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Preparing Elders, Sisters, and Couples to Serve

Randy L. Bott

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“Called to serve Him, heav’nly King of glory, / Chosen e’er to witness for his name, / Far and wide we tell the Father’s story, / Far and wide his love proclaim.”¹ What a soul-stirring anthem with a powerful message!

Prophets from Joseph Smith to Gordon B. Hinckley have issued and reissued the invitation to prepare and to serve honorable missions. However, a sizable majority of eligible young men choose not to serve full-time missions. Although not under the same mandate to serve, many young women want to serve, but fear of the unknown holds them back. In recent years, the clarion call for senior couples to serve has found a prominent place in every general conference and in many articles in the *Ensign* magazine. Why are so many reluctant to serve?

In this essay, several factors associated with missionary service are identified, and practical solutions are suggested. Is the list comprehensive? Certainly not. Are there other concerns equally as important that are not touched upon? Yes, but this essay is a place to begin.

The Prophet Joseph Smith said: “In relation to the kingdom of God, the devil always sets up his kingdom at the very same time in opposition to God. Every man who has a calling to minister to the inhabitants of the world was ordained to that very purpose in the Grand Council of heaven before this world was. I suppose I was ordained to this very office in that Grand Council. It is the testimony

that I want that I am God's servant, and this people His people."²

First, and most importantly, our calls to serve were foreknown to the Lord; the calls were issued and accepted; and we were ordained to the very purpose of missionary service long before the foundations of the world were laid. Second, but also important, Satan is not going to allow individuals or couples to serve uncontested. He always has done and always will do—even until the millennium—all in his devilish power to thwart the progress of the kingdom of God.

Now, having identified the source of opposition to missionary service, I will consider the forms the opposition takes and explain how to overcome the roadblocks to successful service.

Fear of the Unknown

Although fear may be applied in many areas, fear of the unknown—usually ungrounded—causes many prospective missionaries who have earned the right to be among those chosen ones to minister to the inhabitants of the world to shrink at the very moment the time to serve comes. Paul taught his son in the faith, Timothy, a powerful lesson: "For God hath not given us the spirit of fear; but of power, and of love, and of a sound mind" (2 Timothy 1:7).

If God does not give us the spirit of fear, where does it come from? The answer is obvious; fear of the unknown comes from Satan. But why listen to his constant suggestions that we are incapable, unprepared, or unworthy of serving? He is called "a liar from the beginning" (see D&C 93:25). In addition, Lehi clearly revealed Satan's mission statement: "And because he had fallen from heaven, and had become miserable forever, he sought also the misery of all mankind" (2 Nephi 2:18). Following Satan's directives will eventually result in misery and unhappiness to all who fall prey to his deceptive tactics.

As noted previously in 2 Timothy 1:7, God's promise to those who serve is power—power sufficient to accomplish all He has commanded them to accomplish. Love as an endowment of power takes on special significance when coupled with 1 John 4:18, "There is no fear in love; but perfect love casteth out fear: because fear hath torment. He that feareth is not made perfect in love." Even Mormon linked his ability to be bold in teaching the truth with perfect love: "Behold, I speak with boldness, having authority from God; and I fear not what man can do; for perfect love casteth out all fear" (Moroni 8:16). Paul's final promise was a sound mind—not a tortured, tor-

mented one but one capable of reasoning and speaking clearly and persuasively.

One more important factor that prospective missionaries can control should be considered: “But if ye are prepared ye shall not fear” (D&C 38:30).

Will there always be some apprehensiveness about the unknown? Probably, but if prospective missionaries really believe the Lord’s promises, those concerns will not preclude them from serving. So why not put the Lord to the test?

Testimony’s Role in Missionary Preparation

One of Satan’s most effective tactics is challenging the strength of a person’s testimony. Because we are not given perfect knowledge, we must learn to live by faith. The Lord has said, “Now the just shall live by faith: but if any man draw back, my soul shall have no pleasure in him” (Hebrews 10:38). If prospective missionaries, young or old, hold back because of fear caused by lack of a perfect knowledge, the Lord takes no pleasure in them. It was not uncommon, while I was serving as a mission president, for young missionaries, with many tears, to confess that their testimonies were small and weak—if they existed at all.

The Lord patiently tutors all who want to strengthen their testimonies. As Oliver Cowdery began his work as scribe to Joseph Smith in the translation of the Book of Mormon, the Lord said, “Behold, thou knowest that thou hast inquired of me and I did enlighten thy mind; and now I tell thee these things that thou mayest know that thou hast been enlightened by the Spirit of truth” (D&C 6:15). Evidently, Oliver had previously received many mind-enlightening revelations from the Lord but had failed to recognize them. Perhaps Oliver had a preconceived notion of the form in which answers to prayer should come. Later, Oliver was encouraged to stand back and take note of the strength of his testimony and then to act upon it: “Behold, I have manifested unto you, by my Spirit in many instances, that the things which you have written are true; wherefore you know that they are true. And if you know that they are true, behold, I give unto you a commandment, that you rely upon the things which are written” (D&C 18:2–3).

For all prospective missionaries, learning to recognize a testimony and continuing to build on it until it becomes unshakable are not only desirable but also essential to successful missionary work.

Prospective missionaries should begin immediately the process of examining every part of their testimonies. When they discover an aspect that is weak, they should work to strengthen it. The Savior promised: “If any man will do his will, he shall know of the doctrine, whether it be of God, or whether I speak of myself” (John 7:17).

For testimony purposes, I suggest prospective missionaries begin with the Articles of Faith by taking each phrase of each article and making sure they scripturally and doctrinally understand and can defend the basic beliefs. Elder James E. Talmage’s *The Articles of Faith* is a great resource if any seeker of a testimony has difficulty using the Topical Guide to look up references. A small pamphlet entitled *A Missionary’s Scripture Guide* is available at the Church Distribution Center as an inexpensive study guide to eliminate the fear associated with prospective missionaries’ believing they are not scriptural or doctrinal enough to be effective missionaries.

I suggest further that prospective missionaries study the plan of salvation and look up associated scriptures and quotes from the Brethren to clarify and solidify understanding of the “big picture.” By studying just one hour a day, prospective missionaries will be astonished at how quickly they read the scriptures, keep up on monthly issues of the *Ensign*, and read the gospel doctrine lesson and also the priesthood or Relief Society lessons for the week. Surely there is an hour somewhere during the day when things of little or no eternal importance could be bumped to be better prepared to “stand as witnesses of God” (see Mosiah 18:9). The rewards are immediate and soul satisfying, and any prospective missionary’s confidence will “wax strong in the presence of God; and the doctrine of the priesthood shall distill upon thy soul as the dews from heaven” (D&C 121:45).

When the reality of our being led by living prophets and the absolute certainty that the true gospel of Jesus Christ was restored through the Prophet Joseph Smith are burned deeply into the souls of prospective missionaries, then the insatiable desire to share what they know will overcome any ungrounded fears the adversary may put in their way.

The Lord has challenged and promised, “Neither take ye thought beforehand what ye shall say; but treasure up in your minds continually the words of life, and it shall be given you in the very hour that portion that shall be meted unto every man” (D&C 84:85). One of the great fears senior couples have is that they cannot memorize scripture and dialogue like young missionaries can. Senior couples

also are often concerned that they do not know enough to teach.

In reality, virtually all senior couples discover that their real challenge is to simplify their teaching so that people with little or no understanding of spiritual things can understand. Such is also the case with young missionaries. Learning the gospel on a basic, elementary level gave the Lord all the depth He needed to convince those who are His elect of the truthfulness of His gospel (see D&C 29:7). Those who are being prepared by the Spirit to receive the gospel will not harden their hearts but will accept truth even from the “despised and unlearned” (see D&C 35:13). The Lord has designated those whom He wants to spread His gospel during this final dispensation: “That the fulness of my gospel might be proclaimed by the weak and the simple unto the ends of the world, and before kings and rulers” (D&C 1:23).

The Need for a Desire to Serve

In many revelations given to inquiring brethren in the early days of the Church, the Lord stated the initial qualifier to serve was desire (see D&C 4:3; 6:3; 11:3; 12:3; and 14:3 for examples). The more prospective missionaries understand what an honor it is to be called of God to be His representatives in these crucial last days before the Second Coming and the more they understand the importance and magnitude of the work to be accomplished, the easier it is to generate the desire to serve.

Service, however, requires selflessness. Therefore, we can naturally expect that Satan’s counter-gospel will focus on selfishness. “What’s in it for me?” is an attitude fostered by the modern world. The idea of giving up one’s freedom for a year or two to serve—at the missionary’s own expense—is incomprehensible to the world.

For most senior couples who have grown up in the Church, service has become second nature. We always have and always will respond to the Lord’s call to arms, whether it be in Primary, Young Men, Young Women, Relief Society, or priesthood callings. Senior Saints have grown up knowing that Church callings require sacrifice, dedication, diligence, and hard work and that callings are not always “fun.”

However, young prospective missionaries may not have the attitude of service ingrained so deeply in their souls. Therefore, any meaningful activity, calling, assignment, or task they can be given, from their earliest years, will make the transition to full-time mission-

ary service that much easier. It is a terrible shock to many young elders and sisters to realize that their needs are the very last to be met during missionary service. Virtually everyone else comes first—companions, members, and investigators.

In helping prospective missionaries generate the desire to serve, we must not neglect to tell them about the rewards promised for their willingness to sacrifice. Here are a few of the promised rewards:

- Missionary service brings salvation to the souls of missionaries (D&C 4:4).
- Missionaries receive a remission of all past sins (D&C 132:50).
- Selfless service brings blessings and the promise of life to missionaries' families (D&C 31:5).
- Missionary service increases missionaries' financial and familial blessings by a hundred times (see Mark 10:28–30).

It is revelatory to see the marked difference between those who either have not yet served or are unwilling to serve and those who return with honor after completing full-time missionary service. Returned missionaries are scarcely the same people they were before their missions. They have matured into men and women of Christ and have prepared to become husbands and wives, fathers and mothers, and powerful Church leaders. The rewards for missionary service so far outweigh the inconvenience and sacrifice involved that it is difficult to compare them in the same breath.

Senior couples who serve one mission often return again and again to missionary service because they see the sanctifying influence that full-time missionary service has on them. During their golden years, they sacrifice the frequent, coveted visits from children and grandchildren for the essential service they can give as they take the “bread of life” to a starving world.

Senior couples may feel they are needed more at home to stabilize families than they are needed in the mission field. The Lord addressed Joseph Smith and Sidney Rigdon when they became concerned about being absent from their families and said, “Verily, thus saith the Lord unto you, my friends Sidney and Joseph, your families are well; they are in mine hands, and I will do with them as seemeth me good; for in me there is all power” (D&C 100:1). Unless senior couple missionaries have all knowledge and all power, it seems

like a good trade to leave their families in the hands of the Lord and go out and serve His other children. Time after time, senior couples report drastic and dramatic changes in their families because of the couples' service in the mission field.

Worthiness of Prospective Missionaries

Example really is the best teacher; indeed, sometimes it is the only teacher. Prospective missionaries cannot teach what they do not know and cannot effectively teach what they do not live. In the Lord's law of teaching, He said: "And they shall observe the covenants and church articles to do them" (D&C 42:13).

From very earliest opportunities, Church leaders and teachers must be forceful in teaching youth to avoid the practices embraced by the world but condemned by the Lord. There are certain sins that, although a person can repent of and be forgiven for, disqualify young people from full-time missionary service.

It would be productive for prospective missionaries to ask their priesthood leaders for a copy of the 19 June 1998 letter from the First Presidency on "Qualifications for Full-Time Missionary Service." Also, the Church Handbook of Instructions, on pages 80–82, specifically outlines many qualifications.

Such serious things as having an abortion, having a child out of wedlock, having a divorce, being HIV positive, and participating in homosexual activities during the last three teenage years can disqualify a candidate from missionary service. Also listed in the 19 June 1998 letter from the First Presidency is a lengthy directive on moral worthiness—some transgressions may postpone service for up to three years. What a tragedy to have young people fill out the missionary recommendation forms only to find out at that late date that they have disqualified themselves because they have embraced Satan's counter-gospel of "sin now, repent later, and everything will be all right."

Without full and complete repentance, a missionary cannot enjoy all the blessings of the Spirit in the mission field. Without the Spirit, a missionary will discover it is virtually impossible to be truly effective in performing missionary activities. Without the protective influence of the Spirit, missionaries are subject to the bone-crushing buffetings of Satan to the point that too many leave their fore-ordained missions and return to the safety and protection of home. What a tragedy when that happens, but it does not have to happen if leaders and teachers can get the prospective missionaries' atten-

tion early in life and keep holding the standard high for missionary service.

Couples who have worthiness issues left to resolve can and should set the example by making sure they are clean and worthy to serve. Satan will take advantage of every perceived “chink” in a prospective missionary’s armor. If prior sins have not been completely resolved, it is like giving Satan the bullets he subsequently uses to shoot a missionary in the mission field. Prospective missionaries should be taught that disarming Satan now by seeking the help of the bishop or stake president as well as the Lord is part of the process of making sins “as white as snow; though they be red like crimson, they shall be as wool” (Isaiah 1:18).

The Social Preparation of Prospective Missionaries

In reflecting on my years of missionary work, in watching five of my six children serve (the youngest is planning to serve as well), and in teaching literally thousands of preparing missionaries and listening to them report back, I have concluded that much of the opposition to successful missionary work comes from within the companionship. As a mission president, I spent a majority of my time helping resolve companionship problems. Even couple missionaries are not totally exempt from Satan’s attempts to “divide and conquer.”

Prospective young-men missionaries reflect immaturity if they believe they can fight and argue with their parents and siblings and then live harmoniously with their missionary companions and leaders. Prospective young-women missionaries reflect unrealistic expectations if they expect to “live together in love” (see D&C 42:45), without friction, with someone not of their own choosing—often someone who is on the opposite end of the personality scale—when they have not learned to react properly to hormonal changes, mood swings, and impulsive behavior. For senior couples who have lived together for years but who have been separated for the majority of the time because of work and family demands to believe they can pick at each other’s perceived weaknesses, speak harshly with each other, and then live without contention in the mission field suggests a credibility gap that needs to be bridged.

From the very moment that the idea of serving a mission enters a person’s mind, he or she should be identifying and working to overcome every un-Christlike characteristic that Satan can eventu-

ally exploit to retard the progress of the work. It is unlikely that anyone can anticipate all the ways the adversary will set companions at odds with each other. However, if missionaries can develop the skills of identifying the problem and then focusing their energies and skills on solving the problem, they will have taken a giant step forward in their quest to eliminate the spirit of contention.

If asked, most of us would be able to generate a list of habits or characteristics we know are irritating to others. If someone offered us a large sum of money to eliminate those habits from our personality, we would likely do it. Then, knowing that we must overcome all ungodly traits before we are welcomed into Heavenly Father's presence, why not systematically attack them now? How much more pleasant life would be if we all sacrificed our selfish attitudes and replaced them with a totally outward-focused attitude of the Savior.

Since perfecting ourselves is a goal for members of the Church of Jesus Christ, what a golden incentive it is to redouble our efforts to reflect the Lord's counsel: "Learn of me, and listen to my words; walk in the meekness of my Spirit, and you shall have peace in me" (D&C 19:23). In a world where "peace" both internally and internationally is a rare commodity, why not use our impending missions to expedite the perfecting process and receive the promised blessings?

Determination as an Aspect of Service

We have all noted with some degree of consistency that as soon as we plan a family outing, a temple excursion, a service project, or a mission, the adversary throws obstacles in our way to deter us from succeeding in our proposed goal. If we give in to the smoke screen Satan uses to obscure our vision of the desired goal, then we often fail to follow through and receive the expected blessing.

Missions are particularly vulnerable to satanic interference because of the potential they have to draw people away from the Lord's kingdom. If the adversary can detour young men from serving—because of schooling, girls, employment, cars, toys, scholarships, or whatever—he can theoretically stop thousands of people from being introduced to the gospel. The statistics are staggering! In a world of about 6.6 billion people, only sixty thousand are missionaries. That means only one in every 110,000 people on earth is a missionary for the Lord's true Church. It is no wonder the adversary focuses on the destruction of potential missionaries.

If Satan cannot succeed in stopping prospective missionaries from going on missions, perhaps he can lessen their effectiveness by getting them to try to serve unworthily. If that does not work, then playing on the mind-set of the environment they have grown up in (one of fun, self-entertainment, ease, and self-centeredness) may be his next best shot. Missions are difficult—probably more difficult than anything else in life other than marriage. But marriage is spread over a lifetime, whereas a mission is highly concentrated and intense for eighteen months or two years.

When they hit the wall of opposition in the mission field, too many missionaries determine that a mission just is not for them. They then come home at their own insistence, believing they can resume life as usual at home. Too many of them suffer more from coming home early than they would have suffered if they had stayed in the field.

Somehow we must be more effective in teaching our young people that they need to stay in the field—with very few exceptions. Helping them develop a “can-do” attitude with regard to small tasks and distasteful projects during their growing-up years may pay huge dividends when the storms of a mission swirl menacingly around them.

If we can instill in prospective missionaries the idea that the Lord did not call them to fail and that He will sustain them through the tough times, they will be more likely to see the times of discouragement and homesickness as normal things that “come to pass” rather than a condition that will last throughout their missions. We should remind them that the Lord promised, “And whoso receiveth you, there I will be also, for I **RL** go before your face. I will be on your right hand and on your left, and my Spirit shall be in your hearts, and mine angels round about you, to bear you up” (D&C 84:88). What wonderful promised company to each missionary who serves with diligence and honor.

As we are successful in preparing both our youth and ourselves to serve, we will sense a power that transcends our natural abilities. We will feel peace and contentment that we did not know still existed in this topsy-turvy world. Therefore, as the challenge to prepare has been issued, we now have the responsibility to determine how and when to serve. Even with those decisions, the Lord has promised to help us. He said, “And the place where it is my will that you should tarry, for the main, shall be signaled unto you by the peace and power of my Spirit, that shall flow unto you” (D&C 111:8).