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Conversions Through the Book of Mormon - IX. A William Lund

Author(s): John Henry Evans

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JOHN HENRY EVANS

IX. A. *William Lund*

Heretofore in this series we have been concerned only with persons who have been brought into the Church of Christ from without. In



A WILLIAM LUND AT 18

this article we shall have to do with one who received a testimony within the Church.

And here perhaps is as good a place as any to say something specific about the word "convert." This seems more necessary now than

at any time in the past, since we are entering upon what appears to be a different phase of the word.

The term is derived from two Latin words, *con* and *vertere*, which mean, respectfully "altogether" and "turn about" or "change." Thus, if one turns from one party or religion to another, he may be said to have been "converted." The value of the prefix here lies in the fact that one makes the change entirely, wholly, without reservation. Usually there is involved in the alternation the idea of betterment, or improvement, as when one joins a church after having been an infidel or a sinner. It may also be a change of views or opinions within the church. Both the word and the idea have been appropriated by religion, as of something that has especial application to it.

But "conversion" need not necessarily mean a change from sin to righteousness, or even from one faith to another. It may signify certitude, where before there was doubt or uncertainty, or even a making definite what was vague or obscure. One imagines that, when Jacob, son of Isaac and grandson of Abraham, had that dream about the "ladder set up on the earth," whose top "reached to Heaven," he experienced a change from uncertainty

to assurance in his conception of Jehovah. On awakening, the next morning, he vowed that, "if God will be with me and give me bread to eat and raiment to wear," so that I come again to my father's house in peace, then shall the Lord be my God, and all that [He] shall give me I will surely give the tenth to [Him]."

Here, apparently, was a crucial night in Jacob's life. Reared in what we now call a good home, with a religious atmosphere, he had drunk in with his food and water and breath a feeling for religion according to the notions of the time. And doubtless his mother had told him of the prophecy made over him at his birth, and his father about that "ram caught in the thicket" which saved him from being sacrificed on the mount. But these were supernatural experiences, not in his own life, but in theirs. It was an experience to him that he craved, and this he acquired at Beth-el.

In the Mormon Church, as in other churches no doubt, there are many young men and women who, though they have grown up in an atmosphere of religion, cannot point to anything definite in their experience that would be the equivalent to what is known as a "conversion" in the life of one who comes into the church from the outside through a specific event.

This article is about a boy who found spiritual certitude through reading the Book of Mormon in the way it should be read.

A. William Lund was born in Ephraim, Sanpete county, Utah, on

August 10, 1886. His parents were Anthon H. Lund and Sarah Ann Peterson.

Anthon H. Lund, a child prodigy, was a native of Denmark. At twelve he embraced Mormonism from conviction, preached the new religion immediately afterwards, and presided over a branch of the Church at sixteen. Then he immigrated to Utah. Already he spoke English fluently. Later he learned to read and speak Swedish, French, and Spanish, and to understand Hebrew, Latin, Greek, and Hawaiian—all through his own efforts, without a teacher. His friends, endeavoring to fix two characteristics, spoke of him as a "a man who could keep silence in seven languages." This early tendency for scholarship and religion was rewarded by an apostleship and, later, a membership in the First Presidency of the Church.

Sarah Ann Peterson was the daughter of one of the unique men gathered by the net of the gospel—Canute Peterson. Born in Norway, in 1824, he came to America with his parents when he was thirteen. The family settled in Illinois, and there he embraced Mormonism in 1842. On coming to the West in the exodus, he went to Lehi and became one of its founders. And once, in 1852, he went on a mission to his native country, leaving his wife to plant the crop. In ignorance of the ways of nature, she planted the wheat so deep that her neighbors told her it would not grow. But it did. And later she gave those same

neighbors their seed grain for the next spring; for an early frost had destroyed all their wheat but hers, being late in coming up, missed the frost. Canute Peterson, and not Brigham Young, was the man who gave the scenario writer that tobacco story in the play "Brigham Young." Always, after his conversion, he kept a plug of tobacco in the drawer of his desk, as a reminder that he had mastered the habit. He was the man, too, who, as President of the Sanpete Stake, called his men together only long enough to tell them that they were too lazy to be first settlers.

Nine years after his call to the apostleship, Anthon H. Lund took his family of seven children to Salt Lake City, to live. Their home was just west of Temple Block.

Will was twelve then, and attended the city schools. The children, including Will, did much of their study in an upstairs room, their father's den, where there was an unabridged dictionary and other books of reference. Besides, it was quiet and not occupied a great deal by Father Lund, who was frequently away from home on preaching tours.

The Lund home was a typical Mormon home of the time. Every day began and ended with prayer, every meal had grace said at the table, and the children participated in the family worship. It was the same whether the head of the household was at home or absent. When he was at home he often talked to the children or explained some point in religion or told them stories.

For he was a capital story-teller, with a strong sense of humor, loving particularly the play on words. Altogether the atmosphere of this home was religious—not that kind of religion that finds expression in sighs, groans, the long face, and many inhibitions, but rather the sort that is silent, deep-flowing, joyous, basic, underground.

Besides taking his part in the family worship, Will went to Sunday School, to other auxiliary gatherings, and to priesthood meetings when he became of the proper age. Like tens of thousands of other Mormon boys (and girls, too, for that matter) he got religion by unconscious absorption. It is the natural process, like bodily or mental growth. Religion was thus breathed in, as the air is, which is taken for granted — unless attention is specially called to it. If the air is laden with the fragrance of the spring woods, new-mown hay, or of lilacs or roses in the front yard, then there is a pleasant sensation in the nostrils, and one is exalted, and observes. Of this sort of faith one is unaware, till one's attention is directed to it.

In such an atmosphere was A. William Lund reared, gathering ideas about life and accumulating faith in the verities of life, even as did other boys of his generation. Religion meant little more to him than it did to them.

On completing the grades, Will entered upon a four-year course at the Latter-day Saints High School, in Salt Lake City. He had been sent there because in this private institution the religious atmosphere of

the home prevailed. For all the students were required to take one class each year in what was known as "theology." The first year's course in religion consisted of a study of the Book of Mormon. This was taught at the time by a very competent man, John M. Mills, who was reputed to be one of the most proficient in the subject. The class comprised perhaps one hundred and fifty young men and women.

One morning instead of the regular work, the class was addressed by President Joseph F. Smith. He spoke on the subject they were studying. Now, President Smith always held that, if the religious experiences of Joseph Smith were the fruit of his imagination, the Latter-day Saints, as he put it, "did not have a leg to stand on." And so, since the Book of Mormon professed to be a history of pre-Columbian America specially revealed to Joseph Smith and translated by him "by the power of God," it was vital that everyone should have a testimony of the divine origin of the book. And he solemnly promised the class that, if they would read it prayerfully, with a desire to learn whether or not it was true, God would make it known to them.

It is a common experience that, of a chapter read or an address listened to, some one thing stands out in the mind, as of a point underlined or shouted or otherwise emphasized. This is what happened in Will Lund's case. President Smith's promise stuck in his mind. It was a suggestion, and he meant to follow it with an act; he would test the promise.

And so he read the Record through from beginning to end, always with a prayer and a desire in the back of his mind.

One time, after he had completed his task and was sitting alone in the study, thinking and wondering over what he had read, he asked himself the question, "Has the promise of Pres. Smith and that of Moroni been fulfilled in my case?" He had a clearer idea of the doctrines of the Church. He had been interested in the narrative. He *believed*. But did he *know*? He decided that he did not know, that he desired greater certitude. Inaudibly he prayed: "Lord, make me to *know* whether the Book of Mormon is true or not!"

Just then a voice said, aloud and distinctly: "*What you have read is true and of God.*"

He was startled. He had not expected, nor hoped, for anything like this. He had read of such things. Paul had heard a voice on his way to Damascus. Others, in our own time, had done so. He looked around to see whether anyone else was in the room. No one was there—that he could see. He went out into the hall. No one was in the hall. He stole downstairs. His father was in the living room, in an easy chair, absorbed in the evening paper.

The elder Lund looked up. "What is it, Will?" he enquired, thinking perhaps that the boy wanted to ask him a question.

"Oh, nothing," was the answer.

Will returned to the study and sat down to think. It was true,

then, the voice. It was not that of his father, who, alone, knew that he was reading the Book of Mormon with a question in his mind.

Later Will told his father about his experience. The father, after listening attentively, said, "My son, you now have a greater responsibility to carry."

Essentially the same factors are at work here that occur in changes from one religion to another or from a state of sinfulness to a state of personal righteousness.

First, there is the question. It is not "Is the church I am in true or not?" nor "Is my present way of life such that the Lord may approve?" Rather it is one more specific, narrow, restricted: "Is the Book of Mormon what it purports to be, a divine revelation to Joseph Smith?"

Secondly, there is the search for the answer. Certain conditions had to be complied with. The book must be read, but it must be read with the proper mental attitude—sincerity, faith, openmindedness, desire. It is the attitude in which all searchings for spiritual truth must be carried on—or any truth, for that matter.

Thirdly, there is the same satisfaction with the answer received. There is the initial critical attitude, the attitude of not wanting to be misled, deceived. And then there is the consequent certitude that it is the answer sought for, satisfaction, spiritual exhilaration.

The only difference between this and what is generally known as

"conversion" lies in the fact that there is no particular change to be expected, but only a foundation of knowledge. No course of action is charted—as from one religion to another or from one path to another. It is as if one's feet has been taken out of shifting sand and placed firmly on the rock.

After Will Lund had returned from his first mission (he was later to preside over the British Mission), he entered the Historian's Office in the capacity of a clerk. (He is now Assistant Church Historian.) One morning the late Bishop Spaulding, of the Episcopal Church, visited the place and wished to see the books. Will showed him around. Toward the close of the visit the Bishop said:

"Mr. Lund, I would give a good deal to know for sure that this Book of Mormon is true." And then he added, as if it were an after-thought, "Wouldn't you?"

The question may have been asked, subtly, to sound out this Mormon youth as to his knowledge of his own religion. For Bishop Spaulding always showed a keen interest in the youth of Mormonism from this point of view. A. William Lund answered him thus:

"I know already that the Book of Mormon is true."

Bishop Spaulding expressed surprise. He said, "I've heard the authorities of the Church and older Mormons say that, but yours is the first case I've run into where a young man said the same thing as positively."