



Elder Paul V. Johnson

# *A Pattern for Learning Spiritual Things*

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The seminary program was instituted one hundred years ago to offer religious and spiritual education to students as they attended public schools. Leaders felt that the youth needed daily spiritual education as they studied secular subjects. Fourteen years after the first seminary began, the first institute of religion was started. Leaders were concerned that students attending university courses and living away from home needed something to fortify them from some of the philosophies of the world and even from some faculty that seemed bent on damaging students' faith. They did not want these precious students to be lost and wanted to help them build a strong foundation.

Think of the difference between then and now. Today we aren't just concerned with what someone could be exposed to in an educational setting. In this age our youth and young adults are bombarded with information from many sources. Good and evil are available to everyone—on demand—even on handheld devices. The remarkable advances in technology and communication have opened new possibilities and have brought new challenges. Information is at our fingertips. In most cases there is no gauge as to the

accuracy or quality of the information. Some of it is accurate, some is factual but out of context, some consists of half-truths, and some is completely false.

Right now there is heightened interest in the Church—its history, doctrine, and members. In a world of click-generated revenues and rankings, the term Mormon is used to garner more clicks. Many times, the more sensational the story, the more clicks it generates.

### **Students May Have Doubts and Questions**

Some of our students are confronted with negative information and attacks on the Church, and they can develop doubts and questions as a result. Even some information that is accurate can be difficult to deal with. We know that good people can have doubts. Having doubts is not sinning.

Let me read an excerpt from President Gordon B. Hinckley's biography about a time he entertained some doubts: "As Gordon worked his way through the university and made the transition from dependence upon his parents to personal responsibility, he, like many of his peers, began to question assumptions about life, the world, and even the Church. His concerns were compounded by the cynicism of the times. . . . He later explained[:] 'It was a time of terrible discouragement, and it was felt strongly on campus. I felt some of it myself. I began to question some things, including perhaps in a slight measure the faith of my parents.'"<sup>1</sup>

Some of our best students will have doubts. We want to help all of our students. We love them. We know the future rests on them, their abilities and strengths, and their spiritual power.

### **Spiritual Knowledge Protects**

The real protection for us and our students is in having the powerful spiritual knowledge that comes from proper seeking and learning and from past spiritual experiences. Jacob was challenged by Sherem, a person with "a perfect knowledge of the language of the people" (Jacob 7:4). Sherem wanted to "shake [Jacob] from the faith" (Jacob 7:5) and "lead away the hearts of the people" (Jacob 7:3), but since Jacob had had many revelations, had seen angels, and had heard the voice of the Lord, he "could not be shaken" (see Jacob 7:5).

The Objective of Seminaries and Institutes states, "Our purpose is to help youth and young adults understand and rely on the teachings and Atonement of Jesus Christ, qualify for the blessings of the temple, and prepare themselves,

their families, and others for eternal life with their Father in Heaven.”<sup>2</sup> As we focus on this objective, we will help our students build the type of foundation Jacob had, and they will be fortified against attacks just as Jacob was.

Think of what we have:

We have the scriptures, the word of God.

We have the words of living prophets.

We have the guiding influence of the Holy Ghost.

We have more time with our students than other Church programs have with them.

We have a great systematic curriculum that helps students build a strong spiritual foundation by their daily study of the gospel and by their living the principles of the gospel.

And we have you—an army of teachers with strong testimonies that won’t be shaken.

We have students who trust you and know that you love them.

In the course of our important task, there are certain things that can be helpful as we encounter students with doubts.

### **Spiritual Knowledge Is Gained through the Spirit**

One way to help students is to help them realize that different types of knowledge are acquired using different methods. We love the truth. As Latter-day Saints we seek for truth and accept it when we find it.

In the scientific world the scientific method is used to learn truth and advance knowledge. It has been extremely helpful over the years and has yielded tremendous amounts of scientific knowledge and continues to push back the curtain of ignorance about our physical world.

Learning spiritual things, however, requires a different approach than learning scientific things. The scientific method and intellect are very helpful, but they alone will never bring spiritual knowledge. Learning spiritual things involves the intellect, but that is not enough. We only learn spiritual things by the Spirit.

Paul said, “The natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God: for they are foolishness unto him: neither can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned” (1 Corinthians 2:14).

When Laman and Lemuel wondered about the things Lehi had taught them, they stated their concern, and Nephi explained how they could find the answers:

We cannot understand the words which our father hath spoken. . . .

And I said unto them: Have ye inquired of the Lord?

And they said unto me: We have not; for the Lord maketh no such thing known unto us.

Behold, I said unto them: How is it that ye do not keep the commandments of the Lord? How is it that ye will perish, because of the hardness of your hearts?" (1 Nephi 15:7–10)

It's not surprising that Nephi asked them if they had inquired of the Lord. That seems like a reasonable requirement for learning spiritual truths. But he also noted that they hadn't kept the commandments. What does that have to do with it? Well, it happens to be a central part of the pattern in learning things of the Spirit. The Savior taught, "If any man will do his will, he shall know of the doctrine, whether it be of God, or whether I speak of myself" (John 7:17).

Nephi continued with a brief summary of the process for learning spiritual things: "Do ye not remember the things which the Lord hath said?—If ye will not harden your hearts, and ask me in faith, believing that ye shall receive, with diligence in keeping my commandments, surely these things shall be made known unto you" (1 Nephi 15:11).

This pattern is crucial for our students to understand if they have questions about spiritual things. We can make the mistake of trying to resolve doubts about spiritual things by leaning exclusively on intellectual answers. Answers to spiritual questions are given to individuals who don't harden their hearts; who ask in faith, believing they will receive; and who diligently keep the commandments. Even when we follow this pattern, we don't control the timing of getting answers. Sometimes our answers come quickly, and sometimes we must place questions on the shelf for a time and rely on our faith that has developed from the answers we do know.

### Testing Spiritual Things

Years ago Hugh Nibley wrote a parable of a young man who found a diamond in a field. In his analogy the Book of Mormon was the diamond. This parable teaches us the necessity of applying the proper method for testing something:

A young man once . . . claimed he had found a large diamond in his field as he was ploughing. He put the stone on display to the public free of charge, and everyone took sides. A psychologist showed, by citing some famous case studies, that the young man was suffering from a well-known form of delusion. An historian showed that other men have also claimed to have found diamonds in fields and

been deceived. A geologist proved that there were no diamonds in the area but only quartz: the young man had been fooled by a quartz. . . . An English professor showed that the young man in describing his stone used the very same language that others had used in describing uncut diamonds: he was, therefore, simply speaking the common language of his time. A sociologist showed that only three out of 177 florists' assistants in four major cities believed the stone was genuine. . . .

Finally an indigent jeweler . . . pointed out that since the stone was still available for examination the answer to the question of whether it was a diamond or not had absolutely nothing to do with who found it, or whether the finder was honest or sane, or who believed him, or whether he would know a diamond from a brick, or whether diamonds had ever been found in fields, or whether people had ever been fooled by quartz or glass, but was to be answered simply and solely by putting the stone to certain well-known tests for diamonds.<sup>3</sup>

Sometimes people, including some of our students, can get sidetracked trying to determine the veracity of spiritual things by subjecting them to tests that were never designed for spiritual things. Debating spiritual things using only temporal evidence and methods doesn't settle the issues, and yet this seems to be part of some externally imposed set of rules people use to explore questions about the gospel and the Church. This sounds like Korihor—"Ye cannot know of things which ye do not see" (Alma 30:15). If scientists tried to prove their hypotheses without following the scientific method, they would have no credibility. It is just as strange to think of people trying to prove or disprove spiritual things without following the pattern of learning spiritual things.

### **"Changes of the Heart . . . Open Spiritual Eyes"**

Almost twenty years ago President Henry B. Eyring, then a member of the Quorum of the Twelve, spoke to us on this subject:

I would like to visit with you tonight about how we can best help in those moments of quiet crisis in the lives of our students. . . .

In your love for them you may decide to try to give them what they ask. You may be tempted to go with them through their doubts, with the hope that you can find proof or reasoning to dispel their doubts. Persons with doubts often want to talk about what they think are the facts or the arguments that have caused their doubts, and about how much it hurts. They may well want to explore some scientific theory, some historical study, some political position, or some reported failures in the leaders of the Church or in its members, which they see as the source of their doubts. . . .

But even at its best, the resolution of doubts by reason and appeal to evidence cannot take us far. It is helpful to meet a brilliant mind who defends gospel truths with fact and logic. There is comfort in finding that such a person has confronted

the same questions with which you struggle and has retained his faith. But there is a hazard. Even the most brilliant and faithful person may defend the truth with argument . . . that later proves false. The best scholarship has, at least, incompleteness in it. But even flawless argument has a weakness if you come to depend on it: What happens to the next doubt, or the next? What if no physical evidence or persuasive logic can be produced to dispel it? You will find then what I have found—that faithful scholar who reassured you with logic did not base his faith there. It was the other way around. His faith reassured him that someday, when God told him how it was all done, he would see all truth as perfectly logical, transparently reasonable. . . .

You and I can do better if we do not stay long with what our students see as the source of their doubts. . . . Their problem does not lie in what they think they see; it lies in what they cannot yet see. . . . And so we do best if we turn the conversation soon to the things of the heart, those changes of the heart that open spiritual eyes. . . .

The only sure way I know to soften a heart enough for that is to get the effects of the atonement of Jesus Christ into a person's life.<sup>4</sup>

We know that we won't have every answer available to us in any branch of knowledge, including religion. President Ezra Taft Benson said, "We are not obligated to answer every objection. Every man eventually is backed up to the wall of faith, and there he must make his stand."<sup>5</sup>

### **Cautions while Helping Students with Questions**

There are some cautions we should remember as we try to help students with questions. We may feel such a desire to help students who are struggling that we grasp at straws to give them any answer, even when there is no real answer available. Even the great prophet Alma explained to his son, "Now these mysteries are not yet fully made known unto me; therefore I shall forbear" (Alma 37:11). It may have been easy for Alma to speculate, but he didn't.

I can't speak for you female faculty members, but "I don't know" is one of those three-word phrases men sometimes have a difficult time saying. It is right up there with "I love you," "I was wrong," and "Which direction to . . . ?" But no matter how difficult, we all need to learn to acknowledge that we don't know the answer to every question. It is not unhealthy for a student to see that the teacher doesn't know the answer to everything but does know the answer to the core questions and has a strong testimony. When the angel asked Nephi if he knew the condescension of God, Nephi responded, "I know that he loveth his children; nevertheless, I do not know the meaning of all things" (1 Nephi 11:17). Even if we don't know the answer to a specific question, we can remind our students of the things we do know.

Another challenge we face, especially if we have taught for some time, is a tendency to hold on to old files and old explanations. We would be much better off keeping up with the current stance of the Church. One of the best ways to do this is to be familiar with material in the newsroom at LDS.org (*mormonnewsroom.org*). For example, there is currently an excellent interview with Elder Dallin H. Oaks and Elder Lance B. Wickman in the newsroom concerning same-gender attraction that can help us understand the position of the Church on this matter.<sup>6</sup>

I was hired in seminaries and institutes in the summer of 1978. In June of that summer, the revelation that the priesthood was available to all worthy males was announced. In August of that same year, Elder Bruce R. McConkie, a member of the Quorum of the Twelve, spoke to seminary and institute personnel in a gathering analogous to this one. He emphasized how the revelation had changed our understanding of the issue. He said:

Forget everything that I have said, or what President Brigham Young or President George Q. Cannon or whomsoever has said in days past that is contrary to the present revelation. We spoke with a limited understanding and without the light and knowledge that now has come into the world.

We get our truth and our light line upon line and precept upon precept. We have now had added a new flood of intelligence and light on this particular subject, and it erases all the darkness and all the views and all the thoughts of the past. They don't matter any more.

It doesn't make a particle of difference what anybody ever said about the . . . matter before the first day of June of this year (1978).<sup>7</sup>

Let's keep up to date with the light we have been given.

Many of us have a difficult time dealing with ambiguity, especially in issues concerning the Church. In fact, we may be drawn to use quotes in our teaching that are definitive because they seem to dispel the ambiguity. But some quotes are definitive on issues where there is no official answer. People who are more tentative on a subject that hasn't been revealed or resolved don't get quoted as much but may be more in line with where our current knowledge is.

We plan to add helps to the curriculum for certain questions that are commonly raised. When I taught seminary many years ago, there was a lesson in the curriculum on the Mountain Meadows Massacre and one on plural marriage. Over the years these lessons have been dropped from the manuals because of limited page counts and the fact that many students were in countries where these types of things didn't seem like issues. However, with the



spread of the Internet, attacks on the Church aren't limited by geography, so we must do more to help students understand the issues they likely will face.

### Answers Come through Faithful Sources

Great teachers are so crucial in the lives of the students. One important pattern taught in scripture is “he that speaketh, whose spirit is contrite, whose language is meek and edifieth, the same is of God if he obey mine ordinances” (D&C 52:16). When we fit this pattern, our students will sense it. They will also be able to tell the difference between their teacher, who fits this pattern, and other sources that don't.

Our approach to students with doubts can be crucial in how they choose to respond.

Earlier I read about President Hinckley having some doubts as a young person. Let me continue that story. Notice how his father handled the situation. I am quoting again from the biography and speaking of President Hinckley:

Fortunately, he was able to discuss some of his concerns with his father, and together they explored the questions he raised: the fallibility of the Brethren, why difficult things happen to people who are living the gospel, why God allows some of His children to suffer, and so on. The environment of faith that permeated Gordon's home was vital during this period of searching, as he later explained: “My father and mother were absolutely solid in their faith. They didn't try to push the gospel down my throat or compel me to participate, but they didn't back away from expressing their feelings either. My father was wise and judicious and was not dogmatic. He had taught university students and appreciated young people along with their points of view and difficulties. He had a tolerant, understanding attitude and was willing to talk about anything I had on my mind.”

Underneath Gordon's questions and critical attitude lay a thread of faith that had been long in the weaving. Little by little, despite his questions and doubts, he realized that he had a testimony he could not deny. And though he began to understand that there wasn't always a clear-cut or easy answer for every difficult question, he also found that his faith in God transcended his doubts. . . . “The testimony which had come to me as a boy remained with me and became as a bulwark to which I could cling during those very difficult years,” he said. . . .

“There was for me an underlying foundation of love that came from great parents and a good family, a wonderful bishop, devoted and faithful teachers, and the scriptures to read and ponder. Although in my youth I had trouble understanding many things, there was in my heart something of a love for God and his great work that carried me above any doubts and fears.”<sup>8</sup>

Notice that President Hinckley sought help from someone who was faithful. We can help students seek faithful sources. We can also be like President

Hinckley's parents—solid in our faith, wise, judicious, and not dogmatic—so we can help students who may be doubting but who have a destiny in this kingdom, as President Hinckley did.

I am very thankful for you and your worthy lives. I know that your help and your love will bless many students as they become righteous disciples of Jesus Christ.

I know that our Heavenly Father and His Son, Jesus Christ, live. The gospel has been restored to the earth and is true. We are led by prophets, seers, and revelators, and the Lord will give us what we need to negotiate the challenges of this mortal life.

With stronger and more prevalent attacks on the kingdom, the Lord will pour out His Spirit more strongly on you in order to help your students, and He will also pour out His Spirit more strongly on your students so they can withstand the attacks if they are willing to live the gospel.

One hundred years ago the seminary program was instituted, and soon after that, the institute program began. Now more than ever they are needed. Their effectiveness depends on us. I pray the Lord will make us equal to that great challenge. I know he will. In the name of Jesus Christ, amen. **RE**

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## Notes

1. Sheri L. Dew, *Go Forward with Faith: The Biography of Gordon B. Hinckley* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1996), 46–47.
2. *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), x.
3. Hugh W. Nibley, *Lehi in the Desert, The World of the Jaredites, There Were Jaredites*, ed. John W. Welch, Darrell L. Matthews, and Stephen R. Callister (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1988), 121–22.
4. Henry B. Eyring, “And Thus We See’: Helping a Student in a Moment of Doubt,” address to CES religious educators, February 5, 1993, 2–4, 6–7; [https://si.lds.org/bc/seminary/content/library/talks/evening-with/and-thus-we-see\\_helping-a-student-in-a-moment-of-doubt\\_eng.pdf](https://si.lds.org/bc/seminary/content/library/talks/evening-with/and-thus-we-see_helping-a-student-in-a-moment-of-doubt_eng.pdf) (accessed June 13, 2013).
5. *Teachings of Ezra Taft Benson* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1988), 206.
6. “Interview with Elder Dallin H. Oaks and Elder Lance B. Wickman: ‘Same-Gender Attraction,’” “Same-Gender Attraction,” Newsroom; <http://www.mormonnewsroom.org/official-statement/same-gender-attraction> (accessed June 13, 2013).
7. Bruce R. McConkie, “All Are Alike unto God,” CES Symposium on the Book of Mormon, August 18, 1978, 2; [https://si.lds.org/bc/seminary/content/library/talks/ces-symposium-addresses/all-are-alike-unto-god\\_eng.pdf](https://si.lds.org/bc/seminary/content/library/talks/ces-symposium-addresses/all-are-alike-unto-god_eng.pdf) (accessed June 13, 2013).
8. Dew, *Go Forward with Faith*, 47.