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“WITH POWER AND AUTHORITY  
OF GOD”: PRINCIPLES OF  
MISSIONARY SUCCESS

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The Book of Mormon contains powerful and priceless principles relating to the preaching of God’s word to His children. Although various principles relating to missionary work are found throughout the Book of Mormon, nowhere is this more evident than in Alma 17 and 18. This chapter seeks to help students and teachers of the restored gospel identify and implement a few of these potent principles that can help all of us have greater success in missionary work.

FINDING THE PRINCIPLES

Some students of the Book of Mormon are aware of these principles—these keys to success in missionary work, as it were. A few of these principles are simply worded and straightforward to detect. However, when one takes a closer look at Alma 17 and 18, a multitude of key precepts and principles becomes apparent. President Boyd K. Packer once stated: “That word *principle* in the revelation is a very important one. A principle is an enduring truth, a law, a rule you can adopt to guide you in making decisions. Generally principles are not

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spelled out in detail. That leaves you free to find your way with an enduring truth, a principle, as your anchor.”<sup>1</sup> President Packer’s definition of a principle is instructive in that principles are usually “not spelled out in detail.”

As is often the case, students of the scriptures must struggle to extract these truths. The process, at times, can be time consuming and difficult yet highly rewarding. If we are not diligent, we may attain only the “lesser portion of the word” while bypassing “the greater portion of the word” (Alma 12:9–11). Elder Richard G. Scott taught: “As you seek spiritual knowledge, search for principles. *Carefully* separate them from the detail used to explain them. Principles are concentrated truth, packaged for application to a wide variety of circumstances. A true principle makes decisions clear even under the most confusing and compelling circumstances. *It is worth great effort to organize the truth we gather to simple statements of principle.* I have tried to do that with gaining spiritual knowledge.”<sup>2</sup>

## PRINCIPLES OF SUCCESSFUL MISSIONARY WORK

The following is my attempt to articulate a few of those simple statements of principle found in Alma 17 and 18. In these chapters, the prophet-historian Mormon chronicles the account of Alma’s reunion with the sons of Mosiah as they were returning from their fourteen-year mission to the Lamanites. In the process of explaining why the sons of Mosiah were such successful missionaries, Mormon helps us to see how we can be successful missionaries as well. The principles mentioned are both those evident as well as those not so evident.

### *Search the Scriptures Diligently*

In Alma 17:2, Mormon explains that the sons of Mosiah “had waxed strong in the knowledge of the truth; for they were men of a sound understanding and they had searched the scriptures diligently, that they might know the word of God.” This, then, is the first key to success for any missionary. Before one can “declare [the] word,” one must first “seek to obtain” the word (D&C 11:21). Diligent scripture study is one of the activities undergirding the success of any endeavor in God’s kingdom. President Ezra Taft Benson wisely counseled: “Often we spend

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great effort in trying to increase the activity levels in our stakes. We work diligently to raise the percentages of those attending sacrament meetings. We labor to get a higher percentage of our young men on missions. We strive to improve the numbers of those marrying in the temple. All of these are commendable efforts and important to the growth of the kingdom. But when individual members and families immerse themselves in the scriptures regularly and consistently, these other areas of activity will automatically come. Testimonies will increase. Commitment will be strengthened. Families will be fortified. Personal revelation will flow.”<sup>3</sup> The first prerequisite in preaching the gospel is to know the gospel. Paul aptly warned: “Thou therefore which teachest another, teachest thou not thyself?” (Romans 2:21).

*Pray and Fast*

Mormon is quick to tell us, though, that successful missionaries do more than just study the scriptures: “But this is not all; they had given themselves to much prayer, and fasting; therefore they had the spirit of prophecy, and the spirit of revelation, and when they taught, they taught with power and authority of God” (Alma 17:3). Note the combination of both prayer and fasting in the scriptures. These two activities often are mentioned in tandem—as if they were one activity (see Matthew 17:21; Luke 2:37; Acts 14:23; Omni 1:26; Mosiah 27:22; Alma 5:46; 6:6; 45:1; Helaman 3:35; 3 Nephi 27:1; 4 Nephi 1:12; D&C 88:76).

When two elements, such as iron and carbon, are brought together through the proper process, they form an alloy, in this case steel. Iron in and of itself is strong, but when combined with carbon (and other trace elements), it forms an even stronger substance. Likewise, prayer and fasting are, in and of themselves, excellent activities to promote spiritual strength. But when brought together, they can give one even greater strength and power. Elder Delbert L. Stapley once described the extent of the power that can come through combining these two powerful principles: “The Saints by fasting and praying can sanctify the soul and elevate the spirit to Christlike perfection, and thus . . . insure spiritual strength and power to the individual. By observing fasting and prayer in its true spirit, the Latter-day Saints cannot be overpowered by Satan tempting them to evil.”<sup>4</sup>

*Labor in the Spirit*

Mormon continues his narration: “Now these are the circumstances which attended them in their journeyings, for they had many afflictions; they did suffer much, both in body and in mind, such as hunger, thirst and fatigue, and also much *labor in the spirit*” (Alma 17:5; emphasis added). President Benson often taught missionaries and prospective missionaries that the spirit of missionary work is work!<sup>5</sup> He taught: “One of the greatest secrets of missionary work is work. If a missionary works, he will get the Spirit; if he gets the Spirit, he will teach by the Spirit; and if he teaches by the Spirit, he will touch the hearts of the people; and he will be happy. There will be no homesickness, no worrying about families, for all time, talents and interests are centered on the work of the ministry. That’s the secret—work, work, work. There is no satisfactory substitute, especially in missionary work.”<sup>6</sup>

Wise are the missionaries who understand that the preaching of the gospel is not a cultural extravaganza nor a tantalizing tourist trip. Elder Jeffrey R. Holland perceptively observed:

Anyone who does any kind of missionary work will have occasion to ask, Why is this so hard? Why doesn’t it go better? Why can’t our success be more rapid? . . .

You will have occasion to ask those questions. . . . I offer this as my personal feeling. I am convinced that missionary work is not easy because salvation is not a cheap experience. Salvation never was easy. How could we believe it would be easy for us when it was never, ever easy for [Christ]? It seems to me that missionaries and mission leaders have to spend at least a few moments in Gethsemane. . . .

I’m not talking about anything anywhere near what Christ experienced. . . . But I believe that missionaries and investigators, to come to the truth, to come to salvation, to know something of this price that has been paid, will have to pay a token of that same price.

For that reason I don’t believe missionary work has ever been easy, nor that conversion is, nor that retention is, nor that

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continued faithfulness is. I believe it is supposed to require some effort, something from the depths of our soul.<sup>7</sup>

To "labor in the spirit" is to do more than just proselyte with physical exertion. Success in missionary work cannot come by effort alone. Missionaries must labor in *the Spirit*, meaning that the Holy Ghost must attend the work that is done. "And again, the elders, priests and teachers of this church shall teach the principles of my gospel. . . . As they shall be directed by the Spirit. . . . And *if ye receive not the Spirit ye shall not teach*" (D&C 42:12–14). This does not mean that a missionary will somehow be prevented from going through the motions of teaching; it simply means that the power of the Holy Ghost, which makes the teaching authoritative, will not be present. "Verily I say unto you, he that is ordained of me and sent forth to preach the word of truth by the Comforter, in the Spirit of truth, doth he preach it by the Spirit of truth or some other way? And *if it be by some other way it is not of God*" (D&C 50:17–18; emphasis added). How unfortunate it is when a missionary presents discussions devoid of the Spirit. Perhaps some would be shocked to learn that this type of labor "profiteth him nothing" (Moroni 7:6).

To thus labor in the Spirit becomes a daunting task for any missionary. There is a deep and heartfelt humility that comes to the preacher of God's word when realizing that success depends on relying upon the third member of the Godhead, namely the Holy Ghost. His divine role of witnessing that Jesus is the Christ and that the gospel is true is a responsibility that cannot be duplicated by the efforts of any missionary, no matter how strenuous or creative those efforts may be. Accordingly, it is imperative for missionaries to remember that, although they labor in the Spirit, they need not try to generate a "spiritual" mood for their investigators. Robert L. Millet perceptively observed: "The word of God is sufficiently powerful that gospel teachers or preachers do not need to assume the burden of converting their listeners. There is sufficient for the gospel teacher to do by way of reading, studying, preparing, praying, organizing, and presenting that he or she need not feel an obligation to 'create' a spiritual experience. . . . [We] need not usurp the role of the Holy Ghost. Ultimately, he is the teacher. He is the converter.

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He is the member of the eternal Godhead charged with carrying the word of truth into the hearts and minds of the children of men. He is the agent of the new birth, the one who sanctifies and empowers human beings.”<sup>8</sup>

*Postpone Other Worthy Opportunities*

Mormon informs us that Mosiah was anxious to empower his sons with the mantle of leadership; however, they chose instead to serve missions, “having refused the kingdom which their father was desirous to confer upon them” (Alma 17:6). Not only did Mosiah desire that his sons take positions of governance, but so did the citizens of the land. Obviously Mosiah was a righteous man. If his sons stayed home to serve in civic capacities, their actions would have been acceptable to Mosiah and the rest of his people.

The principle here is that successful missionaries relinquish worldly concerns and the motives of materialism in order to fully serve God and thus build His kingdom. President Benson gave this counsel and challenge: “The Lord wants every young man to serve a full-time mission. Presently only a third of the eligible young men in the Church are serving missions. This is not pleasing to the Lord. We can do better. We must do better. Not only should a mission be regarded as a priesthood duty, but every young man should look forward to this experience with great joy and anticipation. A young man can do nothing more important. School can wait. Scholarships can be deferred. Occupational goals can be postponed. Yes, even temple marriage should wait until after a young man has served an honorable full-time mission for the Lord.”<sup>9</sup>

To be a successful missionary, one must be willing to lay aside even those endeavors that are good in favor of that which is eternal. “Now you young men, . . . a mission has been emphasized as a priesthood responsibility,” said Elder Robert E. Wells, “of such priority that again today we stress, your mission comes before marriage, education, professional opportunities, scholarships, sports, cars, or girls.”<sup>10</sup>

*Provide for Yourself*

Continuing his narration, Mormon observes another critical aspect that can contribute to success in missionary work: “Nevertheless they

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departed out of the land of Zarahemla, and took their swords, and their spears, and their bows, and their arrows, and their slings; and this they did that they might provide food for themselves while in the wilderness" (Alma 17:7). No, the point here is not to arm our missionary force with tanks and guns! To see the modern principle, we must bridge the cultural gap. Anecdotal evidence suggests that those missionaries who provide at least part or all of the cost for their mission tend to be more committed to their mission." Although not always possible, it is valuable for missionaries to work for the funds for their own missions. By so doing, a missionary comes to understand the principles of frugality and sacrifice; they are more able to recognize the sacred nature of the resources needed while in the service of the Lord.

*Be an Example of Patience*

The Lord's admonition to the sons of Mosiah in Alma 17:11 is applicable to missionaries in any age: "Go forth among the Lamanites, thy brethren, and establish my word; yet ye shall be *patient in long-suffering and afflictions, that ye may show forth good examples unto them in me, and I will make an instrument of thee in my hands unto the salvation of many souls*" (emphasis added). How sad it is when missionaries are bad examples! Alma rebuked his son Corianton for his bad example and lamented the devastating effects that it had upon the work (see Alma 39). Elder Holland's observation is instructive:

Above all else we can live the gospel. Surely there is no more powerful missionary message we can send to this world than the example of a loving and happy Latter-day Saint life. The manner and bearing, the smile and kindness of a faithful member of the Church brings a warmth and an outreach that no missionary tract or videotape can convey. People do not join the Church because of what they know. They join because of what they feel, what they see and want spiritually. Our spirit of testimony and happiness in that regard will come through to others if we let it. . . . Asking every member to be a missionary is not nearly as crucial as asking every member to be a member!<sup>12</sup>

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It is purported that St. Francis of Assisi once admonished, “Preach the gospel. And if necessary, use words.”<sup>3</sup> People will often learn more from our actions than they will from what we say. This is a great key to successful missionary work.

### *Separate Yourself from Distractions*

Another key to success in missionary work can be found in Alma 17:13: “When they had arrived in the borders of the land of the Lamanites, that they separated themselves and departed one from another.” Although this reference is specifically highlighting geographical separation from other missionaries, with a little imagination we can see a great application: successful missionaries know the importance of appropriate emotional separation from girlfriends, family, and so forth. It is one thing to leave scholarships and school behind—these are inanimate objects; but it is quite another thing to detach oneself from relationships that can hamper and negatively affect the service that one gives. Some missionaries go on a mission, yet they never leave home. Or, to put it another way, their hearts are not in the right place because they are focused on a relationship that for the time being just cannot be.

### *Get a Vision of the Work*

It is vital that missionaries have a correct vision of the work, or an understanding “that great [is] the work” (Alma 17:13). Part of having the correct vision of missionary work consists in knowing why we do missionary work. In verse 16 we learn the reason: “Therefore, this was the cause for which the sons of Mosiah had undertaken the work, that perhaps they might bring them unto repentance; that perhaps they might bring them to know of the plan of redemption.” In other words, missionaries are not just to baptize, not just to have cultural experiences, not just to teach many discussions, and not just to get investigators to read the Book of Mormon. All these endeavors are commendable, but they are only peripheral aspects of missionary work. As stated by Mormon, the core reason for doing missionary work is to bring people to repentance! Elder Holland’s words are instructive:



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Probably there are very few missionaries, if any, who do not know the centrality of this doctrine [of repentance]. But I have been surprised to regularly be with the missionaries and discover that this is not something that readily comes forward in a discussion of missionary work. . . .

Almost never do the missionaries get around to identifying the two most fundamental things we want investigators to do prior to baptism: have faith in the Lord Jesus Christ and repent of their sins. Yet "we believe that the first principles and ordinances of the Gospel are: first, Faith in the Lord Jesus Christ; second, Repentance; [*then*] third, Baptism by immersion *for the remission of sins*; fourth, Laying on of hands for the gift of the Holy Ghost."<sup>14</sup>

Successful missionaries do not get caught up in the thick of thin things. They know that their mission is ultimately about bringing people to Christ, not just being amiable ambassadors of another well-oiled Church program. It is difficult at times to keep focused, especially with all the wonderful handbooks, excellent training, and cultural prestige associated with serving a full-time mission. Illustratively, C. S. Lewis once observed: "There have been men before now who got so interested in proving the existence of God that they came to care nothing for God Himself . . . as if the good Lord had nothing to do but *exist!* There have been some who were so occupied in spreading Christianity that they never gave a thought to Christ. Man! Ye see it in smaller matters. Did ye never know a lover of books that with all his first editions and signed copies had lost the power to read them? Or an organiser of charities that had lost all love for the poor? It is the subtlest of all the snares."<sup>15</sup> Elaborate programming, although not inherently wrong, can sometimes blur the essence of the message.

In this regard, it is interesting to note what the missionaries of the Book of Mormon taught as their missionary discussions. Often we see that they taught the simple core doctrines of the gospel. In Alma 18:36–39 we learn that these missionaries taught what Elder Bruce R. McConkie called the three pillars of eternity—the doctrines of the Creation, the Fall, and the Atonement. We have been told by prophets

that these central doctrines are interrelated and form the very foundation of our Father in Heaven's wonderful plan of redemption.<sup>16</sup> Section 20 of the Doctrine and Covenants contains an excellent summary statement of the doctrines contained in the Book of Mormon (see D&C 20:11–31). Included in this summary are the doctrines of the Creation, Fall, and Atonement. How intriguing that the Lord highlights for us in a modern revelation the importance of these three preeminent doctrines that were taught anciently by missionaries in the Book of Mormon. Our modern missionaries are invited to receive their endowment before they begin full-time service and are encouraged to attend the temple often while in the Missionary Training Center. It is by no means a coincidence that the very essence of the endowment, as far as doctrinal instruction goes, centers on these three doctrinal pillars—the Creation, the Fall, and the Atonement. Thus, it appears that the Lord's pedagogy for training missionaries has not changed. Certain methods of missionary training may change and fluctuate over time, but the doctrine never will.

#### *Build Relationships without Ulterior Motives*

Later in the account of Alma 17 the scene of action switches to the missionary labors of Ammon in the land of Ishmael. After being detained and brought before King Lamoni, Ammon is asked by the king if he desires to live amongst the Lamanites: “And Ammon said unto him: Yea, I desire to dwell among this people for a time; yea, and perhaps until the day I die. And it came to pass that king Lamoni was much pleased with Ammon, and caused that his bands should be loosed; and he would that Ammon should take one of his daughters to wife. But Ammon said unto him: Nay, but I will be thy servant. Therefore Ammon became a servant to king Lamoni. And it came to pass that he was set among other servants to watch the flocks of Lamoni, according to the custom of the Lamanites” (vv. 23–25). Successful missionaries quickly learn that it is important to be true friends and servants to those we teach, without any ulterior motives. Elder Neal A. Maxwell counseled: “It is important in our relationships with our fellowmen that we approach them as neighbors and as brothers and sisters rather than coming at them flinging theological thunderbolts.”<sup>17</sup> Likewise, Elder

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M. Russell Ballard gave this admonition: "That is our doctrine—a doctrine of inclusion. That is what we believe. That is what we have been taught. Of all people on this earth, we should be the most loving, the kindest, and the most tolerant because of that doctrine. . . . May I suggest three simple things we can do to avoid making others in our neighborhoods feel excluded? First, get to know your neighbors. Learn about their families, their work, their views. Get together with them, if they are willing, and do so without being pushy and without any ulterior motives. Friendship should never be offered as a means to an end; it can and should be an end unto itself."<sup>18</sup> In other words, we should be friends with those not of our faith because it is simply the right thing to do! Let the baptisms take care of themselves.

## CONCLUSION

These are but a few of the principles relating to successful missionary work as found in the Book of Mormon. Many more are waiting to be discovered. The Book of Mormon not only can bring us closer to Christ, but it can help us bring others to Him. By abiding by its precepts, we all can become missionaries who teach the gospel "with power and authority of God" (Alma 17:3). Elder McConkie stated that God "has placed in our hands the most effective, compelling, and persuasive missionary tool ever given to any people in any age. The name of this tool is the Book of Mormon."<sup>19</sup> Not only is the Book of Mormon a tool to convert investigators, but likewise it can be a powerful manual to prepare missionaries for great success in the mission field. What a valuable treasure the Lord has given us in this magnificent record!

President Benson's challenge is one we should never forget: "I challenge our Church writers, teachers, and leaders to tell us more Book of Mormon conversion stories that will strengthen our faith and prepare great missionaries. Show us how to effectively use it as a missionary tool, and let us know how it leads us to Christ and answers our personal problems and those of the world."<sup>20</sup> May we as parents, teachers, and leaders use the Book of Mormon as such a tool as we prepare our valiant youth to serve in the vineyard of the Lord.

## NOTES

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5. Ezra Taft Benson to author on July 10, 1985, in Salt Lake City.
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7. Jeffrey R. Holland, "Missionary Work and the Atonement," *Ensign*, March 2001, 14–15.
8. Robert L. Millet, *Alive in Christ: The Miracle of Spiritual Rebirth* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1997), 86.
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19. Bruce R. McConkie, in Conference Report, April 1961, 38.
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