

# Serving or Converting? A Panel

To Serve, Then Teach

*Lowell L. Bennion*

I WOULD LIKE TO TRY to lay a religious foundation for the point of view I am going to take regarding serving or converting. I see five basic dimensions to being religious. Some people feel religious because of what they know; they are theologians or scriptorians or experts in Church history. Others feel religious because of the beliefs that are peculiar to their particular faith. A third type of religious feeling comes from participation in the Church, in its ordinances and rituals, in corporate worship, church activity, teaching, proselyting, things of that kind. In fact, LDS people are prone to identify and equate church life with the religious life. The fourth way of experiencing religious feeling is by our personal relationship with deity: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost. And the fifth dimension is what I call our relationship to our fellow man and to ourselves — morality, if you will — personal and social morality. These five ways of being religious are, I think, valid and meaningful and can be supportive of one another. But none of them has any meaning unless it is accompanied by justice and mercy in human relationships.

You don't truly know religion if you don't know the writing prophets of the Old Testament: Amos, Hosea, Micah, Isaiah, and Jeremiah. They were great thinkers and expounders of the religious life. They reject every expression of religion if it is not accompanied by justice and mercy in human relationships. Let me give a few illustrations. Amos was the first of these writing prophets. He lived about 750 B.C. in Northern Israel. He said (and he had the audacity to speak for God) :

I hate, I despise your feast days, and I will not smell in your solemn assemblies.  
Though ye offer me burnt offerings . . . , I will not accept them: neither will I regard the peace offerings of your fat beasts.

Take thou away from me the noise of thy songs; for I will not hear the melody of thy viols.

---

*LOWELL L. BENNION is executive director of the Salt Lake Community Services Council and Gospel Doctrine teacher in his ward. This paper and that by Marjorie Whitman which follows were presented at a DIALOGUE session of the Sunstone Symposium, August 1985, Salt Lake City, Utah.*

But let judgment run down as waters, and righteousness as a mighty stream (Amos 5:21–24).

In the next chapter Amos said,

Woe to them that are at ease in Zion . . . . That lie upon beds of ivory, and stretch themselves upon their couches, and eat the lambs out of the flock, and the calves out of the midst of the stall [the very best of meat, if you will];

That chant to the sound of the viol, and invent to themselves instruments of musick, like David;

That drink wine in bowls [not in cocktail glasses, but in bowls], and anoint themselves with the chief ointments: but they are not grieved for the affliction of Joseph [they are not grieved for the afflictions of their fellow beings, fellow Israelites] (Amos 6:1, 4–6).

One of the great chapters in prophetic literature is Isaiah 1. If you will read that at your leisure, you will get the whole gamut of prophetic feeling at its best. Isaiah, in a powerful statement, rejected the religious life of ancient Israel and Judah. In place of burnt offerings, songs, prayers, and holy days, Israel was told to: “Learn to do well; seek judgment, relieve the oppressed, judge the fatherless, plead for the widow” (Isaiah 1:17).

The prophet Micah summarized great religion in these beautiful words:

Wherewith shall I come before the Lord, and bow myself before the high God? shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves of a year old?

Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams, or with ten thousands of rivers of oil? Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?

He hath shewed thee, O man, what is good; and what doth the Lord require of thee, but to do justly, and to love mercy and to walk humbly with thy God? (Micah 6:6–8)

Jesus, consistent with the prophetic emphasis, said: “By this shall all men know my disciples, that ye have love one for another” (John 13:35). His last words to Peter after the resurrection were “Feed my sheep, feed my lambs, feed my sheep” (John 21:15–17). And, of course, you all know Paul’s eulogy on love: “Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, and have not charity (love), I am become as sounding brass, or a tinkling cymbal” (1 Cor. 13:1).

I find in the Book of Mormon and the Doctrine and Covenants the same essential emphasis on mercy and compassion for fellow human beings. In Doctrine and Covenants 52:40 we read, “And remember in all things the poor and the needy, the sick and the afflicted, for he that doeth not these things, the same is not my disciple.” I sit up when I read that and wonder if I am a disciple.

What are the implications of this emphasis in both the prophetic work and the New Testament? I would restate the title of our panel and instead of saying “Go Ye Into All the World: To Convert or To Serve?” I would say “Go Ye Into All the World: To Serve and to Convert.” I don’t know why we have to make a choice between those two.

The heart of our Christian faith is to love God by loving our neighbor. I am concerned that we don’t balance and back up our proselyting efforts with a