

# Something to Show

*Bradford Fillmore*

THE CORRIDORS BUZZED WITH ALL THE CHATTER and anticipation of a courtroom before a major trial. At five after eleven, packs of people scurried to their seats looking greedily toward the stand. The chapel bulged. Extra deacons were called upon to carry the large number of sacrament trays. Ushers, normally an extravagance, were put to use trying to seat the overflow of family and friends here to listen to the words of Elder Johnson, returned missionary extraordinaire, recently home from the Eastern States. The man of the hour sat erect on the stand nestled uncomfortably between stake president and bishop, looking down on the spectacle that had been created in his honor, the crowd who didn't know.

In the last few months of his mission, Elder Johnson thought of little other than this occasion and wished more each day to crawl under the nearest rock at the thought of it. "Two years, and nothing to show for it," he mumbled to himself. He could still remember the time, almost two years ago to the day, when he had stood confidently at this same pulpit and read the words from the Doctrine and Covenants, "And if it so be that you should labor all your days in crying repentance unto this people, and bring, save it be one soul to me . . ." The irony was almost laughable. The words felt so empty now. At the same meeting his father spoke on Alma's having converted thousands of Lamanites because of his "exceeding faith." Where had all the confidence gone, all the faith, in such a short period?

It wasn't as if he considered his mission a waste of time. In two years he saw and talked to more people than many do in a lifetime. He witnessed the darker side of human nature, but he also saw what the gospel could do for these people. He experienced the poverty of the ghetto and the snobbery of the affluent. He spoke with ex-convicts, homeless, students, doctors, lawyers, and just about every other type of character imaginable. It was the journeyman's education, something he'd never learn in school. And once in awhile, just when he thought he'd heard every excuse in the book, someone would glance at him searchingly, and he knew he had found a listener—at least, for a time. But, when it came

right down to it, he knew that most humans, slaves to nature that they are, are too afraid to change, to take on new lifestyles even if they're promised the pearly gates. This lesson, perhaps more than any other, repeatedly reenacted itself in the mission of Elder Johnson. Ironically, the one man courageous enough to commit his life to the gospel confessed that he was running from the law in his baptismal interview. They never saw him at church again.

The bishop rose to the pulpit, "We'd like to welcome all relatives and friends here to honor Elder Johnson . . ." The voice droned on. "What have I done?" he asked himself as the time for him to face this arena of hungry spectators drew nearer and nearer. The last several months had been dedicated to one thing: getting a baptism. A new missionary was sent to him by the mission president with one commandment: "Teach this new elder to baptize." Elder Rose did not need encouragement. He must have stepped out of one of those "power of positive thinking" seminars because there was nothing he didn't think he could accomplish. A disciple of the power of suggestion, the walls on his side of the bedroom soon became a display for baptism memorabilia, complete with baptismal clothes tacked to wall. The only thing missing was the pool of water. Elder Johnson had heard of such notions but was always driven by a more practical nature. With him, the philosophy came down to "What's going to happen, is going to happen. I just hope I'm there when the good stuff comes along." But even *he* loosened the hold on such attitudes as a dying effort and once again let Elder Rose bombard him with good old-fashioned MTC faith-promoting pep-talks. It was easy enough with all the letters from family telling him to "hang in there" and that "the baptisms will come."

There was a time when it didn't matter to him if people were baptized or not. He would go into discussions, give it his all, and leave the burden of decision in their own minds. However, everyone kept telling him, "It's *you* who have to make the difference." "Maybe they were right and I just don't have the faith," he thought. Of course, he always hoped they would be baptized, but only for the right reasons. He had seen so many "shaky" converts that he wondered how much missionary prodding was involved in the decisions. He thought of the day he let the pressures get to him. One afternoon, feeling as if he was coming down with something, he lay down on the couch. In tromped Elder Rose exclaiming, "No, Elder Johnson, we can't stop and rest now. How do you expect to get that baptism before you head home?" He hated to admit it, but he got so fed up that he said, "Elder, I don't care if I ever baptize anyone," and added, "And I hope that you never do either. It would teach you a lesson." He never forgave himself for that.

Elder Johnson watched the deacons make their way towards the back

of the hall with the sacrament trays, wondering what kind of effect the truth would have on them. The bishop always made it a point to thank him for the example he was setting for the youth in the ward. He would have loved to have something more substantial to show those young boys. After all, what was the point of a mission if you didn't bring anyone into the church? He sometimes felt he could answer that question for himself, knowing deep and quiet influences that had worked on him since leaving so many months before. In high school he had played on sports teams and joined the various clubs and there was a certain degree of fulfillment, of belonging, associated with it, yet most of the relationships he had developed were shallow at best. It was mostly, "I'll scratch your back a little, you scratch mine, and then let's go our separate ways." Now, finally, he was working with people in a real way, dealing with problems that really mattered. It hadn't been hard to say goodbye to his high school friends, but saying goodbye to these people who opened their lives to him—it was different. They had shared the pain, the joy, the grief of life in a way that he never before had felt it. The currents of feelings traveled deep beneath the surface.

He knew he had changed, but how would *they*? It was that concern that led him to such a low act. It started out innocently, making the ordinary sound extraordinary in his letters home, the great art of the resourceful missionary. The family responded so well to this that he started making up names and writing about spiritual experiences that he heard from other missionaries. It was justifiable in a way. He only gave them what they wanted to hear so badly. At least, someone in the mission experienced them. Eventually, some of these experiences led to baptisms; at least, that was the story. He regretted it as soon as the letter went off in the mail, but how could he take it back now that it was out in the open? Finally, he had lived up to everything everyone expected him to be. It felt nice for awhile, the attention, and he didn't have to hear anyone's sympathy for how pathetically unsuccessful his mission was. He felt as if he had joined the club. There was no longer anything to prove now that people could see that the initiation requirements were met and the dues had been paid. The pressure subsided, but those deacons . . . if they only knew. Even worse, the thought of his parents bragging to everyone they saw. The thought made him queasy.

"We'll turn over the remainder of the time to Elder Johnson. The show's yours, Elder." He stood up, edged forward, took a tight grip with both hands on the podium. Everyone waited. Even Elder Johnson. He watched himself, as if from a distance, waiting for what would come out of the mouth of this man whom he no longer recognized. He was defiling this pulpit which had been graced by hundreds of deeply spiritual men and women, revealing their souls before the congregation.

"Good morning," he began, "I know many of you here made a special effort to be here, for which I'm grateful." Why should he spoil it for everyone? He didn't want to lie. He wished there were some way to explain, some way to show how the pressure was too much to take, some way to tell why he did it. He looked down at Sister Davis sitting there on the front row just like she hadn't moved for the two years he was gone. She was a fragile creature who just kept breathing, one day at a time, although there hardly seemed enough of her to exist. She must be nearly eighty years old by now. Before his mission, every Sunday, as her home teachers, he and his father brought her to church and took her home. It seemed a burden to him, but she was always so gracious about it that he felt good afterwards. When they would visit her she always talked about the missionary that brought her into the church. "Thank God he came along," she would always say, then add, "Someday, someone will say the same of *you*." A flood of faces rushed through his mind. He thought of the time spent volunteering at the senior citizens home, members to whom they gave blessings, companions with whom he went through rough times, especially Elder Petersen, who almost took the next flight out of town until he talked him out of it. But all of that seemed far away now. Somehow he knew it wasn't enough simply to "make a difference." It's the "fruits," the results, that matter when it comes right down to it. They'll never understand. "God, forgive me," he silently uttered, lowering his head to speak into the mike.