



When a student is wrong, the teacher needs to be careful not to embarrass the student.  
Loving correction produces improvement.

# *Responding to Wrong Answers*

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A few years ago, a new missionary at the Missionary Training Center shared a scripture at the beginning of class: “Dig a pit for thy neighbor; there is no harm in this” (2 Nephi 28:8). With the simple faith of an Idaho farm boy, he testified how this scripture had inspired him to help his neighbor dig pits for the posts of a new line of fencing on the neighbor’s cattle ranch.

This situation posed an interesting dilemma for the teacher. Obviously, the student should be congratulated for following the promptings of the Spirit and for serving his neighbor. He had a revelatory experience in the scriptures and acted on that revelation; encouraging this process is one objective of religious education. However, it is clear that the new missionary did not understand the verse. He simply had it wrong.

As teachers and students more fully adopt the student-centered approach encouraged in seminary, institute, and auxiliary curricula, more students are speaking in any given class. If one assumes that no student knows everything, one can expect an increase in the number of wrong statements made in any given class. Therefore, skill in addressing incorrect student answers is becoming increasingly important in religious education.

The purpose of this paper is to help teachers consider the most effective ways to respond to incorrect answers in a classroom. First, a case is made for why teachers should respond to incorrect answers. Next, a few examples of common incorrect answer types are given. Finally, some balancing principles are offered.

### Teachers Should Respond to Incorrect Answers

Perhaps it is not clear *a priori* that a teacher should correct students' statements in religious education. One could argue that the fact that the student was willing to respond is enough to allow any response to stand uncorrected. One could also argue that the answers are not necessarily *incorrect*; maybe the student simply interpreted the verse differently than the teacher. However, the scriptures themselves teach that we do not want to become "blind leaders of the blind" (Matthew 15:14). Most would agree that teachers have at least some responsibility to ensure that their students walk away with a doctrinally correct understanding, not merely a crowd-sourced understanding.

Many arguments can be made for why teachers should respond to incorrect answers. Perhaps the biggest concern is that uncorrected wrong answers may inhibit the influence of the Holy Ghost. B. H. Roberts wrote, "To be known, the truth must be stated, and the clearer and more complete the statement is, the better the opportunity will the Holy Spirit have for testifying to the souls of men that the work is true."<sup>1</sup> Like mismatched sine waves, faithful yet incorrect answers are at best unclear. By helping students more completely understand the scriptures, a teacher provides an environment that is more conducive to the resonance of the Holy Ghost.

Offering correction also helps maintain the Lord's emphasis in the scriptures. In the example in the introduction, the young missionary learned something good from 2 Nephi 28:8, but clearly he had not learned the lesson the author of the verse intended to teach. Elder Bruce R. McConkie said, "If you want to know what emphasis should be given to gospel principles, you simply teach the whole standard works and, automatically, in the process, you will have given the Lord's emphasis to every doctrine and every principle."<sup>2</sup> If lessons are not grounded in the intended meaning of the author, one could teach good principles while skewing the Lord's emphasis.

Another problem with letting incorrect answers stand in a classroom is that it sends an unclear message to other students. The teacher's reaction is in itself teaching everyone in the classroom. If the teacher does not comment,

that may be taken as tacit approval of an incorrect interpretation or answer offered by a student. While the teacher could choose to give private, delayed correction, other students may still come away misinformed. Thus a teacher's desire not to offend or embarrass one student must be balanced against his or her responsibility toward the group.

Furthermore, wrong answers are often the springboard to effective learning situations. Humble students want to know when they have it wrong. Letting a wrong answer stand may be analogous to letting an effective teaching opportunity slip away.

### Examples

While incorrect answers come in many forms, three examples of what could be considered common incorrect answer types are given below, each taken from a real classroom experience. These examples are meant to help teachers recognize similar situations in their own classrooms and consider their responses. Each scenario is followed by a hypothetical less-effective response and a few suggestions on how that response could be improved.

*Partially correct answers.* Some teachers may be tempted to accept a partially correct answer as wholly correct. Consider a class studying Matthew 16:19, focusing on the keys of the priesthood. After an extensive discussion about the keys of the priesthood, students are asked in review, "What are the keys of the priesthood?" A student responds, "The keys of the priesthood are the power of man to act in the name of God." The student is partially correct in defining *priesthood*, but has missed a crucial element of the definition of *keys*.<sup>3</sup>

In the book *Teach Like a Champion*, author and educator Doug Lemov describes how he has seen public school teachers react in this type of situation. "Many teachers respond to almost-correct answers their students give in class by rounding up," he wrote. "That is they'll affirm the student's answer and repeat it, adding some detail of their own to make it fully correct even though the student didn't provide (and may not recognize) the differentiating factor."<sup>4</sup>

Returning to the religious classroom, the teacher might respond, "Good! The keys of the priesthood are the authority to direct the work of the Church and priesthood," himself adding the crucial element of authority to direct. But from this response by the teacher, the student is hearing that she was correct when in fact she was not correct. Further, the rest of the students are

learning that *the keys of the priesthood* and *the priesthood* are essentially the same thing, but with some subtle difference that is not worth pointing out.<sup>5</sup>

In the introduction to a recently published seminary teacher's manual, it says, "If a student's statement is doctrinally incorrect, it is your responsibility to gently help the student correct his or her statement while maintaining an atmosphere of love and trust. Doing so may provide an important learning experience for the students in your class."<sup>6</sup> Thus, in the religious education classroom, the principle of "rounding up" can be insufficient.

Lemov suggests an alternative type of response, gleaned from teachers who showed quantitatively outstanding success among middle school students in poor areas of the United States. "The job of the teacher," he wrote, "is to set a high standard for correctness: 100 percent. The likelihood is strong that students will stop striving when they hear the word *right* (or *yes* or some other proxy), so there's a real risk to naming as right that which is not truly and completely right. When you sign off and tell a student she is right, she must not be betrayed into thinking she can do something that she cannot."<sup>7</sup>

A gospel teacher who sets and enforces a standard of clear and complete understanding would recognize this teaching moment; the student clearly does not grasp the distinction between *the priesthood* and *the keys of the priesthood*. Instead of responding in the affirmative, a teacher would do better to acknowledge the correct portions of the answer and ask for a more complete answer. In this situation, the teacher might respond by saying, "Jenna, you have correctly identified what the priesthood is. Good! But I asked for a definition of the *keys* of the priesthood." Instead of settling for partial understanding, a teacher can help students obtain a full understanding.

*Correct answers at the wrong times.* A correct answer given at the wrong time may be incorrect. This is especially relevant with questions that invite students to search for information or analyze for understanding.<sup>8</sup> Consider a class studying the parable of the seeds and soils found in Matthew 13:3–9. After a first reading of the parable, the teacher says, "Describe the four different soils mentioned in this parable." A student then raises his hand and says, "The soils represent how receptive we are to the gospel when we hear it. We should have good soil, not rocky soil."

This answer is correct, but it is not given at the right time. Some teachers may be tempted to accept the student's answer and move on. However, a passage from the Encyclopedia of Mormonism brings up an important idea; it states, "Because of the multicultural base of the Church and its rapid

growth, gospel teachers are asked to teach a wide array of members with radically different backgrounds, needs, and levels of understanding and spiritual preparation. This continues to be a major challenge to the Church.”<sup>9</sup> In this example, the responding student may not represent the level of understanding of the entire class. Further, the student with the correct answer may not have arrived at his answer for the correct reasons, or may not understand the process of understanding parables. Within the context of the question asked, the student’s answer is incorrect; he did not describe the four types of soil.

Research has shown that passing through a period of confusion can lead to increased motivation to learn and a deeper understanding of complex subjects.<sup>10</sup> When one student arrives at a conclusion before the entire class has had a chance to explore, an opportunity for learning is missed. The teacher could bring the class back to the beginning of the learning process by saying, “It is true that we need to have good soil. Now, can you please describe the four soils mentioned in the parable?” This response by the teacher demonstrates an understanding that the process toward the right answer can be as valuable as stating the right answer.

*Incorrect answers from correct principles.* Third, an answer that is wrong but applies correct principles may necessitate correction. This can come from a misunderstanding of the context or content of the scriptures or from a conscious effort by a student to disguise his or her lack of understanding in front of the class. Consider a class studying the prophecy of the American Civil War found in Doctrine and Covenants 87. After reading the prophecy, the teacher invites students to suggest ways to “stand ye in holy places” (D&C 87:8). A student then responds by saying, “We can stand in holy places by keeping the Sabbath day holy. Look at verse seven; it says that Jesus is the Lord of the Sabbath.” The student is correct in that keeping the Sabbath day holy will help us to stand in holy places. Some teacher may accept this true statement and move on. However, verse seven does not say that Jesus is the Lord of the *Sabbath*; it calls him Lord of *Sabaoth*. *Sabbath* and *Sabaoth* sound similar but have drastically different meanings.<sup>11</sup> While many verses of scripture have multiple plausible interpretations, the author of section 87 clearly did not intend verse seven to be a lesson about the Sabbath day.

The *Gospel Teaching and Learning* handbook states, “When an incorrect response is given, the teacher needs to be careful not to embarrass the student. An effective teacher can build on a part of the student’s comment that is correct or ask a follow-up question that allows a student to rethink his or

her response.”<sup>12</sup> Instead of being content with an answer that merely has a catechetical connection to the question asked, the teacher could invite the student to look again at verse seven, noting explicitly the word *Sabaoth*. The class could then explore together what that verse actually says, taking care not to wrest the scriptures (see D&C 10:63).

This type of error, accepting a wrong answer that applies correct principles, is common enough that a second, more nuanced example is in order. Consider a class studying John 10:1–11. After reading the text about sheep, sheepfolds, and robbers, a teacher might ask, “In these verses, how is Jesus like a door?” A student may then respond by accessing imagery already in her memory: “Jesus is like a door because he opens heaven to us. He is the way.” While it is true that Jesus is like a door in that he opens heaven to us, *these particular verses* offer an additional interpretation of the door imagery. At least three times in these verses, Jesus explains how he stands between his sheep and the danger that seeks to harm them. While it is true that Jesus is an open door, *these verses* are showing Jesus as a door closed to the harm that seeks his sheep.

When students give a wrong answer that applies correct principles, they are often answering based on previous knowledge, but not engaging with the text in front of them. They are responding, but not learning. A wise teacher can help them do both.

All of the previous examples can be understood in the context of a feedback model. Feedback is an important part of decision making and learning. In the book *Nudge*, economists Richard Thaler and Cass Sunstein describe the role of feedback in making different levels of decisions. They explain:

Even practice does not make perfect if people lack good opportunities for learning. *Learning is most likely if people get immediate, clear feedback after each try.* Suppose you are practicing your putting skills on the practice green. If you hit ten balls toward the same hole, it is easy to get a sense of how hard you have to hit the ball. Even the least talented golfers will soon learn to gauge distance under these circumstances. Suppose instead you were putting the golf balls but not getting to see where they were going. In that environment, you could putt all day and never get any better.<sup>13</sup>

Thaler and Sunstein then suggest that a lack of feedback impedes an individual’s ability to make an optimal choice.<sup>14</sup> A teacher can help students gauge how correct their answers are so that they can improve. A teacher provides the feedback.

## Balancing Principles

In responding to students, there are a few balancing principles to remember. First, teachers can be careful not to discourage the receipt of personal revelation. Elder Robert D. Hales taught, “When we want to speak to God, we pray. And when we want Him to speak to us, we search the scriptures; for His words are spoken through His prophets. He will then teach us as we listen to the promptings of the Holy Spirit.”<sup>15</sup> During personal scripture study or in a classroom, the Holy Ghost could teach to an individual something that is completely unrelated to the text the class is studying. A student certainly may read 2 Nephi 28:8 and *feel* he needs to dig fence post pits for his neighbor. However, this does not mean a class should be taught that this is what 2 Nephi 28:8 *means*. Teachers and students can carefully distinguish between personal revelation received while studying a verse (application) and the meaning of the verse (interpretation). Quite often, the set of possible applications is much larger than the set of possible interpretations.

Second, teachers can remember that a learning environment of love, respect, and purpose is essential to effective classroom instruction. The *Gospel Teaching and Learning* handbook states, “When students know they are loved and respected by their teacher and other students, they are more likely to come to class ready to learn.”<sup>16</sup> Research shows that emotions operate continually throughout many cognitive processes, including memory and problem solving.<sup>17</sup> Hence, caring for the emotions of a student can have a significant impact in the classroom.

Offering correction and feedback can contribute to a loving and respectful environment if done with care and righteous motivation. In a letter from Liberty Jail, Joseph Smith couched the idea of “reproving betimes with sharpness,” or correcting immediately with clarity, in a list with persuasion, long-suffering, gentleness, meekness, love, kindness, and pure knowledge (see D&C 121:41–43). Thus, correction and kindness are not mutually exclusive.

An environment of love and respect can also help teachers hear what students say better than they say it. One curriculum manual states, “Be careful not to suggest that students’ answers are wrong simply because the words they use to express them differ from those used in the manual or because they identify a truth that is not mentioned in the curriculum.”<sup>18</sup> Love and respect for our students can help us cut through the halting words that many students struggle with and arrive at the intended meaning of a comment.



Third, teachers can be careful not to disallow a basic understanding of scripture because a full understanding has not yet come. Consider Romans 1:16, “For I am not ashamed of the Gospel of Christ: for it is the power of God unto salvation.” This verse is often used as a powerful declaration of Paul’s willingness to stand up for the gospel of Christ no matter the social opposition. It has also inspired countless individuals today to do the same. In the context of the verses immediately surrounding verse 16, this interpretation makes sense. A close reading in Greek, however, helps one understand an additional aspect of Paul’s meaning in this verse. The Greek term translated as *ashamed* has the same root as the term *ashamed* in Romans 6:21 and 2 Timothy 1:12. In these cases, the term *ashamed* has the additional connotation of *let down by* or *disappointed in*. Applying this connotation to Romans 1:16, we see Paul’s conviction that he will not be let down by or disappointed in the gospel of Christ. With this understanding, Romans 1:16 becomes a fitting thesis statement for the first half of the book of Romans. Even so, there is probably no harm in allowing a novice student to explore the basic or easier meaning without introducing the more difficult concept because these layers of understanding are both true and complementary.

## Conclusion

A religious educator may let an incorrect statement made by students stand for a variety of reasons. Perhaps the teacher does not want to crush a student’s burgeoning exploration of the scriptures, or the teacher wants to emphasize the application of a truth more than the understanding of the text. Lack of time is often a concern. For whatever reason, we as religious educators must be careful; we do not serve students by reinforcing error.

When a student looks at a verse of scripture and states what he or she sees, sometimes he or she is simply wrong. As religious educators, it is not wrong for us to kindly correct him or her. In a more serious setting, the Lord is good to correct us. He said, “Whom I love I also chasten that their sins may be forgiven, for with the chastisement I prepare a way for their deliverance in all things out of temptation, and I have loved you” (D&C 95:1). Loving correction produces improvement. Our students deserve that from us. **RE**

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## Notes

1. B. H. Roberts, *New Witnesses for God*, 3 vols. (Salt Lake City: Deseret News, 1909), 2:vii.

2. Bruce R. McConkie, "The Foolishness of Teaching," in *The Voice of My Servants: Apostolic Messages on Teaching, Learning, and Scripture*, ed. Scott C. Esplin and Richard Neitzel Holzapfel (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2010), 69–96.
3. For a clear definition of the keys of the priesthood, see <https://www.lds.org/scriptures/gs/keys-of-the-priesthood>.
4. Doug Lemov, *Teach Like a Champion: 49 Techniques that Put Students on the Path to College* (San Francisco: John Wiley & Sons, 2010), 35.
5. For an additional example, see Lemov, *Teach Like a Champion*, 37.
6. *Doctrine and Covenants and Church History Seminary Teacher Manual* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2013), x.
7. Lemov, *Teach Like a Champion*, 35.
8. *Gospel Teaching and Learning: A Handbook for Teachers and Leaders in Seminaries and Institutes of Religion* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2012), 59–60.
9. Adrian P. Van Mondfrans, "Teaching the Gospel," in *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, ed. Daniel H. Ludlow (New York: Macmillan, 1992), 1443.
10. Sidney D'Mello et al., "Confusion Can Be Beneficial for Learning," *Learning and Instruction* 29 (2014): 153–70.
11. LDS Bible Dictionary, *Sabaoth*, 764.
12. *Gospel Teaching and Learning*, 64.
13. Richard H. Thaler and Cass R. Sunstein, *Nudge: Improving Decisions about Health, Wealth, and Happiness* (New York: Penguin, 2009), 77; emphasis added.
14. Thaler and Sunstein, *Nudge: Improving Decisions*, 77.
15. Robert D. Hales, "Holy Scriptures: The Power of God unto Our Salvation," *Ensign*, November 2006, 26–27.
16. *Gospel Teaching and Learning*, 14.
17. See George Mandler, *Mind and Body: Psychology of Emotion and Stress* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1984). See also Nancy L. Stein, Marc W. Hernandez, and Tom Trabasso, "Advances in Modeling Emotions and Thought: The Importance of Developmental, Online, and Multilevel Analysis," in *Handbook of Emotions*, ed. Michael Lewis, Jeannette M. Haviland-Jones, and Lisa Feldman Barrett, 3rd ed. (New York: Guilford Press, 2008), 574–86.
18. *Doctrine and Covenants and Church History Seminary Teacher Manual*, x.