

“CONVERTED UNTO THE LORD”

Alma 23-29

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QUOTE OF THE WEEK:

Not everything in life is . . . black and white, but it seems that the authenticity of the Book of Mormon and its keystone role in our belief is exactly that. Either Joseph Smith was the prophet he said he was, who, after seeing the Father and the Son, later beheld the angel Moroni, repeatedly heard counsel from his lips, eventually receiving at his hands a set of ancient gold plates which he then translated according to the gift and power of God—or else he did not. And if he did not . . . he is not entitled to retain even the reputation of New England folk hero or well meaning young man or writer of remarkable fiction. No, and he is not entitled to be considered a fine teacher or a quintessential American prophet or the creator of great wisdom literature. If he lied about the coming forth of the Book of Mormon, he is certainly none of these (Elder Jeffrey R. Holland, “A Standard unto My People,” delivered at the CES Book of Mormon Symposium, 9 August 1994, BYU Marriott Center).

INTRODUCTION: When the Lamanites came into the fold and church of God, they *came all the way*. We have members who dance around the hard doctrines and escape to the edges of discipleship. They are members of the church in the same way that a Volkswagen without an engine or tires is a car. You can tell by looking what it is supposed to

be, but it will not take you anywhere.

Elder Holland spoke of such members when he said:

I speak carefully and lovingly to any of the adults of the Church, parents or otherwise, who may be given to cynicism or skepticism, who in matters of whole-souled devotion always seem to hang back a little, who at the Church's doctrinal campsite always like to pitch their tents out on the periphery of religious faith. To all such—whom we do love and wish were more comfortable camping nearer to us—I say, please be aware that the full price to be paid for such a stance does not always come due in your lifetime. No, sadly, some elements of this can be a kind of profligate national debt, with payments coming out of your children's and grandchildren's pockets in far more expensive ways than you ever intended it to be (CR, April 2003, Sunday Afternoon).

But the Anti-Nephi-Lehies were converted. Once converted, they migrated to the center of doctrinal certainty and they stayed there. And their children seem to have stayed there also. They were all (100%) converted. In fact, in all of the scriptures, no one shows us the patterns and attitudes associated with true conversion better than these remarkable disciples.

1. THE ANTI -NEPHI -LEHIES ARE CONVERTED TO THE LORD (Alma 22-24)

When I teach these chapters, I like to make a road on the wall or on the board, a road which I label, *THE ROAD TO TRUE CONVERSION*. As I teach the concepts, I move a toy car along the road and place billboards here and there. Each of them has one of the evidences of conversion written on it, taken from the account of the Anti-Nephi-

Lehies.

1. (Alma 22:15) *I will give up all that I possess. Nothing will be more important to me than following the Savior.* We talked about this verse last week, but it is worth another look as we discuss true conversion. I baptized a man who owned a bar during my labors in Brazil. We had some sweet times together—times of refreshing from the Lord as Peter mentioned (see Acts 3:19). During one of those visits near the time of his immersion, he told me that he had decided to sell his bar.

“Sell It?” I remarked. “Why?”

“If I don’t use the stuff, it cannot be right to sell it.”

And so he sold his rather prosperous establishment and began looking for new work. But for a year he was unable to find anything at all, and used up nearly all the profit from the sale of his tavern supporting himself and his family that year. Since he was unemployed, he went to the construction site of a new chapel in his ward and worked there, full time, without pay, for most of that year. When the chapel was finished, he found a new job and was called to be the bishop of his ward in that new building. He has since served as Stake President in that area.

I taught with a wonderful young man named Eli Herring. He turned down millions of dollars rather than engage in an activity he felt inappropriate for the Sabbath---playing professional football.

2. *I will give away all my sins.* True conversion is not a guarantee of perfection so much as a longing for perfection.

In his wonderful book, *The Great Divorce*, C. S. Lewis tells of a group of sinners from hell who take a sight-seeing trip to heaven. All of them have their attachments to sin, and their self-imposed and self-sustaining weaknesses, and all of them, when they arrive at their heavenly destination, are invited to remain. All they must do to have this opportunity is to give away anything that is more important to them than staying in that celestial sphere. Heaven must be more important to them than any other thing. Among those who receive this invitation is a man with a small red lizard on his shoulder. *"It was twitching its tail like a whip and whispering things in his ear."* (P. 98)

The man from Hell (Lewis calls them *Ghosts*) was about to leave, embarrassed by the words of his reptilian companion, when a great, blazing man invited him to remain. *"I told this little chap,"* (here he indicated the lizard) *"that he'd have to be quiet if he came—which he insisted on doing. Of course his stuff won't do here. I realise that. But he won't stop. I shall just have to go home."* (P. 99)

When the *angel* (Lewis' word again) offers to kill the lizard, the ghost proposes a multitude of excuses, divided by his longing to keep the creature and his longing to be free of its corrupting influences.

The issue is the very one facing Lamoni's father and all of us. The lizard is a symbol for sins—our favorite sins, which we must be willing to give away. Again and again the angel asks for permission (as the Father and the Son ask us), to kill the lizard and free the man from the consequences of his sins, a thing that cannot be done without consent of the one making the sacrifice. Finally it happens . . .

"Have I your permission?" said the Angel to the Ghost.

"I know it will kill me"

"It won't, but supposing it did?"

"You're right. It would be better to be dead than to live with this creature."

"Then I may?"

"Damn and blast you! Go on can't you? Get it over. Do what you like," bellowed the Ghost . . .

The transformation of the Ghost once he had given up the thing that kept him out of heaven was wonderful!

For a moment I could make out nothing distinctly. Then I saw, between me and the nearest bush, unmistakably solid but growing every moment solidier, the upper arm and the shoulder of a man. Then, brighter still and stronger, the legs and the hands. The neck and golden head materialized while I watched . . . the actual completing of a man—an immense man . . . not much smaller than the Angel. (Pp. 101, 102)

All of us are sinners, and to some degree that reality will probably continue with us until we are out of this mortal tabernacle. But we must be *willing to abandon our sins*. And when we make mistakes, we must be willing to repent immediately.

I do not recollect that I have seen five minutes since I was baptized that I have not been ready to preach a funeral sermon, lay hands on the sick, or to pray in private or in public. I will tell you the secret of this. In all your business transactions, words, and communications, if you commit an overt act, repent of that immediately, and call upon God to

deliver you from evil and give you the light of His Spirit. Never do a thing that your conscience, and the light within you, tell you is wrong. Never do a wrong, but do all the good you possibly can. Never do a thing to mar the peaceable influence of the Holy Spirit in you; then whatever you are engaged in--whether in business, in the dance, or in the pulpit--you are ready to officiate at any time in any of the ordinances of the House of God. If I commit an overt act, the Lord knows the integrity of my heart, and through sincere repentance, He forgives me (Brigham Young, Journal of Discourses, Vol.12, p.102 - p.103).

3. (Alma 23:7; 24:16) *The greater the temptation, the stronger will be my commitment not to sin.* When the Lamanites were converted, “. . . they did lay down the weapons of their rebellion, that they did not fight against God any more, neither against any of their brethren.” (Alma 23:7) Later, however, when the unconverted Lamanites prepared to attack and destroy those who had accepted the gospel, these converts did a different thing.

And now, my brethren, if our brethren seek to destroy us, behold, we will hide away our swords, yea, even we will bury them deep in the earth, that they may be kept bright, as a testimony that we have never used them, at the last day; and if our brethren destroy us, behold, we shall go to our God and shall be saved. (Alma 24:16)

It is a very different thing to lay down the *weapons of our rebellion* than it is to *bury them deep in the earth*. Years ago one of my sons decided that his comic book collection contained some material that was not conducive to spirituality. He was in his late teen years, and had

purchased the books to read, but also with the intent to preserve and resell them at a later time for a profit. He therefore kept them in plastic sleeves and in pristine condition. But once he decided that there were things in the books that he was better off not reading, he boxed them carefully up, tied the boxes closed, and hid them under his bed. He laid down the *books* of his rebellion, but he put them where, in an emergency, he could find them again.

Another son, convinced by friends and the Spirit that some of his music cassettes were inappropriate, went through his collection with a pair of scissors. When he discovered offensive material or an offensive cassette, he inserted the blade of the scissors under the tape, snipped it and tossed it in the garbage. He buried the *cassettes* of his rebellion. He put them where, no matter what the provocation, he could not get to them again.

These converted Lamanites had loved bloodshed.

And now behold, my brethren, since it has been all that we could do, (as we were the most lost of all mankind) to repent of all our sins and the many murders which we have committed, and to get God to take them away from our hearts, for it was all we could do to repent sufficiently before God that he would take away our stain-

Now, my best beloved brethren, since God hath taken away our stains, and our swords have become bright, then let us stain our swords no more with the blood of our brethren.

Behold, I say unto you, Nay, let us retain our

swords that they be not stained with the blood of our brethren; for perhaps, if we should stain our swords again they can no more be washed bright through the blood of the Son of our great God, which shall be shed for the atonement of our sins. (Alma 24:11-13)

Burying their weapons made it impossible for these wonderful Christians, in a moment of crisis, to change their minds.

4. (Alma 23:16,17; 27:27) *I want to be different from the world.* These Lamanite converts wanted to distinguish themselves from their unconverted brethren. They wanted to *peculiar* (see Ex. 19:5; Deut. 14:2; etc). The scriptures mention two things that enabled them to be distinguished. First,

those who were converted were desirous that they might have a name, that thereby they might be distinguished from their brethren; therefore the king consulted with Aaron and many of their priests, concerning the name that they should take upon them, that they might be distinguished.

And it came to pass that they called their names Anti-Nephi-Lehies; and they were called by this name and were no more called Lamanites. (Alma 23:16,17)

The second distinguishing characteristic of these wonderful people was their conduct:

And they were also distinguished for their zeal

towards God, and also towards men; for they were perfectly honest and upright in all things; and they were firm in the faith of Christ, even unto the end. (Alma 27:27)

1 Samuel 8:5,20 tell us of a group of Israelites that wanted to be “like all the nations.” But the Lord has asked precisely the opposite of us. *I don't want you to be like anybody else. You don't have to see the same movies and TV shows everybody else is seeing. You don't have to wear the same kinds of swimming suits or dresses. You don't have to listen to the same music or attend the same concerts.*

But we have been at this for a long time—trying to look like the world without abandoning the kingdom. Ponder this statement from 1913.

I suppose I shall incur the censure and displeasure of many in saying these things, but I do not care what the world has to say, what men say, nor what women say, in relation to these things. In my sight the present day fashions are abominable, suggestive of evil, calculated to arouse base passion and lust, and to engender lasciviousness, in the hearts of those who follow the fashions, and of those who tolerate them. Why? Because women are imitating the very customs of a class of women who have resorted to that means to aid them to sell their souls. It is infamous, and I hope the daughters of Zion will not descend to these pernicious ways, customs and fashions, for they are demoralizing and damnable in their effect. (Joseph F. Smith, Conference Report, October 1913, p.8)

5. (Alma 24:6-10) *I feel gratitude, even in adversity.* When the Anti-Nephi-Lehies learned of the impending attack of their former

brethren, none of them would lift a weapon in self-defense. Rather, their king spoke to them of his gratitude to the Lord. Reading this reminded me of Job, who had what must have been one of the worst days in history. In the space of a few minutes he lost *everything*, including all ten of his 10 children (see Job 1:14-19). His response? "The Lord gave, and the Lord hath taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord. (Job 1:21)

A beautiful legend tells the story of two angels that were sent forth throughout the land, each given a basket, one to gather up requests and the other thanksgivings. The angel of requests came back with her basket running over full. The angel of thanksgivings came back with her basket practically empty. So it is in life. It seems that all have requests to make, but few of us think to return and give thanks. (Heber Q. Hale, C.R., Oct. 1919)

Many of us fall somewhat short of the Lord's expectation in D&C 78:19 that we receive all things with thankfulness. But to express that thankfulness in the face of danger and adversity is a quality of the truly converted.

6. (Alma 24:19) *I would rather die than sin.*

And thus we see that, when these Lamanites were brought to believe and to know the truth, they were firm, and would suffer even unto death rather than commit sin; and thus we see that they buried their weapons of peace, or they buried the weapons of war, for peace. (Alma 24:19)

This willingness to place principle above personal safety is another

attitude of the true convert. Job said, "though he slay me, yet will I trust in him." (Job 13:15) The little Indian patriot Mohandas Gandhi lived his life in a way that taught the same lesson:

When Gandhi was very young, he took a pledge to his mother that he would remain a vegetarian throughout his life. Many years after Gandhi's mother had died, Gandhi became very ill, and the doctors tried to persuade him that if he would drink a little beef broth it might save his life. But Gandhi said, "Even for life itself, we may not do certain things. There is only one course open to me, to die, but never to break my pledge." Now just think for a minute what kind of a world this would be if each one of us could manifest that kind of integrity before his family and among his friends and before the world generally. (Elder Sterling W. Sill, C.R., Oct 1974)

In the play, *A Man for All Seasons*, Sir Thomas Moore, who would soon have his head removed because of a refusal to compromise his principles, said,

When a man takes an oath, he's holding his own self in his own hands, like water, and if he opens his fingers then—he needn't hope to find himself again (p. 81)

7. (Alma 26:3,15) *I desire to be an instrument in the hands of God.* Converts want to be useful to the Father and the Son in the accomplishment of their purposes. My niece wrote home from Ecuador where she was serving a mission, and shared some ideas about being an instrument in the hands of God. Her comparison involved *surgical instruments*. It was an interesting analogy. Surgical instruments must be clean—perfectly clean, or they can do more damage than good. They

must be utterly submissive. They cannot have a will of their own. Deciding where to make the incision is the business of the doctor. They cannot expect the gratitude of the patient. That belongs to the one holding the instrument as well.

When I read her letter, I phoned my brother-in-law who was an orthopedic surgeon until he retired from medicine several years ago. I asked if he had any surgical instruments he would part with. He sent me a box of his sharp and shiny instruments and I have used them often in teaching this lesson.

8. (Alma 26:32 [30-33]) *I would rather give than receive.* The Anti-Nephi-Lehies, we are told, “had rather sacrifice their lives than even to take the life of their enemy . . . because of their love towards their brethren.” The impetus for this feeling of giving is charity, the pure love of Christ, which he has given to all those who are true followers (see Moroni 7:48). I have seen this longing to give—to serve—in the life of my own mother, who passed away about three years ago. In her final years she was bedridden much of the time. Her eyesight had failed her and her hearing was declining as well. But she had served her entire life and certainly deserved a vacation of a few final years in which she could relax and listen to her tapes while others cared for her.

But she would not even consider it. She determined to make Afghans for her grand- and great-grand children. They took her about fifty hours each, and she made one hundred and one of them.

9. (Alma 27:8) *I am willing to repair any damage I have ever done to anyone . . .*

Yea, if the Lord saith unto us go, we will go down unto our brethren, and we will be their slaves until we repair unto

them the many murders and sins which we have committed against them. (*Alma 27:8*)

My wife found an envelope with a brief note and a \$20 bill on the kitchen table one day. The note said, "Sister Gibbons, I am a friend of one of your sons. One day I took \$20 from your purse. I'm sorry. I am repaying the money so I can be forgiven."

No name was attached to the note and we do not know who wrote it. But the effort to repair, imperfect as it seemed to be, was commendable. We should always be ready to locate the necessary tools and repair any damage we have ever done to anyone.

2. THE ANTI -NEPHI -LEHIES SEEK SAFETY AMONG THE NEPHITES. (*Alma 26 and 27*)

The two great blessings of missionary work are emphasized by Ammon in the following verses.

A. *Alma 26:9,31; 27:4.* (The love between converts and missionaries)

B. *Alma 26:11,16,30,35-37; 27:17,18; 28:8.* See also *D&C 18:13-16* (The joy that comes into the heart of a missionary)

Ammon and the Lamanite king both had suggestions for how to help the converted Lamanites preserve themselves from destruction by their Lamanite enemies. But in the end, they did what the Lord wanted them to do. (*See Alma 27:1-14*) There is no better way to deal with danger and turmoil. *What does the Lord want me to do?* Often we are so agitated that we forget that we have the gift of the Holy Ghost and access to the throne of God.

One additional event here is deserving of a comment. The Nephites

were not only willing to give a home to these homeless converts, but they were willing to set themselves between them and their enemies. That is to say, the Nephites were willing to risk death in order to help the Anti-Nephi-Lehies keep their covenants.

4. AMMON AND ALMA REJOICE IN THE ACCOMPLISHMENT OF THE LORD'S WORK (Alma 26-29)

What great tragedy occurred after the Anti-Nephi-Lehies were settled in the land of Jershon? (Alma 28:1-3) What was the result of this great battle? (Alma 28:4-12)

Alma uses this event as an opportunity to preach a great lesson about the importance of the gospel in bringing joy and happiness into the lives of the children of God.

In the first edition of the *Book of Mormon*, Alma 28 and 29 are not separate chapters, but are in fact part of the *same paragraph*. Take a few minutes and read chapters 28 and 29 together without a pause for the chapter break. What is the relationship between Alma 28:13,14 and Alma 29:1,2?

Why does Alma want to be an angel? What difference did it make to Alma that an angel had visited him?

What does Alma realize about his desire? (Alma 29:3-10)

Conclusion

Like Alma and the sons of Mosiah, we live in a world of sorrow because of wickedness. What do these chapters teach us about our

responsibilities as inhabitants of such a world? The Lord has allotted certain things for us to do and called us to perform works in his name for the welfare of his children. As we perform these works, we will experience some of the same joys and love experienced by Ammon.

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