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“A Teacher Come from God”

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One of the desires of the heart that I’ve had since being called at age eighteen to teach a youth Sunday School class is the desire to become a good teacher. Chapter 3 of John’s Gospel is best known for the exchange between the Savior and Nicodemus about the need to be born again. For me, however, the most moving part of that dialogue has always been the way Nicodemus greeted the Savior. He began with the salutation, “Rabbi,” which, as you scholars know, is the Jewish title for “master” or “teacher.” He continued, “We know that thou art a teacher come from God: for no man can do these miracles that thou doest, except God be with him” (John 3:2).

Because of the generous nature of our Latter-day Saint culture, General Authorities and religious educators receive more than their share of praise. Whatever form that praise may take, there can be no higher manifestation of it than to be recognized by those we teach as teachers come from God—and, even more rewarding, on occasion to have listeners say that they felt the Spirit of the Lord while we taught them. To me, that is the ultimate compliment

that can be paid to a teacher of religion. It is in those moments that we experience the soul-satisfying truth that “he that preacheth and he that receiveth, understand one another, and both are edified and rejoice together” (Doctrine and Covenants 50:22). The quest of one who aspires to be a “teacher come from God” must always be to live worthy to teach by the Spirit of truth. Only then will we have lasting influence in the lives of God’s children.

I recall with perfect clarity a weekly devotional in the Smith Fieldhouse in November of 1965, my junior year at BYU. On that morning, the speaker was a young religion and philosophy professor named Truman G. Madsen—a teacher come from God. His talk that day was entitled “The Commanding Image of Christ.” In my mind’s eye, I can see Brother Madsen at the pulpit as he came to the end of his address. He drew himself up to his full height, took a deep breath, and said something that deeply touched my heart:

Now, brothers and sisters, I stayed up part of the night, worried as to whether I should say this, but I’m going to say it. Men have stood in this pulpit and elsewhere, great men, and have testified that their knees have never buckled. . . .

I cannot bear that kind of testimony, but if there are here some of you here who have been tricked into the conviction that you have gone too far, that you have been weighed down with doubts of which you alone have a monopoly, that you have had the poison of sin that makes it impossible ever again to be what you could have been, then hear me! I bear testimony that you cannot sink farther than the light and sweeping intelligence of Jesus Christ can reach. I bear testimony that as long as there is one spark of the will to repent and reach, he is there. He did not just descend to your condition, he descended below it, that he might be “in and through all things, the light of truth” (Doctrine and Covenants 88:6). If there is only one who will feel what I feel of the Spirit of God bearing witness to that, I will have been grateful for this privilege.¹

I felt the Spirit of God bearing witness to Brother Madsen’s testimony, and I know I wasn’t alone in that experience. I remember later that day committing to God in my personal prayer that I was going to live my life in a very different way from that moment on.

When I reflect on my educational experience at BYU over fifty years ago, the most lasting impressions I have are of my religion professors. Their teachings and spiritual influence remain with me. They were teachers come from God. Men like Daniel Ludlow, Reid Bankhead, and Rodney Turner—I can still see and hear them as they shared their knowledge and love of the Lord. Leon Hartshorn, Robert Patch, James Allen, Milton Backman, and others—all helped me lay a firm foundation for my religious life. I share these personal memories so that you will never underestimate your own reach, your own

influence. I was a nameless student to most of those men, but their names, teachings, and the Spirit they radiated have remained in my mind and heart for over fifty years. And what unbelievable changes those fifty-plus years have brought to pass.

Crisis of Faith

You all know better than I the challenges that the current generation of young adults faces in this information age. When Steve Jobs publicly introduced the iPhone in 2007, he said prophetically, “Every once in a while a revolutionary product comes along that changes everything.”² How right he was, and I don’t think that even at a distance of over ten years we have yet begun to comprehend the nature and scope of those changes.

Toward the end of my full-time service as a General Authority Seventy, I was sobered by how frequently I received visits, phone calls, and written inquiries from young adults and their alarmed parents concerned about a loss of faith arising out of the young adults’ study of Church history and doctrine. They were having difficulty finding satisfying answers to their questions from their parents, teachers, and Church leaders. Many felt a sense of betrayal and asked, “Why hasn’t the Church told me about these issues?” More than once I heard the anguished query, “What if all of this [referring to the Restoration and its associated truths] isn’t real?” I’m grateful to Alma for the perfect response to this question. In Alma 32, after explaining the experiment that can result in the acquisition of increased faith and feelings of spiritual enlightenment, Alma poses the rhetorical question: “O then, is not this real?” (Alma 32:35). My firm witness is that spiritual feelings and promptings are indeed real. When I give patriarchal blessings or perform sealings in the temple, this conviction is very dear to me. A patriarchal blessing *really* does come from God. A marriage sealed by the authority of the priesthood by one holding the sealing power *really* can endure forever. I think the prophet Jacob had this same thought in mind when he said the Spirit “speaketh of things as they really are, and of things as they really will be” (Jacob 4:13). The fundamental gospel doctrines and the historical events that brought about the restoration of the gospel are realities. We have all staked the course of our lives on their veracity, and those we teach need to be assured that they can do likewise and will never be disappointed. Often when doubts or questions come, young people get dislodged from their foundation of faith and lurch into a spiritual

freefall with nothing to hold on to and no plan B for their religious future. I think this must be despair at its worst.

It was out of the desire to build faith by providing the best possible answers to difficult gospel questions that the Brethren approved the project that produced the Gospel Topics essays. I think it's wonderful that we now have a collection of more than a dozen responses to challenging questions coming from some of the best minds and hearts in the Church, all edited and approved by the First Presidency and Quorum of the Twelve. This significant step forward will definitely help those who are honestly questing for greater faith and truth. But, that said, I don't think any source of help can compare with the personal relationship a student can have with a loving, caring, and well-informed teacher come from God. There is something about the one-on-one experience that is a vital part of God's gospel delivery system. Changing hearts one student at a time may be slow and seemingly inefficient, but it is a doctrinal principle of which every teacher needs to remain conscious.

Humility

You are a select few in a very big Church who have the privilege of spending your lives learning and teaching the restored gospel of Jesus Christ at Church expense. In a certain sense, you constitute a city set on a hill. If there is a group in the Church that ought to be approaching Zion, it is you. If gospel knowledge, sound doctrine, or accurate history mean anything to our faith—and they certainly do—your opportunities for influence are immense. What a responsibility you have been given! So what might a reasonable expectation of you be, and what is your part of this enviable quid pro quo wherein the Church encourages and supports you in the studying and teaching of the restored gospel? In short, how can you qualify to be viewed by your students as a teacher come from God?

In response, I first suggest that you must learn and teach with great humility. The intellectual pride that often exists in academia was already evident among the Jews in Christ's time. The Gospel of John records an interesting incident as Jesus went up into the temple to teach. The Jews marveled, saying, "How knoweth this man letters, having never learned?" (John 7:15). To paraphrase this question for our modern-day purposes, I think it might read, "How could Jesus display such erudition without the benefit of a higher degree?" For me, Alma captures the spirit of humility that must pervade the life of a teacher come from God: "And when the priests left their labor to

impart the word of God unto the people, the people also left their labors to hear the word of God. And when the priest had imparted unto them the word of God they all returned again diligently unto their labors; and the priest, not esteeming himself above his hearers, for the preacher was no better than the hearer, neither was the teacher any better than the learner; and thus they were all equal, and they did all labor, every man according to his strength" (Alma 1:26). This passage conveys the spirit of humility and equality that is essential for one seeking to be a teacher come from God.

Harmony between Our Lives and Our Teachings

A word now about the need for congruence. I speak of the harmony that must exist between our lives and our teachings. The Savior spoke forcefully of this need: "Whosoever therefore shall break one of these least commandments, and shall teach men so, he shall be called the least in the kingdom of heaven: but whosoever shall do and teach them, the same shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 5:19). The key for a teacher come from God is to both *do* and *teach*. The moral influence and authority that emanate from such an integrated person can be limitless.

I was blessed as a young Seventy to work closely with Elder Marion D. Hanks. He had been one of my boyhood heroes, and to work at his side during the first few years of my ministry was a dream come true. Watching him daily live what he taught was inspiring. His relationship with Maxine, his wife, was one of equality, love, and wholesome good humor. They were spiritually in tune with each other and with God. He adored and treated his exceptional children equally well and lovingly honored their agency. He was beloved by his secretary who had worked for him for over thirty years. He was continually looking for opportunities to comfort and help those in need. I saw him in situations of great pressure and stress—in worldly settings as well as in the presence of the highest leaders of the Church—and always found him to be intellectually honest, mindful of the welfare of others, and true to his own convictions and belief in the Savior. His spiritual and humanitarian legacies remain important in many lives, including my own. He was both a teacher and a doer! He was truly a teacher come from God.

Unity

I want to say something now about unity. Christ is the great uniter. Satan is the great divider. Sadly, he has succeeded in creating divisions among us along

racial, economic, religious, intellectual, political, ideological, and social lines. There is a spiritual as well as a pedagogical reason for you to be unified as a religion faculty. In His great intercessory prayer, the Savior prayed for His Apostles and all the Saints, “that they all may be one; as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee, that they also may be one in us,” and then the Savior gives the reason for His plea for unity: “that the world may believe that thou hast sent me” (John 17:21). If I interpret this passage correctly, your unity as religion faculty colleagues will contribute to your students’ belief in Christ, to their belief that God sent Him. In the world of scholarship, where individual effort, creativity, and originality are prized and rewarded, there are strong centrifugal forces. You must resist these forces so that divisions do not arise and so that your students will learn the truth of the Apostle Paul’s words that “neither is he that planteth any thing, neither he that watereth; but God that giveth the increase” (1 Corinthians 3:7).

As we assembled the fledgling Joseph Smith Papers Project team, the scholars were an exceptional group, and—if I may say so with a smile—some of them wanted exceptional treatment! My feeling at that time was that it would not please the Lord if a scholarly caste system were to exist in the Church’s history enterprise. It took a little coaching, but in time a wonderful unity was achieved among all of the scholars and staff working in the Church History Department. Since the quality of your gospel scholarship is a reflection of your character even more than your intellect, I feel those laboring in Church education will rise no higher scholastically than their efforts to conform to the Savior’s dictum that “if ye are not one ye are not mine” (Doctrine and Covenants 38:27). There can be no academic aristocracy in the Church of Jesus Christ. To work in an environment of unity, mutually respectful of each other and your individual strengths, will ensure that you have the Lord’s blessing on your labors and that the cumulative good you do will be the greatest amount possible.

Competence in Theology

Next, I wish to suggest that a teacher come from God must be a competent theologian. Not long after I returned from my mission in 1964, I attended a stake conference presided over by Elder Richard L. Evans, a giant of an earlier era. He was a dignified and spiritual leader with an unusual eloquence. In the priesthood leadership session of the conference, in an effort to spur the brethren on to greater effectiveness in our service, Elder Evans said something to us

I have never forgotten: “O how wonderful it is to be faithful, but how much more wonderful to be faithful and competent too.” A teacher come from God must be a dedicated, lifelong learner, continually striving for greater light and gospel knowledge and for ways to effectively share that knowledge. I found a little sermon from Brigham Young given in 1852 that places the study and teaching of theology in perspective:

There are a great many branches of education: some go to college to learn languages, some to study law, some to study physic, and some to study astronomy, and various other branches of science. We want every branch of science taught in this place that is taught in the world. But our favourite study is that branch of science which particularly belongs to the Elders of Israel—namely, theology. Every Elder should become a profound theologian—should understand this branch better than all the world. There is no Elder that has the power of God upon him but understands more of the principles of theology than all the world put together.³

I love Brother Brigham’s hyperbole, and he is right. You all have your various fields of study and expertise, but these will have their greatest meaning as they contribute to your ability to learn and teach our theology. To be truly competent as religion teachers, you do need to “understand this branch [of learning] better than all the world.” I’m sure one of the main reasons the BYU professors that I mentioned earlier were so influential in my life was because I respected their intellectual attainments as well as their ability to integrate these with their mastery of the principles of our theology. How grateful I have always been that the Holy Ghost reveals truth to our mind and to our heart (Doctrine and Covenants 8:2). As you blend your knowledge from your fields of study with your understanding of our theology, some of you will be able to speak more forcefully to the mind, and others to the heart. Is not this the condition described by the Lord in section 46, where He says, “For all have not every gift given unto them; for there are many gifts, and to every man is given a gift by the Spirit of God. To some is given one, and to some is given another, that all may be profited thereby” (Doctrine and Covenants 46:11–12). You all have your gifts to give and your contributions to make, but the starting point for a teacher come from God is to pay the price to become a fully competent theologian.

Christ Centered

Lastly, I want to emphasize the importance of a teacher come from God being Christ-centered in his or her life and teachings. The beginning stanza of

William Butler Yeats's poem "Second Coming" powerfully describes society's critical need for the firm foundation of Christ:

Turning and turning in the widening gyre [an ever-widening, forceful current]
 The falcon cannot hear the falconer;
 Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
 Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
 The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
 The ceremony of innocence is drowned;
 The best lack all conviction, while the worst
 Are full of passionate intensity.

The only center that can hold—in your lives, in my life, and in the lives of the wonderful young people that come to you to be spiritually fed—is the Lord Jesus Christ. Your greatest responsibility, whatever your training or academic credentials, is to talk of Christ, to rejoice in Christ, to preach of Christ, and to “write according to our prophecies, that our children may know to what source they may look for a remission of their sins” (2 Nephi 25:26). The Apostle Paul, who by reason of his study and training was qualified as a man of letters in his day, summarized his feelings about the primacy of Christ as he wrote to the learned Corinthians: “And I, brethren, when I came to you, came not with excellency of speech or of wisdom, declaring unto you the testimony of God. For I determined not to know any thing among you, save Jesus Christ, and him crucified. And I was with you in weakness, and in fear, and in much trembling. And my speech and my preaching was not with enticing words of man’s wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power: That your faith should not stand in the wisdom of men, but in the power of God (1 Corinthians 2:1–5).

Years ago, I read and adopted as somewhat of a personal creed a statement President David O. McKay made in the April 1951 general conference. I wrote this quotation on the flyleaf of my scriptures: “That man [I am sure if he were giving this today he would be more politically correct and say “that man or woman”] is most truly great who is most Christlike. What you sincerely in your heart think of Christ will determine what you are, will largely determine what your acts will be.”⁴ What you sincerely in your hearts think of Christ—and how you teach and testify of Him—will largely determine the kind of teachers you will be. To be a teacher come from God, you must know God and Jesus Christ, whom He has sent (John 17:3). I believe that even those who may lose faith in the Church, if they don’t stray from Christ, will

one day find their way back to His fold, back to where His gospel is taught and lived in its fullness, and back to where His priesthood authority is exercised and living apostles and prophets reveal His will.

I share my own witness of the reality and greatness of God and His Beloved Son, Jesus Christ. I thank you for the matchless contributions you are all making to God’s kingdom. In the years to come, I will be watching you with interest, benefitting from your teachings and writings, and rejoicing over the generations of young Latter-day Saints who will be blessed by your love and the wonderful minds and hearts that God has given you. My prayer is that you will all merit the distinction of being known as “a teacher come from God.” **RE**

Notes

1. Truman G. Madsen, “The Commanding Image of Christ” (BYU devotional, 16 November 1965), speeches.byu.edu/talks/truman-g-madsen_commanding-image-christ/.
2. Steve Jobs, announcing the introduction of the iPhone, as quoted in “Apple Unveils Cell Phone, Apple TV,” in AP report at *MSNBC*, 9 January 2007.
3. Brigham Young, in *Journal of Discourses* (London: Latter-day Saints’ Book Depot, 1859), 6:317.
4. David O. McKay, in Conference Report, April 1951, 93.