

# 13 The Two Conversions

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A parable about the Pharisee and the Publican found in Luke 18 explains that there is a difference in the conversion process. The Pharisee, an active member of the Jewish religion, and the publican, considered a sinner by the same faith, also represent the members of the church in our day. The Pharisee foolishly thought that his salvation was based on his activity in the 'works' of the church.

9 And he spake this parable unto certain which trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and despised others:

10 Two men went up into the temple to pray; the one a Pharisee, and the other a publican.

11 The Pharisee stood and prayed thus with himself, God, I thank thee, that I am not as other men are, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this publican.

12 I fast twice in the week, I give tithes of all that I possess.

As evidence of personal righteousness, the Pharisee, considering himself faithful and obedient, lists his outward actions that could be seen of men. With pride he boasts of his righteousness in his temple attendance, his fasting, and his comprehensive tithes and offerings. Perhaps he brought two dishes to every potluck. In Zoramite fashion (Alma 31:12-18), the Pharisee proudly gives thanks to God that he is not like all the other sinful people, as he is the shining example of righteousness!

13 And the publican, standing afar off, would not lift up so much as his eyes unto heaven, but smote upon his breast, saying, God be merciful to me a sinner.

14 I tell you, this man went down to his house justified rather than the other: for every one that exalteth himself shall be abased; and he that humbleth himself shall be exalted.

In clear and simple words, the Savior teaches that there is a difference between activity in the church and activity in the gospel of Jesus Christ. The Pharisee was active in the Jewish church of his day, but the publican (the sinner) was active in the gospel. According to Christ, this sinner was more righteous than the Pharisee because he recognized the need for change and was actively trying to change his character.

The strength of faith and the resolve to repent is not always as visible as the rote actions of activity in checking the boxes of righteousness. Repentance might be seen in subtle changes of character stimulated by one's personal faith in Christ and the Atonement. A person may be totally active in the church of Jesus Christ—attending every meeting, doing all that is asked, obedient in every outward display—and yet may be internally inactive in the gospel of Jesus Christ. Members that are converted to the church rather than the gospel may become disillusioned by leaders or offended by doctrines due to their weakness in faith and gospel understanding. Salvation and exaltation is dependent on the inner activity in the gospel rather than the outer activity in the church. When converted to the gospel and Atonement of Christ *first*, activity in the Church will be a natural consequence. Without exception, every example *in scripture* of teaching and conversion—Ammon, Aaron, Alma, King Lamoni etc.—reveals that the conversion is always *first* to Christ and

the Gospel, and *never* to the administrative elements of prophets, priests, and a church organization. Remember, the faith and testimony required for salvation must be in Christ and the Atonement because it cannot fail.

## Checking the Boxes

When parents seek to teach their children the gospel and provide testimony-building experiences, Latter-day Saints should recognize the difference between activity in the Church and activity in the Gospel. The *religion* (the Church organization) is an aid that helps to foster and strengthen the *relationship* an individual should have with Christ, His Gospel, and the Atonement. Many believe that checking the boxes of church activity is a sure sign of spiritual activity and security. It is not uncommon to hear the following statements and questions when a once active individual falls away from the church: *I don't understand why they would leave the church! He attended all his meetings and went on a mission, and was a leader in all his priesthood quorums, and didn't his parents serve in every position?* As if the outward actions insured an inward conviction. The terrible question is: How can this apostasy, inactivity, or even divorce happen when all the boxes have been checked. The scriptures teach that the Christian character developed by church activity on earth should be the same character developed for heaven (Alma 34:34).

The Doctrine and Covenants makes a connection between the church and kingdom on earth and that of heaven:

*5 Call upon the Lord, that his kingdom may go forth upon the earth, that the inhabitants thereof may receive it, and be prepared for the days to come, in the which the Son of Man shall come down in heaven, clothed in the brightness of his glory, to meet the kingdom of God which is set up on the earth.*

*6 Wherefore, may the kingdom of God go forth, that the kingdom of heaven may come, that thou, O God, mayest be glorified in heaven so on earth...* (D&C 65:5-6)

The purpose that the "kingdom of God" (the Church) should go forth is so that the "Kingdom of heaven" may come. The Church organization and the priesthood is to prepare the saints for the glory and kingdom of heaven when it does come. This personal preparation does not lie exclusively in one's physical activity in the Church.

During his mortal ministry, even Christ taught that there must be a connection between the activity on earth and the activity of heaven, as he explains in the first restorative sermon: "Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven" (3 Nephi 13:10). In this sermon the Savior makes an obvious shift from the lesser Law of Moses (performances and ordinances) to the higher law of character development and change.

The activity that connects these two environments is not just the leadership boxes of the Mosaic Law, which focused on the temporal and visual performances and ordinances, but the boxes of character change. A brief but serious look at the boxes that need to be checked for the signs of activity on earth and heaven should be looked at. The list below is not comprehensive in any way, but presented as a comparison between the outward and inward signs of activity and conversion. Remembering always that there can be a difference between activity in the Church and activity in the Gospel.

<b>Outward Activity</b>
Attend your meetings
Pay a full tithing
Pay a generous Fast Offering
Family Home Evening
Attend the Temple
Personal and family prayer
Living the Word of Wisdom
Honest in your dealings
Living the Law of Chastity
Read the scriptures
Serve when called
Sustain all your leaders

These necessary questions asked by leaders are the boxes that are used (checked or unchecked) to determine one's activity in the Church or Kingdom of God on earth. The answers to these questions, even if favorable, will not satisfy the Celestial requirements to be in the presence of God and endure His Glory. The character or 'celestial spirit' ensures a celestial resurrection (D&C 88:22-28). King Benjamin taught that one must not only act like a saint but must 'become a saint through the atonement of Christ' (Mosiah 3:19). If going to the Temple is symbolic of entering into the presence of God, then not only the questions above must be answered correctly to determine one's activity in the church, but the following character traits should also be connected to the same interview if one hopes to dwell with God. If the Outward Activity doesn't lead to the Inward Character Change required to check the Celestial Boxes, then the primary activities have been a failure.

## The Celestial Boxes

### Inward Activity and Character

**Exodus 20**

No other gods before me,  
No graven image or any likeness,  
Not take the name of the Lord in vain,

**Matthew 5:2**

Poor in spirit,  
Meek,  
Hunger and thirst after righteousness,  
Merciful,  
Pure in heart,  
Peacemakers,  
Persecuted for righteousness sake,  
Love your enemies,  
Do good to them that hate you,  
Bless them that curse you,  
Pray for them which despitefully use you and persecute you,

**Matthew 22:36-40**

Love God with all thy heart, and with all they soul, and with all thy mind,  
Love thy Neighbor as thyself,

**John 13:34-35**

Love one another as Christ loved you,

**Doctrine and Covenants 82:19**

Every man seeking the interest of his neighbor,  
Doing all things with an eye single to the glory of God,

**2 Nephi 25: 26-27**

Rejoice in Christ,  
Preach of Christ,

**Mosiah 3:19**

Become a saint,  
Submissive,  
Meek,  
Humble,  
Patient,  
Full of love,  
Willing to submit to all things

**Mosiah 5:2**

No more disposition to do evil,  
Do good continually,

**Mosiah 18:8-10**

Mourn with those that mourn,  
Comfort those that stand in need of comfort,  
Stand as a witness of God; at all times, in all things, in all places,

**Alma 13:12**

Cannot look upon sin save it were with abhorrence,

**Moroni 7:45-48**

Suffereth long,  
Is kind,  
Envieth not,  
Not puffed up,  
Seeketh not her own,  
Not easily provoked,  
Thinketh no evil,  
Rejoiceth not in iniquity but rejoiceth in the truth,  
Beareth all things,  
Believeth all things,  
Hopeth all things,  
Endureth all things.

Charity is the pure love of Christ, and it endureth forever; and whoso is found possessed of it at the last day, it shall be well with him. Wherefore, my beloved brethren, pray unto the Father with all the energy of heart, that ye may be filled with this love, which he hath bestowed upon all who are true followers of his Son, Jesus Christ; that ye may become the sons of God; that when he shall appear we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is; that we may have this hope; that we may be purified even as he is pure. Amen. (Moroni 7:48-49)

A lengthy amount of time has been spent converting the youth, prospective and new members to the church and programs that exist to help administer the gospel of Jesus Christ. Today, unlike examples in scripture, there is a tendency to focus on the church and the priesthood leadership, which constitute the organization and vehicle created for the administration of the gospel. Without doubt, the inspired administration of the gospel by the church and priesthood leadership is *required and needed* by the general membership. This administration of the gospel and the accompanying responsibilities of the priesthood, such as the ‘perfecting of the saints and the work of the ministry’ are aided by the programs of the church. Family Home Evenings, Relief Society, Young Men’s and Young Women organizations, are all a necessary part of building individual faith and testimony.

Albert Einstein once stated: “I just want to know the thoughts of God; all the rest are just the details.” The “immortality and eternal life of man” (Moses 1:39) is the work and glory of God, and thus His thoughts. This “work” of God is to provide for *the individual spirit*, without compulsion, an opportunity for a relationship with Christ as their Savior, forging the kind of personal relationship with Him that makes the Atonement real and effective in their life, eventually creating a character that is worthy to return to the presence of God. If these are the thoughts and works of God, the details alluded to by Einstein could be the church’s organization, programs, auxiliaries, and policies. The priesthood leaders, through that authoritative inspired organization of administration, provide the help and support that *the individual* may need to gain light and truth, participate in Gospel ordinances, and learn to develop a character that loves God and his or her fellow man (i.e. to repent).

Current church policies, programs, and auxiliaries are intended to assist members to come unto Christ. An individual relationship with Christ and His Atonement is the underlying goal of every program and auxiliary in the church. The programs themselves should not become the focus. This is not to say that these programs are wrong. Christmas programs, Easter pageants, ward dinners,

etc. can be useful in introducing investigators to the fellowship of the church, however, these should be used as an aid and not as a substitute for the meaningful gospel instruction of coming unto Christ.

Unfortunately, the tendency to push programs over Christ-centered-content extends to the youth as well. There are many LDS young adults whose conversion and testimonial strength is no greater than that of a “baseball baptism” [referring to a practice many years ago in some mission fields to invite local youth to play baseball, insisting they get baptized if they wanted to continue to play. This was a baptism without any conversion to the Gospel]. Unintentionally, many have taught the youth to focus their faith in the church, the programs, and priesthood leaders more so than faith in Jesus Christ, the gospel, and the scriptures. Parents and leaders seek to have their children and young adults “active” in every aspect of the church organization, but some have not remembered the fundamental purpose of church organizations, which is to teach and encourage the individual to “come unto Christ” (Moroni 10:30, 32). Like an automobile, the active participation in the programs and auxiliaries become a valuable vehicle that should be used as a means to assist in the arrival to a specific destination or goal.

Understanding this distinction helps answer the question of why the youth retention in some evangelical churches seems so high, and conversions away from those churches are so difficult, even when their doctrines may not be correct. These evangelical churches have a singular converting focus—Christ—and little else. In more ways than one, the greatest threats to the LDS youth are the Christ-centered “Born Again” faiths. One successful example, though incorrect in doctrine, is the scripture and Christ-centered Calvary Chapel.

There is an unassailable truth manifested in scripture and life, which is this: When a conversion is centered on Christ and is coupled with an awareness of man's fallen nature and need for the gospel of Christ, the activity and retention of converts is a hundred-fold. When the converted have “received his image in their countenances” (Alma 5: 14), and begin to “sing the song of redeeming love” (Alma 5:26; 26:13), their faith, testimony and conversion will be more lasting and true than those who are merely converted to a church organization, program, activity or social network.

Before “coming unto Christ”, the individual needs to understand *why* they need a Savior. This was the main message of King Benjamin in the Book of Mormon. He realized that *understanding why* must precede the testimony of *action*. Seldom does anyone run into the street in the middle of the night in their pajamas until they first realize the house is on fire, and when they do, proper attire is not a primary concern. The testimonies of youth are often borrowed from those around them. Like the moon reflecting the light of the sun, the youth often reflect the testimonies of their parents and teachers. This reflected testimony is a necessary part of testimony development; however, the time must come when, through trials and experience and life's problems and disappointments, a personal testimony must be developed. A reflected testimony cannot endure to the end.

Once, while attending ward fast and testimony meeting, seventeen people approached the pulpit to share their testimony. Fifteen of those 17 were *not* baptized members of the church—they were all under the age of 8 and technically non-members because they had not yet been confirmed as members. Children are the echoes of their parents, teachers and environment. Their testimonies

overtly revealed the focus and teachings they were receiving. Each said, “I know the church is true and I know President Monson is a prophet.” This statement is not bad or wrong. But none stated that they knew or believed in Jesus as the Christ, or that they knew the gospel of Jesus Christ was true. Subtly and quite unintentionally children and youth are taught to place their faith in the church and leadership more than in the Savior. Often the pictures, statements, and primary songs are more about the leadership and church than Christ. Sacrament talks are chosen from Conference talks rather than from the words of God found in the scriptures, with the constant injunction to “follow the leaders.” While this is good and proper counsel, it silently implies the infallibility of past and present leadership. This practice of placing a *primary* faith and testimony in leadership rather than in Christ has been a significant factor in the falling away that is currently taking place.

The label “Mormon” often indicates a way of life that revolves around the church and organization of administration rather than a relationship with Christ. This way of life, the Mormon culture, is often mistaken for the Mormon religion. Unfortunately, there may be a difference between *religion* and *relationship*. Technically, organized religion should exist to facilitate the relationship one has with Christ. Yet in many faiths (including the LDS), the religious culture can become the focus, to the detriment of a relationship with Christ, as faith and repentance take a back seat.

In a way, those born in the church are born to be a Mormon. When parents are active members, there is the expectation that their children will be baptized and confirmed a member of the church when eight years of age. There's no way out of it; it's a rite of passage for an eight year old. However, none are necessarily born a Christian or a disciple of Christ despite their baptism at eight years of age. This relationship with the Savior and Christian character must be personally developed over time. While this relationship is fostered with the help of the church organization, being active in a church culture doesn't automatically translate unto becoming a Christian. For instance, one may live in a Mormon community and be involved in the Mormon culture, attend the Mormon Church and participate in all aspects of the Mormon religion. But only those who have taken the necessary steps in the gospel can begin to develop a personal *relationship* with Christ *as their Savior*. The reality of becoming a disciple of Christ will then be manifest in the works of their character.

A testimony founded upon the vehicle of administration (the church) will always leave the believer wanting. Many young adults who are coming of age today and even some older adults have placed their faith and testimony in the vehicle of the administration of the church rather than in Christ *without even realizing it*. This vehicle, even with Divine guidance, is the organization and leadership, which has as its primary responsibility the administration of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Today the “mists of darkness” have rendered a zero visibility for the path that leads to the tree of life (1 Nephi 8:23). The tree cannot be reached, nor the fruit tasted, unless there is a standard that can be “grasped firmly and held tightly” (1 Nephi 8:24), leading all of us safely through the black fog of doubt and temptation. The wise and faithful will seek a standard surer than themselves. The arm of flesh, educated or not, can and will fail. Anchored to bedrock, the “rod of iron” that leads to the tree *cannot fail*. It is the “word of God” and the “word is in Christ” (Alma 34:5).