

History of the Church in Japan: Part 2: 1901-1903 - Dedication of Japan; first baptisms

By R. Lanier Britsch ()

On September, 1, 1901, Heber J. Grant (then a member of the Quorum of Twelve, and newly called president of the Japanese Mission) led his three companions to a secluded spot in a small grove situated on the slope of one of the rolling hills lying south of Yokohama, to dedicate the land of Japan to the preaching of the gospel. There they formed a small circle, sang, and prayed for the Spirit of the Lord to attend them. When they felt that they were in the proper spirit, President Grant offered the dedicatory prayer. According to Alma O. Taylor,

his tongue was loosed and the Spirit rested mightily upon him; so much that we felt the angels of God were near for our hearts burned within us as the words fell from his lips. I never experienced such a peaceful influence or heard such a powerful prayer before. Every word penetrated into my very bones and I could have wept for joy. (Alma O. Taylor, Journal B, September 1, 1901, BYU-Special Collections.)

President Grant's prayer covered fifteen major points. Possibly of greatest importance was his supplication that Israel might be gathered, that Satan would release his hold upon the minds of the people, and that the hearts of the people might be prepared to recognize the truth when it was declared to them. With this prayer the mission was officially opened.

Probably in no other country have the first LDS missionaries had a harder time getting out among the people than in Japan. In India, Burma, and Siam the elders had begun preaching the gospel immediately upon arriving in those lands. This was also true throughout the Pacific. But the Japan elders seem to have felt the weight of history and tradition against them. Possibly the most formidable obstacle, at least in the beginning, was the Japanese language.

Within a week or two of their arrival, the elders hired a language teacher, the first of several over the next year or so. They decided that because they were all neophytes, they would devote their full time to language study until the next spring; then they would split into pairs and move out among the people. But this method proved tedious and slow, and by December Elders Ensign and Taylor had decided to move from the Metropol Hotel in Tokyo, to a completely Japanese area where they would have to use the language.

On December 4, 1901, Ensign and Taylor moved into the Nakai Hotel, actually a Japanese-style ryokan, where they were to live for the next fifteen months. Learning language was so difficult that the elders did not decide to go out among the people to teach the gospel until February 1903, eighteen months after the first group arrived in the country. (Ibid. February 9 to March 19, 1903).

During the early months of 1902, while Ensign and Taylor were adjusting to Japanese food, manners, bathing habits, and so forth, President Grant and Elder Kelsch occupied their time studying the language, and working on written materials to present to the Japanese people. In February, President Grant (who of course was also an apostle) proposed to his companions that it might be well for him to return to Utah for General Conference in April. He had several purposes in mind, among them to give a full report to Church leaders on conditions in Japan, to propose that additional elders be called to Japan, and to perform the marriage of one of his daughters. The other elders of course supported him in his plans.

Before President Grant left for home, however, two men were baptized into the Church, a happening that was totally unexpected, for the elders had not as yet sought converts. The first convert was a man named Nakazawa Hajime, a Shinto priest who seems to have been something of a firebrand. His visits with the LDS missionaries evidently caused his dismissal from his position as a Shinto priest.

Nakazawa, who considered himself a "small Luther," demanded baptism even though the missionaries did not believe he was ready. On the morning of March 8, the elders, Nakazawa, and an interpreter, Mr. Hiroi, traveled to the village of Omori on Tokyo Bay. Finding the tide low, they took a rowboat out far enough to immerse the candidate. Then President Grant and Nakazawa climbed over the side into the water and performed the ordinance. Mr. Hiroi translated the baptismal prayer as President Grant spoke it in English. Following the baptism, President Grant confirmed Nakazawa a member of the Church and ordained him as elder in the Melchizedek Priesthood.

Two days after this first baptism, a second candidate, Kikuchi Gaboro, a man who had visited the missionaries, presented himself to President Grant early in the morning and pleaded for baptism. Although President Grant did not feel good about baptizing Kikuchi, he was so insistent — arguing that he would understand the gospel better after he was baptized, and even claiming a willingness to die as the first Latter-day Saint martyr in Japan if necessary—that his request was granted later the same morning. He too was ordained an elder in the Melchizedek Priesthood. (Ibid., March 10, 1902.)

The next day, President Grant sailed for America. He was elated with the progress of the mission and enthusiastically reported the two baptisms to the Saints at home. Unfortunately, Nakazawa and Kikuchi both proved to be dishonest in their intentions and were later excommunicated from the Church. Sadly, they seem to represent the whole history of the early mission. A few excellent and devoted converts were made among the Japanese, but for the most part the mission was a great disappointment to the missionaries themselves and to the Church at home.

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