my work clothes ringing his doorbell. When he answered the door, he looked at me and gruffly said, “Go home. I’ll come to church.” He did. Our trust and appreciation for one another grew from there. Many months of fellowshipping and teaching followed, but eventually he became my quorum president. I witnessed the principle Alma modeled so well with his great sacrifice: those we are trying to help reclaim faith will be more responsive to our efforts if they trust and know we are genuine in our concern for them and sincere in our commitment to the gospel.

### *Remember the Past*

Alma began his efforts to reclaim the Nephites to the faith in the capital city of Zarahemla in the land of Zarahemla.<sup>5</sup> With the exception of the people in Ammonihah, those living in this city had apparently strayed more than most in the land (see Alma 7:5–6; 8:9). As Alma began teaching, he reminded them of the role God played in their forefathers’ lives. He told of both the physical and spiritual captivity and bondage their forefathers endured and of their great deliverance wrought by the “mercy and power of God” (Alma 5:4). He spoke of the “mighty change” that occurred in the hearts of those ancestors and of

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how “they humbled themselves and put their trust in the true and living God” (Alma 5:13). He assured them that their forefathers “were saved” because “they were faithful until the end” (Alma 5:13). As he rehearsed this history, he repeatedly asked the Nephites to consider if they had “sufficiently retained in remembrance” these remarkable sacred events (Alma 5:6). In so doing, Alma modeled another helpful principle of activation. As we help those who have strayed remember the blessings, happiness, and faith that accompanied past activity in the Church, we can help them reconsider why they left and perhaps find the desire to return.

While we may not know and be able to rehearse the history and details of past church activity of those we are trying to help as Alma did the Nephites, we can help them remember and reflect on their past with questions such as, How did you come to be a member of the Church? Has there ever been a time when you were happily active in the Church? Were your parents or ancestors deeply committed to the gospel? If they were and you asked them why they were so committed, what do you think they would say? Can you identify times in your life or the lives of your loved ones or ancestors when God intervened or blessed them?

These kinds of questions can solicit honest answers from those we are trying to help and lead to a discussion of the blessings, hope, confidence, and happiness that accompany those trying to live a righteous life. Such discussions may not only help them understand and reconsider why they may have strayed in the first place but also bolster their desire to return to a life of faith.

Once that spark of desire is found, the door may be opened to further invite them back to activity. I recall another occasion serving as a home teacher to a wonderful couple that had not attempted to live the gospel for many years. I remember the first time I visited their home. They came to the door together. The two were friendly but reluctant to invite my young companion and me inside. As we visited on the doorstep, they informed us they were not interested in religion. The wife, who at the time was employed as a bartender at a local tavern, boasted to us, “We don’t just break the commandments—we smash

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'em!" Still, they agreed to let us come by occasionally for a visit. On the next visit, we were invited in.

Over the course of several visits, it became apparent that though they had a rough exterior, there was goodness in these two and a sweet commitment to each other. When the occasion was right, I asked them how they came to be members of the Church. In response they spoke fondly of the good people who introduced them to the gospel when they lived in Hawaii. What followed was a rather nostalgic discussion of their short but happy time in Hawaii when they were active members of the Church. As we talked, it seemed that they began to yearn for some of those former experiences and feelings. The discussion naturally led me to ask why they were not active members of the Church now. They explained that when they first came to the mainland they went to church dressed in their bright, floral-print Hawaiian attire. They told of feeling out of place in their dress and of feeling unaccepted by the congregation for it. Consequently, they determined the Church was different here and not for them. I tried to assure them that they would be welcome at our ward no matter what they were wearing, but they did not seem convinced. I ultimately volunteered to wear a Hawaiian shirt to church for a month to prove the point. They found the proposition amusing and encouraged me to try it.

Finding a Hawaiian shirt in that small desert town in Idaho was not easy. At the local thrift store, I eventually found a long-sleeved, silky-looking thing that had what appeared to be dead and dying vines printed on it. It was hideous, but it was the best I could do. After I wore it for three weeks to our Sunday meetings, I visited the couple and told them I was going to wear it only one more time, so if they wanted to see it they were going to have to come to church. They did. Needless to say, everyone in the ward had already asked why I was wearing such a ghastly shirt to church, so they were especially anxious to meet the couple who drove the local seminary teacher to do such a thing. What followed was a wonderful fellowshiping experience as they were warmly welcomed into the ward. Months later, as the couple prepared to go to the temple, the wife frequently commented, "When I walk out of the temple, I want to die in the parking lot because that will probably be the best I'll ever get!" Sadly, she did pass away within a year of their

sealing in the house of the Lord, but what a blessing it was for them to have made their relationship eternal! Their experience validated for me the principle Alma modeled—that remembering and discussing the blessings, happiness, and faith that accompanied past activity in the Church may encourage those who have strayed to want to find their way back into activity.

### *Evaluate the Present*

After helping the Nephites reflect upon the blessings and happiness their righteous forefathers enjoyed, Alma demonstrated another principle of activation as he invited the Nephites to evaluate their own current spiritual condition: “And now behold, I ask of you, my brethren of the church, have ye spiritually been born of God? Have ye received his image in your countenances? Have ye experienced this mighty change in your hearts?” (Alma 5:14). He further invited them to evaluate how prepared they were to stand before God, should they be “called to die” at that time, and to sincerely consider if they were sufficiently pure and humble (see Alma 5:15–31). Such questions must have been sobering for an apostate people and would have caused them to ponder what they should do to better prepare for the life to come.

Today, too, helping those who have fallen into inactivity seriously evaluate their current spiritual status and preparation for the next life can help them find the desire to renew their faith. Again, sincere questions asked at the right time in a trusting relationship can facilitate this kind of evaluation. Helpful questions might include, Can you remember a time when you were striving to be righteous and active in the faith? Did you have a better relationship with God then? Were you happier? Were you better able to deal with the trials of life? How are you now? Are you happier? Is life really going better for you? Are you better prepared to meet God? Are you being blessed by Him? Could you, with confidence, call upon Him for help? Are you now a better person, spouse, or parent? If those who have let their faith and activity slip honestly consider such questions, they may come to the conclusion that life is better when they are trying to live righteously. Reaching such a conclusion can help prepare them to accept an invitation to come back.

*Extend an Invitation*

Alma gives us a model for such an invitation: “Repent, repent, for the Lord God hath spoken it! 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 5:32–35). If they know that there is a way back and that they would be welcomed, the decision to come back may be made easier for those who have wandered from the faith. A sincere invitation like that given by Alma may do much to help them come to the realization that they are indeed wanted, needed, welcomed, and able to come back.

*Teach the Way*

Alma demonstrated another helpful principle of activation as he taught the Nephites the way they could return to righteous lives. Having once himself strayed from the faith, Alma was able to speak with the voice of experience. As he taught the people, he asked, “Do ye not suppose that I know of these things myself? Behold, I testify unto you that I do know that these things whereof I have spoken are true. And how do ye suppose that I know of their surety?” (Alma 5:45). Those familiar with Alma the Younger’s history might expect that in answer to the question, he would next speak of the angel of the Lord that appeared to him and called him to repentance when he was a rebellious young man trying to destroy the Church (see Mosiah 27).

The actual answer he gave is both surprising and deeply significant: “Behold, I say unto you they are made known unto me by the Holy Spirit of God. Behold, I have fasted and prayed many days that I might know these things of myself. And now I do know of myself that they are true; for the Lord God hath made them manifest unto me by his Holy Spirit; and this is the spirit of revelation which is in me” (Alma 5:46).

Although the visit from the angel started him on the road to a righteous life, his testimony came the way it does for most of us—through the whisperings of the Holy Spirit as we sincerely seek, pray, and fast

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for knowledge and confirmation. Alma also made it clear that the way back to the faith for those Nephites would also require them to repent and come unto Christ through works of righteousness (see Alma 5:31–36, 50–52). The formula is not difficult to apply. Seek and pray for direction and answers. Fast sincerely. Repent of sins. Do good works by trying to live a Christlike life. This was the way to faith anciently, and it still is the way today. As we strive to assist others in finding faith, it can be helpful for us to teach the way back—by precept and example.

*Bear Testimony*

Because of Alma's position as the prophet and the high priest over the Church, throughout his discourse he also testified to the people of their wickedness and warned of the misery and destruction that awaited them if they did not repent. Alma declared, "For behold, the time is at hand that whosoever bringeth forth not good fruit, or whosoever doeth not the works of righteousness, the same have cause to wail and mourn" (Alma 5:36). He further warned that "whosoever bringeth forth evil works, the same becometh a child of the devil, for he hearkeneth unto his voice, and doth follow him. And whosoever doeth this must receive his wages of him; therefore, for his wages he receiveth death, as to things pertaining unto righteousness, being dead unto all good works" (Alma 5:41–42).

While we typically will not be in a position to so warn and prophesy against the sins of those we are trying to help, we can, as Alma did, bear testimony of the love and mercy of God. Alma declared to the Nephites, "Behold, I say unto you, that the good shepherd doth call you; yea, and in his own name he doth call you, which is the name of Christ" (Alma 5:38). He further testified, "I know that Jesus Christ shall come, yea, the Son, the Only Begotten of the Father, full of grace, and mercy, and truth. And behold, it is he that cometh to take away the sins of the world, yea, the sins of every man who steadfastly believeth on his name" (Alma 5:48). As we obtain and bear similar testimony to those who struggle to maintain faith, we may provide an opportunity for the Spirit to confirm our witness in their hearts. That witness can increase their desire to return to activity.

## CONCLUSION

Not everyone we try to invite back to activity in the Church will respond to our efforts. Alma certainly learned that in Ammonihah (see Alma 9–14). That fact should not discourage us from trying. As one whose own family struggled with activity in the Church for a season, I have a great interest in activation efforts. Though I was a young boy when my family finally found its way into faith and activity in the Church, I still remember those good people who helped us. As I look at Alma's example, I have come to realize that these good people persistently, patiently, and sincerely loved and served my family, following many of the principles Alma modeled. They helped us love and trust them. They helped us remember why we joined the Church in the first place. They encouraged us to consider our spiritual status and standing before God. They showed us the way to increase our faith and commitment. They bore inspiring testimony to us through their words and actions. I will love them forever. I know that one way we can show the depth of our gratitude for all the blessings we receive from our Heavenly Father is to strengthen others, especially those who struggle, by practicing the principles so well taught and demonstrated by Alma during his remarkable mission in Zarahemla.

## NOTES

1. As Alma described the challenge the sons of Mosiah undertook in trying to preach the gospel to the Lamanites, he explained: "And assuredly it was great, for they had undertaken to preach the word of God to a wild and a hardened and a ferocious people" (Alma 17:14). We marvel at their faith as they endured rejection, persecutions, and prisons. We teach our prospective missionaries to pattern their preparation after that of the sons of Mosiah by being prayerful students of the gospel (see Alma 17:28). We encourage our missionaries in the field to work as the sons of Mosiah did, building relationships of trust and serving the people among whom they labor (see Alma 17–18). We challenge our missionaries to seek the Spirit in their labors that they, like the sons of Mosiah, might teach with the "power and authority of God" (Alma 17:3).

2. For an account of the conversion of Alma the Younger and the sons of Mosiah, see Mosiah 27–28, and Alma 36.

3. In some ways, Alma's task may have been more challenging than that of the sons of Mosiah, for it can be more difficult to reclaim someone who has strayed from the Church than to convert one who had never been taught the gospel. Like

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the sons of Mosiah, Alma endured rejection, persecution, and prison as he labored, and like the sons of Mosiah, he enjoyed remarkable success. In the space of five years, he taught repentance not only in the city of Zarahemla but also in Gideon, Melek, Ammonihah, Sidon, and the surrounding areas. As a result of his faith and efforts, “they began to establish the order of the church in the city of Zarahemla (see Alma 6:4), Gideon (see Alma 8:1), and Sidon (see Alma 15:17), and he baptized those who “came to him throughout all the borders of the land” of Melek (Alma 8:5). He even was able to reclaim many of the exceptionally wicked Ammonihahites, who were steeped in the profession of Nehor, including Amulek and Zeezrom (see Alma 8–15). The timing of Alma’s reform of the land of Zarahemla proved fortuitous for the sons of Mosiah and their converts, the Anti-Nephi-Lehies, for as they fled the wrath of their unconverted Lamanite brethren who were determined to slay them, these new converts found compassion and refuge among the recently activated Nephites. As a result of Alma’s contemporary labors the Nephites’ hearts were prepared not only to welcome the refugees to their land but also to give the Anti-Nephi-Lehies the land of Jershon (see Alma 27:4–28:14) and to defend their new brethren in the faith with their own lives. Likely, if Alma had not just activated the Nephites, the Anti-Nephi-Lehies’ petition for refuge would have been rejected by what would have still been a hardened and apostate Nephite nation. Surely an omniscient Father in Heaven directed this work and its timing.

4. Please note the list of principles presented hereafter is intended to be illustrative rather than exhaustive. Moreover, the account recorded in Alma was not written primarily for this purpose, but the principles that can be derived from the historical record constitute a valuable secondary message.

5. Book of Mormon geography is divided into two great divisions, the land northward and the land southward, separated by a narrow neck of land. The land southward appears to have had three major subdivisions, the land of Nephi or Lehi-Nephi in the southern end, the land of Zarahemla in the middle, and the land of Bountiful in the northern portion next to the narrow neck. The land of Zarahemla itself had several subdivisions as well, such as the land of Gideon and the land of Melek. Thus, the term “land of” could refer to a large or small division. Lands typically contained a major city that bore the land’s name. Therefore, the city of Zarahemla is located in the land of Zarahemla in the land southward, while the city of Melek is located in the land of Melek, in the land of Zarahemla, in the land southward.