



Gary E. Smith, *Joseph Smith's Visit by Moroni in the Field*

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Building Stronger Testimonies

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As gospel teachers, we have a charge to help those we teach strengthen their testimonies. The purpose of this article is to identify what a true testimony is and then determine how we as teachers can best help those we teach build testimonies equal to the challenges that will be theirs and that will lead them back to the presence of their Eternal Father.

In the context of missionary work, shallow missionaries frequently get shallow converts. Surely the same principle is true of the classroom. Shallow teaching produces shallow students. The principle is obvious: all things beget after their own image and in their own likeness. That which is shallow produces that which is shallow.

You Cannot Build a Strong Testimony out of Weak Doctrine

“When crises come in our lives—and they will—the philosophies of men interlaced with a few scriptures and poems just won’t do,” states Elder Jeffrey R. Holland. “Are we really nurturing [those we teach] in a way that will sustain them when the stresses of life appear? Or are we giving them a kind of theological Twinkie—spiritually empty calories? President John Taylor once called such teaching ‘fried froth,’ the kind of thing you could eat all day and yet finish feeling totally unsatisfied. During a severe winter several years ago, President Boyd K. Packer noted, a goodly number of deer died of starvation while their stomachs were full of hay. In an honest effort to assist, agencies had supplied the superficial when the substantial was what had been needed. Regrettably they had *fed* the deer but they had not *nourished* them.”¹

If we are to build for the Lord, we must build on a strong foundation. Consider the parable of the unwise builder:

A certain man inherited a choice piece of ground whereon to build an house to shelter his loved ones from the storms of the day and the cold of the night.

He began his work with zeal and skill, using good materials, for the need was urgent.

But in his haste, and because he gave no heed to the principles of proper construction, he laid no foundation, but commencing immediately, he built the floor, and raised the walls, and began to cover them with a roof.

Then, to his sorrow, because his house had no foundation, it fell and became a heap of rubble, and those whom he loved had no shelter.

Verily, verily, I say unto you: A wise builder, when he buildeth an house, first layeth the foundation and then buildeth thereon.

Now consider my interpretation of the parable:

A certain gospel teacher was called to build a house of faith and righteousness and salvation for the souls entrusted to his care. Knowing he had been called by inspiration and having great zeal, he hastened to teach gospel principles without first laying the foundation of faith and testimony and conversion.

He spent his time on teaching aids and devices and classroom activities, but he never laid the great and eternal foundation upon which all things must rest in the Lord's house—the foundation of our theology and of our doctrine.²

Understand What a Testimony Is

As a point of beginning, we must define what a testimony is. A testimony is what you know. It is that to which you would be a competent witness in a court of law. In the context of the gospel, it is what you know by the spirit of revelation about the principles of eternal life.³

Some gospel teachers, including some missionaries, have supposed that they could substitute the bearing of testimony for their responsibility to know and teach adequately the principles they were called to teach. In so doing, they misunderstand not only their responsibility as teachers but also the meaning and purpose of testimony. The message you are commissioned to bear is your testimony. In a court of law, your testimony is not a substitute for evidence—it is the evidence. Having given that evidence, you can then say, “What I have told you is the truth.” But to do so you must first have declared what the truth is.

Illustrating this point, President Joseph F. Smith states that “the voicing of one's testimony, however eloquently phrased or beautifully

expressed, is no fit or acceptable substitute for the needed discourse of instruction and counsel expected” of those we have been commissioned to teach. “The man . . . who assumes that his testimony embraces all the knowledge he needs, and who therefore lives in indolence and ignorance shall surely discover his error to his own cost and loss.”⁴ Nor can it be overlooked that this failure to teach also comes at the “cost and loss” of those who deserved to be taught but who were not.

It is a meaningless thing for a teacher to say “I know the gospel is true” if that teacher does not know the gospel and has not taught it adequately. For gospel teachers, a testimony without an attendant message is basically an empty package. It not only leaves those to whom it was given a feeling that they were cheated of something they needed but also leaves the Holy Ghost with little or nothing to bear witness of.

Simply stated, if you have not taught anything, you cannot legitimately bear testimony to what you supposedly have taught. That is, your testimony as a teacher cannot be confined to a formal declaration at the end of a class or the end of a course that the gospel is true; your testimony must reflect the composite of all you have taught during that class or course.

In the mission field or in the classroom, the principles are the same. *You cannot teach what you do not know, and therefore you cannot legitimately testify of that which you have not taught.* Again, in the true and proper sense, your testimony based on your knowledge is what you teach. Shallow teaching cannot produce a deep and meaningful testimony in those being taught any more than shallow soil can give root to a great tree.

All Gospel Truths Are Not Equal

Paul said that if we have not charity, we are as sounding brass and a tinkling cymbal (see 1 Corinthians 13:1). These words reflect sound doctrine. Disciples of the true gospel will always have an overriding concern for those in need, and true Christians will always be found feeding the hungry and clothing the naked. Therefore, they will then be able to teach those they have clothed and fed, as necessary, how to provide both food and clothing for themselves. This principle survived the Apostasy, and at least in modern times it is taught and practiced by all Christian faiths.

Distinguish between Social and Eternal Principles

The principle of Christian charity, however, does not negate Christ’s command that we must be baptized or else be damned (see

Mark 16:16; 3 Nephi 11:34; D&C 22). Nor can it discount the need for that baptism to be performed by the proper priesthood authority. This is hard doctrine; there is no compromise in it. Baptism places us on a path that is strait, narrow, and often steep, yet it is the only path that leads back to the presence of God. How much good, we might ask, have we done by assisting weary travelers while withholding from them the knowledge that they are on the wrong path?

No right-thinking person questions the necessity of charity. Yet if the entire Christian message begins and ends with charity, there was no need for Joseph Smith or the Restoration of the gospel; there was no need, for instance, for John the Baptist to come to Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery and restore the authority to baptize and the knowledge that baptism by the proper authority is essential to salvation.

Many principles that we hold to as Latter-day Saints unite us with the historical Christian world, and charity is one example. Many principles of our faith, however, such as continuous revelation, the nature of God, and the divine sonship of Christ, separate us from historical Christianity. Baptism by the authority restored by John the Baptist is an example. The principles that unite us did not require that the heavens be opened, that ancient prophets came to restore the majesties of heaven, that there be living prophets, or that ancient scriptural records be restored. The principles that unite us with the churches of the world survived the Apostasy and are commonly had by good people everywhere. It is assumed that such principles embrace all good ethics. Among their number are honesty, kindness, charity, brotherly love, and service. Such principles teach that we must love our neighbors, obey laws, and fight against influences that are destructive to family or community values. These are all moral or ethical principles.

If holy writ had never mentioned the necessity of our embracing moral and ethical principles or if our leaders had never admonished us to embrace them, Latter-day Saints would still be expected to know intuitively that such behavior is expected of them. No revelation is necessary to tell a man that he should love his wife and be kind to his children, that he should deal honestly with others, and that he should not take that which does not belong to him. Such principles reflect the Light of Christ. These social or ethical principles are preparatory, like the law of Moses was to the coming of Christ. They are like an Elias to the fulness of the gospel. Their purpose is to prepare the hearts and minds of those who abide them to receive greater light and truth.

President J. Reuben Clark Jr., in “The Charted Course,” his sterling address to the Church Educational System, repeatedly says that we demean

the restored gospel when we reduce it to a system of ethics. Doing so is to deny our testimony of the Restoration.⁵ President Clark states:

Students already know that they must be “honest, true, chaste, benevolent, virtuous, and [do] good to all men” and that “if there is anything virtuous, lovely, or of good report or praiseworthy, we seek after these things” (Articles of Faith 1:13)—these things they have been taught from very birth. They should be encouraged in all proper ways to do these things which they know to be true, but they do not need to have a year’s course of instruction to make them believe and know them.

These students fully sense the hollowness of teachings that would make the gospel plan a mere system of ethics. They know that Christ’s teachings are in the highest degree ethical, but they also know they are more than this. They will see that ethics relate to the doings of this life, and that to make of the gospel a mere system of ethics is to confess a lack of faith, if not a disbelief, in the hereafter. . . .

[They know that] one living, burning, honest testimony of a righteous God-fearing man that Jesus is the Christ and that Joseph was God’s prophet, is worth a thousand books and lectures aimed at debasing the gospel to a system of ethics or seeking to rationalize infinity.⁶

Repeating President Clark’s charge to recognize that all doctrines are not created equal, Elder Bruce R. McConkie, also in an address to those of Religious Education, notes:

We have some passing interest in ethical principles but not a great deal as far as emphasis in teaching is concerned. If we teach the doctrines of salvation, the ethical concepts automatically follow. We do not need to spend long periods of time or make elaborate presentations in teaching honesty or integrity or unselfishness or some other ethical principle. Any Presbyterian can do that. Any Methodist can do that. But if we teach the doctrines of salvation, which are basic and fundamental, the ethical concepts automatically follow. . . .

Pitfalls we are supposed to avoid are the teaching of false doctrine, teaching ethics in preference to doctrine, compromising our doctrines with the philosophies of the world, entertaining rather than teaching, and using games and gimmicks rather than sound doctrine—“coddling students,” as President Clark expressed it.⁷

So it is that there are principles that bless and others that also exalt. Those that bless unite true religion with all that is good in the world, whereas doctrines that exalt separate the true disciple from all those who are of the world. Indeed, these doctrines invite us to receive more than the world’s theologies have dared suppose God would be willing to grant.

Joining the Church in the early days of this dispensation equaled

leaving home, family, community, and nation to join with the Saints. This dedication did not occur because the newly converted embraced a system of ethics that required honesty, kindness, and selflessness. Such virtues were common to converts' behavior before the message of the Restoration came to them. The ideas that God would manifest Himself to man in this day as He had done anciently, send forth a new book of scripture, and send angels to minister to men on earth were the doctrines that caused their family and neighbors to ostracize them.

A true testimony embraces both those principles that unite us with the world and those doctrines that separate us from it; both doctrines are as much a part of our faith as youth and adulthood are part of a full and meaningful life. Our challenge today is to remain in a world that simultaneously respects and rejects us, one that lauds the fruits of the gospel while seeking to entice us to abandon the roots from which they came.

We should note that those critical of our faith of necessity ignore our allegiance to the doctrines of brotherly love and charity. Our good works are typically dismissed silently or are depicted as attempts to deceive the world while we substitute works for the grace of Christ.

The history of the Latter-day Saint people attests that weak doctrines cannot produce strong testimonies. Physical strength will not increase with a weak workout routine. The more that is demanded of muscles, the stronger they get. The same principle applies in the realm of spirituality.

Our Testimonies Must Be Rooted in That Which Separates Us from the World

The requirement of a true testimony is that it be rooted in those principles that separate us from the world. A temporal world is a poor host to eternal principles. As light eschews darkness, so darkness eschews light.

Some have sought to protect people with tender testimonies by building fences around them, but the testimony forever protected remains forever tender. Perhaps we would be better served by growing up into truth rather than avoiding it. The greater protection is needed against the sectarian doctrine of sufficiency. Nephi described the attitude of those embracing such a stance as saying, "A Bible! A Bible! We have got a Bible, and there cannot be any more Bible" (2 Nephi 29:3). Thus, in the name of loyalty to God and prophets, the heavens are sealed. "Wo be unto him," Nephi said, "that shall say: We have received the word of God, and we need no more of the word of God, for we have enough! For behold, thus saith the Lord God: I will give

unto the children of men line upon line, precept upon precept, here a little and there a little; and blessed are those who hearken unto my precepts, and lend an ear unto my counsel, for they shall learn wisdom; for unto him that receiveth I will give more; and from them that shall say, We have enough, from them shall be taken away even that which they have” (2 Nephi 28:29–30).⁸

Strong Doctrines Are Those That Bring Peace

Light cannot compromise with darkness, nor can darkness exist in the presence of light. The peace of heaven is born of light; it is born of heaven-sent truths. When we teach those truths, their light dispels darkness and brings peace. Thus, the paradox of gospel teaching is that only when we teach the principles that the prince of darkness contends with can the light of heaven banish the principle of contention. A wonderful illustration of this principle is found in the vision of the redemption of the dead. Those who love darkness rather than light in this life receive the same in the spirit world. The vision states: “Neither did the rebellious who rejected the testimonies and the warnings of the ancient prophets behold his [Christ’s] presence, nor look upon his face. Where these were, *darkness reigned, but among the righteous there was peace*” (D&C 138:21–22; emphasis added). Where we would have expected the text to say “light,” it says “peace,” suggesting that the two concepts are inseparably linked.

I return again to the mission field as a point of reference, for it was there that I learned that tough doctrines, those that missionaries were sometimes tempted to slip by if they could, were the very doctrines that were the most attractive to the spirit of peace. These were the doctrines that brought the greatest strength to those who were honest of heart. The tough doctrines (like one true Church, the Word of Wisdom, or the law of tithing) brought the light that chased away the darkness of contention and replaced it with a spirit of confidence and assurance.

During a round of zone conferences held while I presided over the Scotland Edinburgh Mission, I challenged the missionaries to proselyte for one month without taking their Bibles with them. This challenge meant that they had to do all their teaching from the Book of Mormon and the Doctrine and Covenants. I told them that they had no business teaching any principle they could not teach from those sources because it was not a part of the message the Lord had commissioned us to take to the ends of the earth. It seemed a reasonable assumption to us that if the gospel had indeed been restored and if we in reality represented a new gospel dispensation, then we could teach the message as the Lord

had given it to us.

From then until our next round of zone conferences, the reports flooded in. The missionaries spoke of a stronger, even overwhelming, Spirit in their cottage meetings. It was obvious that the Holy Ghost liked being a part of what they were doing. What was particularly noticeable was the increased confidence the missionaries took with them into the teaching situation when they knew they were standing on their own ground. The natural result was that they started to find more people to teach than they ever had located before. This outcome I expected, but what I did not expect was that the spirit of contention common to many of their efforts to teach was now gone. After our one-month experiment, our missionaries refused to return to their old methods. Baptisms greatly increased, as did the testimonies of our missionaries.

By standing on their own ground and teaching doctrine from latter-day scripture, the missionaries found a greater inner strength, and they also discovered that by doing this they could avoid the spirit of contention that is often associated with proving our doctrines from the Bible.

Knowledge of God Must Be Empirical

Knowledge precedes faith. We cannot worship a God whom we do not know, nor can we practice principles of which we are ignorant. To abide the law, we must first know the law. Having been introduced to the law, we must then live it if we are to truly understand it. The Savior says, “My doctrine is not mine, but his that sent me. 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 7:16–17).

In His great Intercessory Prayer, Christ says, “And this is life eternal, that they might know thee the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom thou hast sent” (John 17:3). He spoke of an empirical knowledge. We know the Father and the Son only to the extent that we are like Them. Our knowledge of Them grows only as we become more like Them. Salvation consists of our learning to think as They think, act as They act, and feel as They feel.

We cannot live on borrowed light. The strength of our testimony must rest in the strength of our understanding, which comes only by living the principles we teach.

To Have Faith, We Must Do Things That Require Faith

“The pursuit of easy things,” my father repeatedly told his children, “makes men weak.” He was never hesitant about giving us challenging tasks. I applied the same principle as a mission president. When new mis-

sionaries arrived in our mission, I told them that I had too much respect for who and what they were to ask anything of them that did not require faith and courage. They responded in a marvelous manner, which I take as a reflection of the wonderful parents and teachers who had trained them.

I recently listened to a sacrament meeting talk that was excellently crafted. The thought content was deep and rich and the manner of its expression direct and clear. It was a wonderful compilation of quotations from various Church leaders. I wondered why those present, myself included, seemed so uninterested.

My question evoked a memory of the Old Testament story of David being commanded to offer a sacrifice on the threshing floor of Araunah. David went to see Araunah, who generously offered to give him whatever was needed for the sacrifice. David responded that he would not make an offering to the Lord of that which cost him nothing (see 2 Samuel 24:24).

Perhaps the problem with the talk in which people seemed to have so little interest was that it had cost the speaker nothing. Although the quotations he was reading were wonderful, they needed to be bound together by the price of his own feelings and experiences. We can borrow the words and thoughts of others, but we cannot plagiarize the Spirit that comes to those who lived the principles involved.

President Gordon B. Hinckley notes that “without sacrifice there is no true worship of God.”⁹ The Prophet Joseph Smith taught that “a religion that does not require the sacrifice of all things never has power sufficient to produce the faith necessary unto life and salvation.”¹⁰ If we cannot live on borrowed light, we certainly cannot live on borrowed experiences. We cannot teach what we do not understand, and we cannot understand that for which we have not paid a price. Good teaching must reach beyond good quoting. It must embrace what we have experienced. It must facilitate experience on the student’s part. Thus, the teacher becomes a tree of life, laden with good fruits, the seeds of which are planted in the hearts of his or her students. The teacher who gets lost in methodology and ethics becomes as the fig tree cursed by the Savior for the pretext of bearing fruits when it did not.

The Testimony That Saves Requires Courage

The scriptures are plain that those who inherit the celestial kingdom will be those who were valiant in the testimony of Christ (see D&C 76:79; 121:29). Surely these words mean that they knew no neutrality where the cause of Christ was concerned—that for them there was no middle ground and for their neighbors there was no ques-

tion where they stood on all things where the kingdom of God was concerned. Surely it means that their every expression and every action attested to where they stood and with what army they marched.

If those we teach are going to make a difference in this world, they must be different from the world. That difference will not come by teaching only easy doctrines, nor will it come by pretending that we believe the same things that everyone else does. Such things demean the sacrifice of our forefathers and the cost they paid for our right to live and believe as we do. If we want those we teach to stand for something, we must give them something worth standing for. If they are to be “valiant in the testimony,” our testimonies must embrace something that requires faith and courage.

In the councils of heaven, it was determined that Moroni would be Joseph Smith’s mentor, that he would play the primary role in preparing the youthful prophet for all that stood before him. We note with interest that Moroni began that instruction in a room filled with light, that he addressed Joseph by name, and that he told him God had a work for him to do. Having so done, he then told Joseph that his name would be “both good and evil spoken of among all people” (Joseph Smith—History 1:33).

There were no delusions here—this was God’s work. Joseph was to be His messenger, and His message would not go forth without opposition. If Moroni had prepared a lesson plan, perhaps it would have read something like this: “Major objective: Announce to Joseph that God has called him to a work that will require considerable faith and courage.” As to the church Joseph would eventually organize, Moroni promised, “It will increase the more it is opposed,” thus suggesting that the same principles would apply to all who were called to labor in the same great cause.¹¹

We Must Help Our Students Build Strong Testimonies

Two great themes dominate President Hinckley’s training of priesthood leaders. He states both very succinctly: “Lead them with doctrine,” and “Bless them with responsibility.”¹² These words mean that we must teach our students the great doctrines of the kingdom and do so in a way that challenges them to live those principles. It is this marvelous union of eternal truths and the responsibilities that attend them that give birth to strong testimonies. As Elder McConkie explains, “If we are to have faith like Enoch and Elijah we must believe what they believed, know what they knew, and live as they lived.”¹³ **RE**

Notes

1. Jeffrey R. Holland, "A Teacher Come from God," *Ensign*, May 1998, 27.
2. This parable is taken from a talk given by Elder Bruce R. McConkie at a regional representatives seminar in the Church Office Building, April 3, 1981; copy in author's possession. I have modified its interpretation to fit gospel teachers of all kinds.
3. The word *testimony* comes from the Latin *testis*, which means "a witness" (see Joseph T. Shipley, *Dictionary of Word Origins* [New York: Philosophical Library, 1945], 355; Eric Partridge, *Origins: A Short Etymological Dictionary of Modern English* [New York: Macmillan, 1966], 708).
4. Joseph F. Smith, *Gospel Doctrine* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1997), 206.
5. See J. Reuben Clark Jr., "The Charted Course of the Church in Education," Church Educational System, *Teaching Seminary: Preservice Readings* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2004).
6. Clark, "The Charted Course," 3–4.
7. Bruce R. McConkie, *Doctrines of the Restoration: Sermons and Writings of Bruce R. McConkie*, ed. Mark L. McConkie (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1989), 323, 336.
8. I have heard it said on a number of occasions that we ought to confine what we teach to the first principles of the gospel, that these principles embrace all that is necessary for us to know. If this were the case, why did the Lord send Peter, James, and John to restore the higher priesthood, even though John the Baptist had already restored the authority to teach the first principles? Similarly, we must wonder why the Lord revealed so much to us in the standard works that goes beyond the first principles if we are not to go beyond them. Are we to remain ignorant of all these things, or are we to advance from grace to grace until we, like Christ, receive the fulness of the Father?
9. Gordon B. Hinckley, *Teachings of Gordon B. Hinckley* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1997), 565.
10. Joseph Smith, *Lectures on Faith* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1985), 69.
11. Oliver Cowdery, "Letter VIII," *Messenger and Advocate*, October 1835, 199.
12. Hinckley, *Teachings*, 310–11.
13. Bruce R. McConkie, in Conference Report, April 1985, 11.