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By Study and by Faith

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From an address to CES religious educators on 26 February 2016 in the Salt Lake Tabernacle.

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In a General Authority training meeting, President Gordon B. Hinckley (1910–2008) said regarding the teaching of Church doctrine: “We cannot be too careful. We must watch that we do not get off [course]. In our efforts to be original and fresh and different, we may teach things which may not be entirely in harmony with the basic doctrines of this the restored Church of Jesus Christ. . . . We had better be more alert. . . . We must be watchmen on the tower.”¹

As Church education moves forward in the 21st century, our educators need to consider any changes they should make in the way they prepare to teach, how they teach, and what they teach if they are to build unwavering faith in the lives of our precious youth.

Gone are the days when a student asked an honest question and a teacher responded, “Don’t worry about it!” Gone are the days when a student raised a sincere concern and a teacher bore his or her testimony as a response intended to avoid the issue. Gone are the days when students were protected from people who attacked the Church.

Fortunately, the Lord has provided this timely and timeless counsel to teachers: “And as all have not faith, seek ye diligently and teach one another words of wisdom; yea, seek ye out of the best books words of wisdom; seek learning, even by study and also by faith” (D&C 88:118).

This is especially applicable today because not all of our students have the faith necessary to face the challenges ahead and because many of them are already exposed through the Internet to corrosive forces of an increasingly secular world that is hostile to faith, family, and gospel standards. The Internet is expanding its reach across the world into almost every home and into the hands and minds of our students.

You can help students by teaching them what it means to combine study and faith as they learn. Teach them by modeling this skill and approach in class.

President Harold B. Lee (1899–1973) observed:

“We would remind you that the acquiring of knowledge by faith is no easy road to learning. It demands strenuous effort and a continual striving by faith. . . .

“Learning by faith is no task for a lazy man [or woman]. Someone has said, in effect, that such a process requires the bending of the whole soul, the calling up from the depths of the human mind and linking it with God—the right connection must be formed. Then only comes ‘knowledge by faith.’”²

Knowledge by faith will produce a pure testimony, and a pure testimony has the power to change lives, as illustrated in the following brief stories.

Three Stories

Phoebe Carter left her home in Maine, USA, to gather with the Saints in Ohio in the 1830s. She recalled, “My friends marveled at my course, as did I, but something within impelled me on. My mother’s grief at my leaving home was almost more than I could bear; and had it not been for the spirit within I should have faltered at the last.”³

Phoebe followed the Prophet Joseph Smith and gathered with the Saints in Ohio and later in Utah, where she died a faithful Latter-day Saint and equally yoked as the wife of Church President Wilford Woodruff (1807–98).

As a college student, Marion G. Romney (1897–1988) had decided he could not serve a mission because of his family’s financial situation. On one occasion, however, he heard Elder Melvin J. Ballard (1873–1939) speak. A

biography notes, “Little did [Marion] know that the course of his life, in one very short moment, was about to be completely changed.”

The story continues: “For the first time Marion . . . fully understood what it was [like] to be under the influence of inspiration. A piercing, tingling sensation filled his soul. He . . . never had been so touched as he was now, listening to the words of this newest of the Apostles. . . .

“The glow of the Apostle’s countenance and the sincerity of [his] testimony filled him with an irresistible desire to go on a mission. . . . He knew that his plans for further education must be postponed.”⁴

Soon, Marion was on his way to Australia, where he served faithfully. Later he became a mighty Apostle and a member of the First Presidency.

The final story comes from President Boyd K. Packer (1924–2015), President of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, about the impact of an aged teacher on William E. Berrett. The teacher, a convert from Norway, had imperfect English-language skills. Despite the teacher’s limitations, President Packer recalled, Brother Berrett testified of his teacher, “We could warm our hands by the fire of his faith.”⁵

Later, William became the head of seminaries, institutes, and Church schools.

For Phoebe, Marion, and William, hearing a pure testimony became the catalyst that changed their lives forever. The same can be true for those you teach. However, given the realities of today’s world, pure testimony may not always be enough. Phoebe, Marion, and William were clean and pure and free from pornography and worldliness as they sat at the feet of inspired missionaries, teachers, and leaders. The Spirit easily penetrated their soft and pure hearts.

Today the story is much different. Some of your students are already infected by pornography and worldliness before they ever reach your classes.

It was only a generation ago that our young people’s access to information about our history, doctrine, and practices was basically limited to materials printed by the Church. Few students came in contact with alternative interpretations. Mostly, our young people lived a sheltered life.

Our curriculum at that time, though well-meaning, did not prepare students for today—a day when they have instant access to virtually everything about the Church from every possible point of view. Today what they see on their mobile devices is likely to be faith challenging as much as faith promoting. Many of our young people are more familiar with Google than with the

gospel, more attuned to the Internet than to inspiration, and more involved with Facebook than with faith.

Doctrinal Mastery

In light of these challenges, the Church Board of Education recently approved an initiative in seminary called Doctrinal Mastery. Building on what already has been done in Scripture Mastery, this new initiative focuses on building and strengthening our students' faith in Jesus Christ and fortifying them with increased ability to live and apply the gospel in their lives. Drawing on the scriptures and the words of the prophets, they will learn how to act with faith in Christ to acquire spiritual knowledge and understanding of His gospel. And they will have opportunities to learn how to apply the doctrine of Christ and gospel principles to the questions and challenges they hear and see every day among their peers and on social media.

This initiative is inspired and timely. It will have a wonderful influence on our young people. However, the success of Doctrinal Mastery, and of all the other programs of study in the Church Educational System, will depend to an important extent upon our teachers.

In the face of these challenges, what are the opportunities and responsibilities gospel teachers have in the 21st century? Obviously you teachers must love the Lord, His Church, and your students. You must also bear pure testimony sincerely and often. Additionally, more than at any time in our history, your students also need to be blessed by learning doctrinal and historical content and context by study and by faith accompanied by pure testimony so they can experience a mature and lasting conversion to the gospel and a life-long commitment to Jesus Christ. Mature and lasting conversion means they will “stay in the boat and hold on” throughout their entire lives.⁶

For *you* to understand the doctrinal and historical content and context of the scriptures and our history, you will need to study from the “best books,” as the Lord has directed (D&C 88:118). The “best books” include the scriptures, the teachings of modern prophets and apostles, and the best LDS scholarship available. Through your diligent efforts to learn by study and by faith, you will be able to help your students learn the skills and attitudes necessary to distinguish between reliable information that will lift them up and the half-truths and incorrect interpretations of doctrine, history, and practices that will bring them down.

Teach them about the challenges they face when relying upon the Internet to answer questions of eternal significance. Remind them that James did not say, “If any of you lack wisdom, let him Google!” (see James 1:5).

Wise people do not rely on the Internet to diagnose and treat emotional, mental, and physical health challenges, especially life-threatening challenges. Instead, they seek out health experts, those trained and licensed by recognized medical and state boards. Even then, prudent people seek a second opinion.

If that is the sensible course to take in finding answers for emotional, mental, and physical health issues, it is even more so when eternal life is at stake. When something has the potential to threaten our spiritual life, our most precious family relationships, and our membership in the kingdom, we should find thoughtful and faithful Church leaders to help us. And, if necessary, we should ask those with appropriate academic training, experience, and expertise for help.

This is exactly what I do when I need an answer to my own questions that I cannot answer myself. I seek help from my Brethren in the Quorum of the Twelve and from others with expertise in fields of Church history and doctrine.

Gospel teachers should be among the first—outside students' own families—to introduce authoritative sources on topics that may be less well-known or controversial so that students will measure whatever they hear or read later against what they have already been taught.

Spiritual Inoculation

We give medical inoculations to our precious missionaries before sending them into the mission field so they will be protected against diseases that can harm them. In a similar fashion, before you send your students into the world, inoculate them by providing faithful, thoughtful, and accurate interpretation of gospel doctrine, the scriptures, our history, and those topics that are sometimes misunderstood.

To name a few such topics that are less known or controversial, I'm talking about plural marriage, seer stones, different accounts of the First Vision, the process of translation of the Book of Mormon or the Book of Abraham, gender issues, race and the priesthood, and a Heavenly Mother.

The efforts to inoculate our young people will often fall to Church Educational System teachers. With those thoughts in mind, find time to think about your opportunities and your responsibilities.

Church leaders today are fully conscious of the unlimited access to information, and we are making extraordinary efforts to provide accurate context and understanding of the teachings of the Restoration. A prime example of this effort is the 11 Gospel Topics essays on LDS.org⁷ that provide balanced and reliable interpretations of the facts for controversial and unfamiliar Church-related subjects.

It is important that you know the content of these essays. If you have questions about them, please ask someone who has studied them and understands them. In other words, “seek learning, even by study and also by faith” (D&C 88:118) as you master the content of these essays.

You should also become familiar with the Joseph Smith Papers website,⁸ the Church history section on LDS.org, and other resources by faithful LDS scholars.

The effort for gospel transparency and spiritual inoculation through a thoughtful study of doctrine and history, coupled with a burning testimony, is the best antidote we have to help students avoid and deal with questions, doubt, or faith crises they may face in this information age.

As you teachers pay the price to better understand our history, doctrine, and practices—better than you do now—you will be prepared to provide thoughtful, careful, and inspired answers to your students’ questions.

One way to know what questions your students have is to listen attentively to them. All good teachers must be good listeners. In addition to listening to your students, encourage them in class or in private to ask you questions about any topic. One of the most important questions your students may ask is “Why?” When asked with a sincere desire to understand, “Why?” is a great question. It is the question missionaries want their investigators to ask. Why are we here? Why do bad things happen to good people? Why should we pray? Why should we follow Christ? Often the why questions lead to inspiration and revelation. Knowing our Heavenly Father’s plan of salvation will help you answer most of the why questions.

Here is one final note about answering questions. It is important to teach your students that although the gospel provides many, if not most, answers to life’s most important questions, some questions cannot be answered in mortality because we lack the information needed for a proper answer. As we learn in Jacob: “Behold, great and marvelous are the works of the Lord. How unsearchable are the depths of the mysteries of him; and it is impossible that

man should find out all his ways. And no man knoweth of his ways save it be revealed unto him” (Jacob 4:8; see also D&C 101:32–34).

A Word of Caution

Now I offer a word of caution. Please recognize that you may come to believe, as many of your students do, that you are a scriptural, doctrinal, and history expert. A recent study revealed that “the more people think they know about a topic, the more likely they are to allege understanding beyond what they know, even to the point of feigning knowledge . . . and fabricat[ing] information.”⁹

Identified as *overclaiming*, this temptation must be avoided by our gospel teachers. It is perfectly all right to say, “I do not know.” However, once that is said, you have a responsibility to find the best answers to thoughtful questions your students ask (see D&C 101:32–34).

As you teach your students and respond to their questions, let me warn you not to pass along faith-promoting or unsubstantiated rumors or outdated understandings and explanations of our doctrine and practices from the past. It is always wise to make it a practice to study the words of the living prophets and apostles; keep updated on current Church issues, policies, and statements through mormonnewsroom.org and LDS.org; and consult the works of recognized, thoughtful, and faithful LDS scholars to ensure you do not teach things that are untrue, out of date, or odd and quirky.

The authors of the overclaiming study noted that “a tendency to overclaim, especially in self-perceived experts, . . . may discourage individuals from educating themselves in precisely those areas in which they consider themselves knowledgeable.”¹⁰

In addition to becoming lifelong learners, you must also be doing those things in your personal life that allow the Holy Spirit to work within you. Such things include sincere daily prayer; faithful fasting; regular study and pondering of the scriptures and the words of the living prophets; making the Sabbath day a delight; partaking of the sacrament with humility and always remembering the Savior; worshipping in the temple as often as possible; and, finally, reaching out to the needy, poor, and lonely—both those close by and across the world.

To properly fulfill your opportunities and responsibilities, you must practice what you preach!

Be courageous by seeking counsel and correction from those you trust: a spouse, priesthood leaders, or supervisors. Ask them where you can improve in your personal discipleship. Avoid anything that drives away the Spirit.

Additionally, may I suggest that you hold a personal interview with yourself on occasion and review 2 Nephi 26:29–32, Alma 5:14–30, and Doctrine and Covenants 121:33–46? Doing so will help you identify the kinds of temptations we all may face. If something needs to change in your life, then resolve to fix it.

Avoid the temptation to question the motives of your co-laborers. Instead, look deeply into your own heart and search your own desires and motives. Only then can the Savior change your heart and align your desires and motives with His.

The rising generation needs to know, understand, embrace, and participate in God's plan of salvation. Understanding the plan will give them the divine insight through which to view themselves as sons and daughters of God, which provides a lens to understand almost every doctrine, practice, and policy of the Church.

Teachers of the gospel today need to accept the opportunity and the responsibility to teach the 21st century's young people correct principles about the plan, including the divinely sanctioned doctrine of marriage and the role of the family as defined in the proclamation on the family.¹¹

The Doctrine of Eternal Marriage

The doctrine of eternal marriage and family is a crucial part of God's plan of happiness. It includes our own temple-sealed families as part of Heavenly Father's own eternal family in the celestial kingdom. Because this doctrine relates directly to His own family and to His own spirit children, we are taught in Genesis that "male and female created he them" and that He commanded Father Adam and Mother Eve to "multiply, and replenish the earth" (see Genesis 1:27–28).

It has been said that the plan of happiness begins and ends with family. Indeed, family began in the premortal world, where we lived as members of our heavenly parents' family. And in the end, familial commitments and loving relationships will not only continue to exist but also proliferate through the process of procreation (see D&C 131:1–4; 132:19).

The hinge point that connects it all—on which God's plan and our eternal destiny depend and on which all else pivots—is our Savior, Jesus Christ.

His atoning sacrifice makes all things possible, including but not limited to a loving, caring, and eternal marriage and family.

The Lord teaches us that no single person, regardless of his or her righteousness, can obtain all our Heavenly Father has for His children. A single individual is half of the equation, unable to dwell in the highest degree of the celestial kingdom (see 1 Corinthians 11:11; D&C 131:1–4).

Your students need to understand that the purpose of mortality is to become more like God by gaining physical bodies, exercising agency, and assuming roles that previously belonged only to heavenly parents—roles of husband, wife, and parent.

The prophets have assured that all those who are worthy and who rely upon Jesus Christ but have not been able to be sealed to a companion or have children in this life will have those opportunities in the world to come.

Teach young people that in the Lord's Church there is room for all to worship, serve, and grow together as brothers and sisters in the gospel. Remind them what Lehi taught—that God's goal and hope for all of His children can be summed up as follows: "Adam fell that men might be; and men are, that they might have joy" (2 Nephi 2:25).

Heavenly Father wants us to accept His definition of marriage and obey His first commandment to "multiply, and replenish" (Genesis 1:28)—not only to fulfill His plan but also to find the joy that His plan was designed to give His sons and daughters.

As Church educators, help our youth to have a clear understanding of God's plan of happiness wherein real joy comes to His children. Help them to know it, embrace it, participate in it, and defend it. From my forty years of experience as a General Authority, I am concerned about the large number of our Church members, younger and older, who simply do not understand the plan for their eternal and divine destiny.

So, my fellow teachers, we should look for and relish these opportunities to explain, doctrinally and spiritually, why we believe that knowledge of God's great plan of happiness will answer most of the "why" questions we may be asked. Expressing our belief in a premortal life where we lived as the spirit children of a Heavenly Father and a Heavenly Mother allows us to explain why this earth was created. One essential purpose of mortal life is that we can replicate that family experience ourselves, only this time as parents rather than just as children. Treasure your basic understanding of the doctrine

and purpose of our Heavenly Father's plan for our eternal happiness. And continue to teach it.

Conclusion

So, to conclude and to summarize, the points I have shared with you are:

- Teach students to combine learning by study and faith with pure testimony.
- Teach students to stay in the boat and hang on!
- Teach students to control their mobile devices and focus on being connected more to the Holy Spirit than to the Internet.
- Inoculate students with the truths of the plan of salvation found in the gospel of Jesus Christ.
- Remember that "Why?" can be a great question that leads to gospel understanding.
- Master the content of the Gospel Topics essays.
- Don't overclaim, and don't be afraid to say, "I don't know."
- Become lifelong learners.
- Seek counsel and correction from those you trust.
- Consider holding a personal interview occasionally to review your spiritual preparation, your diligence, and your effectiveness.
- Teach that the plan of happiness begins and ends with family. Keep the plan of salvation in mind at all times.
- Teach that marriage and family bring long-lasting joy.

Remember, combining learning by study, by faith, and by pure testimony brings about true and long and lasting conversion. Above all else, strong faith in the Atonement of the Lord Jesus Christ is essential for our spiritual strength and growth.

May you find the joy and the peace that come from knowing that through your teaching, you have touched a life and lifted one of Heavenly Father's children on the journey back to His presence. **RE**

Notes

1. General Authority training meeting, Salt Lake City, 29 September 1992.
2. Harold B. Lee, in Clyde J. Williams, ed., *The Teachings of Harold B. Lee* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1996), 331.
3. See Edward W. Tullidge, *The Women of Mormondom* (New York: Tullidge and Crandall, 1877), 411–14.
4. See F. Burton Howard, *Marion G. Romney: His Life and Faith* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1988), 62–64.
5. Boyd K. Packer, "A Tribute to the Rank and File of the Church," *Ensign*, May 1980, 62.
6. See M. Russell Ballard, "Stay in the Boat and Hold On!" *Ensign* or *Liahona*, November 2014, 89–92.
7. See www.lds.org/topics/essays?lang=eng.
8. See josephsmithpapers.org.
9. Brent W. Webb, "Quest for Perfection and Eternal Life" (Brigham Young University annual university conference faculty session, 24 August 2015), 10, speeches.byu.edu; see also Stav Atir, Emily Rosenzweig, and David Dunning, "When Knowledge Knows No Bounds: Self-Perceived Expertise Predicts Claims of Impossible Knowledge," *Psychological Science*, August 2015, 1295–1303.
10. In Brent W. Webb, "Quest for Perfection and Eternal Life," 10.
11. See "The Family: A Proclamation to the World," *Ensign* or *Liahona*, November 2010, 129.