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The ideal teaching setting involves more than a teacher dispensing information; it requires the students to be anxiously engaged in learning.

Church Councils and Gospel Classrooms: Reservoirs of Insight and Inspiration

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In a recent satellite broadcast to Church Educational System religious educators, David A. Beck, Young Men general president, taught: “The Lord intends learning to be an active, not a passive, experience . . . To the Lord, the ideal teaching setting involves more than a teacher dispensing information; it requires the students to be ‘anxiously engaged’ in learning (see D&C 58:26–28).”¹ He then illustrated this principle by citing an example from the teachings of Elder M. Russell Ballard concerning Church councils:

Elder M. Russell Ballard has spoken frequently about the Church’s divinely appointed system of councils. He once described a training exercise in which he gave the bishop a hypothetical problem and asked him to develop a solution with his ward council. “The bishop took charge of the situation immediately and said, ‘Here’s the problem, and here’s what I think we should do to solve it.’ Then he made assignments to the various ward council members.” Elder Ballard explained that this method fell far short of the potential of the council. Once the bishop learned how to solicit thoughts from the council members—once they truly began to counsel together—the effect was like opening the floodgates of heaven. A reservoir of insight and inspiration suddenly began to flow between council members.²

Brother Beck continued: *"I believe we can have similar experiences in our . . . seminary and institute classes. The same 'reservoir of insight and inspiration' can be present when our students are invited and encouraged to edify one another."*³

Brother Beck's comparison between Church councils and a gospel classroom in regards to the principle of participation is intriguing and prompts the consideration of further questions: If active participation is a principle that is shared between gospel classrooms and Church councils, what other principles might they also share or have in common? What are the principles of effective Church councils? What important perspectives would a gospel teacher gain by comparing these principles to gospel teaching? And lastly, how could these perspectives help a gospel teacher to be more effective in the classroom?

The objective of this paper is to explore these questions by identifying the principles of effective Church councils and then comparing and applying them to gospel teaching. It is therefore hoped that this comparison will provide gospel teachers with helpful perspectives and insight concerning effective gospel teaching.

Principles of Effective Church Councils

The principles of effective Church councils can be identified by a careful review of the most recent handbook of instructions of the Church and the teachings of the Brethren, particularly Elder Ballard, who has repeatedly emphasized the importance of Church councils. The list below summarizes some principles from these sources.

The presiding officer of a council directs but does not dominate discussion. "The bishop presides over the meeting . . . He encourages discussion without dominating it. He asks questions and may ask particular council members for their suggestions. He listens carefully before making a decision."⁴

"Functioning successfully as a council doesn't mean making group decisions. It simply means the council leader draws from the various abilities, insights, experiences, and inspiration of council members to help make good decisions under the influence of the Spirit."⁵ In fact, "councils are for leaders to listen at least as much as they speak."⁶

Members of a council have both a collective and an individual responsibility. "All council members have a dual responsibility: not only do they represent the needs and perspectives of the individual organization they have been called to

lead, but each one also serves as a member of the council, sharing equally with the others a sense of stewardship for the success of the Lord's work."⁷

Council proceedings focus on things of real importance rather than on matters that are trivial. "Ward council meetings should focus on matters that will strengthen individuals and families. The council spends minimal time on calendaring, activity planning, and other administrative business."⁸

All members of a council should participate and contribute their thoughts and opinions. "Council members are encouraged to speak honestly, both from their personal experience and from their positions as organizational leaders. Both men and women should feel that their comments are valued as full participants. The bishop seeks input from Relief Society, Young Women, and Primary leaders in all matters considered by the ward council. The viewpoint of women is sometimes different from that of men, and it adds essential perspective to understanding and responding to members' needs."⁹

"Promote free and open expression. Such expression is essential if we are to achieve the purpose of councils."¹⁰

A climate of openness, mutual respect, and unity should be fostered in the council. "Leaders . . . should establish a climate that is conducive to openness, where every person is important and every opinion valued."¹¹

Council members support, implement, and report on council decisions. "Ward council members regularly evaluate each course of action and report on their assignments. In most instances, progress will require sustained attention and follow-up assignments."¹²

Comparison and Application of the Principles of Effective Church Councils to Gospel Teaching

Viewing gospel teaching through the lens of Church councils provides insight into the principles of effective gospel teaching and helps a gospel teacher view the classroom experience from a unique perspective. A brief discussion of each of the principles mentioned above and their application to gospel teaching follows.

Role and responsibility of a gospel teacher. Although gospel teachers do not have the same authority or responsibility in their classrooms as leaders do in the Church,¹³ it is helpful for a gospel teacher to compare his role in the classroom with that of a Church leader's role in a Church council. For example, just as a bishop draws upon the various abilities, insights, experiences and inspiration of council members, a gospel teacher would do the same with his

students. As a bishop encourages discussion without dominating it, a gospel teacher should also be careful concerning this issue in his teaching.¹⁴ As a bishop listens at least as much as he speaks in a Church council, gospel teachers should seek to do the same.

Elder Ballard's example of the "one-cylinder ward" is an appropriate consideration for a gospel teacher:

The one-cylinder ward is the ward where the bishop handles all of the problems, makes all of the decisions, and follows through on all of the assignments. Then, like an overworked cylinder in a car engine, he is soon burned out . . . Our Heavenly Father does not expect them to do everything by themselves . . . God, the Master Organizer, has inspired a creation of a system of committees and councils. If understood and put to proper use, this system will decrease the burden on all individual leaders and will extend the reach and the impact of their ministry.¹⁵

This can also be true in gospel teaching. The one-cylinder classroom is where the teacher does all the talking, makes all of the insights, asks and answers all of the questions,¹⁶ and is the central focus of the classroom experience, rather than the students.

How a gospel teacher perceives his role in the classroom will have a profound effect on the way he teaches. The role of a leader in a Church council helps a gospel teacher to see his role as more than just a dispenser of information. In fulfilling his role, a gospel teacher will invite students to consider and respond to appropriate questions, direct and guide classroom discussions, help students to study and think about pertinent passages of scripture, and discover and apply gospel principles to their own lives. Ultimately as a teacher seeks to fulfill these responsibilities, he becomes part of a community of learners in which the teacher is no better than those he teaches (see Alma 1:26).¹⁷

Role and responsibility of the student. Elder Ballard has taught that "one who is called to serve on a Church council should remember that his or her participation on the council is a privilege. And with that privilege comes responsibility."¹⁸ According to Elder Ballard, council members are responsible to be prepared, to share, to advocate, to be supportive, to be in tune with the Spirit, and to positively contribute to council discussions and deliberations.¹⁹ Although the students who attend Church classes are not called in the same sense that participants of a Church council are, they do have responsibility as gospel learners. Many of the responsibilities that members of a Church council have are similar to the responsibilities that students have in a gospel classroom.



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Every student in a gospel classroom is personally responsible for his or her individual actions and attitudes. These actions and attitudes influence their ability to learn the gospel and have a profound effect upon the class as a whole. Such simple things as bringing a personal copy of the scriptures; having a pen or pencil and journal to record insights, thoughts, and feelings; being prepared to contribute to class discussions by studying the assigned material, listening, and participating appropriately; and being reverent, humble, respectful, and optimistic can make all the difference in a student's classroom experience and learning.

In addition, just as members of a Church council have both a collective as well as an individual responsibility, students should also understand they are part of a community of learners and share in the collective responsibility for the class's overall success. Elder Dallin H. Oaks illustrated this responsibility when he taught:

The values of the world wrongly teach that "it's all about me." That corrupting attitude produces no change and no growth. It is contrary to eternal progress toward the destiny God has identified in His great plan for His children. The plan of the gospel of Jesus Christ lifts us above our selfish desires and teaches us that this life is all about what we can become. . . .

Each of us should apply that principle to our attitudes in attending church. Some say "I didn't learn anything today" or "No one was friendly to me" or "I was

offended" or "The Church is not filling my needs." All those answers are self-centered, and all retard spiritual growth.

In contrast, a wise friend wrote:

"Years ago, I changed my attitude about going to church. No longer do I go to church for my sake, but to think of others. I make a point of saying hello to people who sit alone, to welcome visitors, . . . to volunteer for an assignment"

"In short, I go to church each week with the intent of being active, not passive, and making a positive difference in people's lives. Consequently, my attendance at Church meetings is so much more enjoyable and fulfilling."²⁰

In a gospel classroom, students have a responsibility to look beyond themselves to others and to contribute to the success of the class and its members. Gospel classrooms can literally be a measure of one's discipleship—a living laboratory of Christian love and service. Simple things such as developing a love for class members and serving them, contributing to class discussions, bearing testimony, helping the teacher to succeed in accomplishing his instructional objectives, and overcoming personal fears that hinder one's ability to participate are a few examples of how students can fulfill this collective responsibility.

Whether or not students fulfill these responsibilities, however, can be influenced by how a teacher teaches. *Teaching, No Greater Call* states: "Knowing that individuals are responsible to learn the gospel, we may ask, What is the role of teachers? It is to help individuals take responsibility for learning the gospel—to awaken in them the desire to study, understand, and live the gospel and to show them how to do so."²¹ In helping students to assume their responsibility to learn, teachers should prepare and teach with the students in mind.²² Students then become the focus of the classroom experience rather than the teacher.

Instruction that is meaningful and doctrinally sound. Just as Church councils focus on matters that will strengthen individuals and families and spend minimal time on calendaring and other administrative business; the same should also be true of gospel classrooms. Gospel teachers should ensure that time spent in the classroom is purposeful and carefully managed. Routine activities such as announcements, student devotionals, and beginning and ending on time should be focused and meaningful. In addition, classroom instruction should be devoted to "converting principles"²³ and doctrines that strengthen and fortify students. Elder Jeffrey R. Holland counseled that gospel teachers should "keep war stories and strange doctrines and near-death

experiences to a minimum [and] stay in the heart of the mine where the real gold is."²⁴ One way gospel teachers can do this was suggested by President Henry B. Eyring: "We invite the Holy Ghost as our companion when we are careful to teach only true doctrine. One of the surest ways to avoid even getting near false doctrine is to choose to be simple in our teaching. Safety is gained by that simplicity, and little is lost."²⁵

Participation. In order for a Church council to accomplish its purposes, free and open expression on the part of council members is essential. Elder Ballard taught that when Church leaders

allow the priesthood and auxiliary leaders whom the Lord has called to serve with them to become part of a problem-solving team, wonderful things begin to happen. Their participation broadens the base of experience and understanding, leading to better solutions. You bishops energize your ward leaders by giving them a chance to offer suggestions and to be heard. You prepare future leaders by allowing them to participate and learn. You can lift much of the load from your shoulders through this kind of involvement. People who feel ownership of a problem are more willing to help find a solution, greatly improving the possibility of success.²⁶

Similarly, student participation can have the same effects in a gospel classroom. For example, participation broadens the base of experience and understanding leading to better lessons, energizes students to become active rather than passive participants, prepares students to become future leaders and teachers in the Church, enables students to share in the responsibility for the class and greatly improves the possibility of its success.

Gospel classrooms are similar to Church councils in that participation invites inspiration and fosters the receipt of revelation. Elder David A. Bednar in the November 2010 Worldwide Training Broadcast taught: "There is a mistaken notion that every element of revelation coming to the ward has to be through the bishop. 'By virtue of his keys, he has to acknowledge it and affirm it, but he doesn't necessarily have to be the only vehicle through whom it comes. So in that council, as you have that spirit of unity and acting under the influence of the Spirit, the contributions of all of the council members add elements to the inspiration.'"²⁷ Likewise, in a gospel classroom it is also a mistaken notion that every element of revelation has to come through the teacher. Teaching by the Spirit is something that a teacher and students do together as they counsel with one another in the classroom. Thus teaching by the Spirit is more than just a teacher receiving inspiration concerning how and what to teach; it also encompasses the students receiving inspiration and revelation.

Classroom climate. Just as a Church leader has the responsibility to foster and establish a climate that is conducive to openness and mutual respect in a Church council, a gospel teacher has this same responsibility in a gospel classroom. The climate found in either of these settings profoundly affects the level of participation and contribution the participants make. This participation invites the presence of the Holy Ghost and facilitates learning under his influence.

In fostering and establishing such a climate, gospel teachers should consider such things as their view of the students, love for them, and expectations concerning them, as well as helping their students to develop appropriate classroom habits and behaviors.²⁸ These principles could also apply to Church leaders and the councils they preside over.

Assignments. As participants in a Church council receive and report on assignments, gospel teachers should invite and encourage students to appropriately do the same. Gospel teachers should ask students to apply gospel truths to their lives and to consider how lessons learned in class can address their experiences and circumstances outside of class.²⁹ Simple assignments, invitations and challenges made by a gospel teacher can extend the effect of classroom instruction beyond its walls into students' lives.³⁰ Having students report on their experiences and monitor their progress can also help them become responsible for their own learning. Just as the work of a Church council is accomplished outside of the council itself, lessons learned inside a gospel classroom must also be lived outside of it. An edifying classroom experience alone is not enough if gospel truths are to go down deep into students' lives. Deliberation and decision inside the classroom should be followed by action outside of it!

Conclusion

In 1953, President Stephen L. Richards taught: "Now, I don't know that it is possible for any organization to succeed in the Church . . . without adopting the genius of our Church government. What is that? As I conceive it, the genius of our Church government is government through councils."³¹ Achieving success in gospel teaching can also come by adopting the "genius" of Church councils. Comparing the principles of effective Church councils to gospel teaching provides insight and understanding into the basic principles that characterize good teaching. Through a careful implementation of these principles, a gospel teacher can establish a classroom where students

and teachers strengthen and help one another, where they are able to seek and receive the Lord's guidance and find solutions to their problems, concerns and questions. Like Church councils, gospel classrooms can indeed be a reservoir of inspiration for both teachers and their students. **RE**

Notes

1. David A. Beck, "Helping Young Men Fulfill Their Duty to God," Seminaries and Institutes of Religion Satellite Broadcast, August 3, 2010, 3.
2. Beck, "Helping Young Men Fulfill Their Duty to God," 3; see also M. Russell Ballard, "Counseling with Our Councils," *Ensign*, May 1994, 24.
3. Beck, "Helping Young Men Fulfill Their Duty to God," 3; emphasis added.
4. *Handbook 2: Administering the Church* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2010), 17.
5. M. Russell Ballard, *Counseling with Our Councils* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1997), 68.
6. M. Russell Ballard, "Strength in Counsel," *Ensign*, November 1993, 78.
7. Ballard, *Counseling with Our Councils*, 14.
8. *Handbook 2: Administering the Church*, 17.
9. *Handbook 2: Administering the Church*, 17.
10. Ballard, "Strength in Counsel," 78.
11. Ballard, "Strength in Counsel," 78.
12. *Handbook 2: Administering the Church*, 18.
13. While Church leaders are called, set apart, or ordained to their positions, religious educators who teach in CES classrooms are not.
14. "Teachers who speak 90 percent of class time are probably talking too much. Of course, teachers need to give explanations, instructions, examples, stories, testimonies, and so forth, but their speaking should be a planned part of promoting participation. In many lessons, students can speak 40 to 60 percent of the time. This approach helps teachers avoid becoming lecturers or the only dispensers of information. Instead, teachers can be facilitators—helping students learn from the scriptures, from other students, and from the Spirit. Of course, teachers may introduce the lesson and help lay some groundwork and, at the end of the class, clarify and summarize the doctrine taught. However, they should also be careful not to take a great deal of time doing this." Jonn D. Claybaugh and Amber Barlow Dahl, "Increasing Participation in Lessons," *Ensign*, March 2001, 34.
15. Ballard, "Counseling with Our Councils," 24.
16. "To encourage student responses, refrain from answering the questions *you* ask." *The Gospel and the Productive Life: Teacher Manual* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2004), vi.
17. "Teachers . . . should consider themselves as part of the group of learners, not just as the dispensers of knowledge. If there is no discussion or sharing of thoughts and feelings in our classes . . . we are missing out on many glorious opportunities to learn from each other." Richard G. Moore, "Teaching and Being Taught," *Ensign*, June 2007, 38.
18. Ballard, *Counseling with Our Councils*, 66.
19. Ballard, *Counseling with Our Councils*, 66.
20. Dallin H. Oaks, "Unselfish Service," *Ensign*, May 2009, 95–96.

21. *Teaching, No Greater Call* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1999), 61.

22. "Teachers can help students accept their role in learning. One way to do this is for teachers to stay focused on the learner and not just on teaching. The difference between focusing on the learner and focusing on teaching or on the teacher is illustrated by the difference in a teacher who says, 'What shall I do in class today?' and one who says, 'What will my students do in class today?' or 'What will I teach today?' and 'How will I help my students discover what they need to know?'" *Teaching the Gospel: A Handbook for CES Teachers and Leaders* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1994), 13.

23. "As you prepare a lesson, look in it for converting principles. Most of your students want to do the right thing, but they need the conversion that comes from doing the right thing in faith. A converting principle is one that leads to obedience to the will of God—always in faith and sometimes to the point of sacrifice." Henry B. Eyring, "Converting Principles," address to CES religious educators, February 2, 1996, 1.

24. Jeffrey R. Holland, "Therefore, What?" General Authority address at New Testament conference, August 8, 2000 (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2000), 2; emphasis added.

25. Henry B. Eyring, "Teaching True Doctrine," *Ensign*, April 2009, 6.

26. Ballard, "Counseling with Our Councils," 26; emphasis added.

27. R. Scott Lloyd, "Ward Councils Can Meet Member Needs," *Church News*, November 20, 2010, 5.

28. For a helpful discussion of this subject and these principles, see Alan R. Maynes, "Cultivating the Proper Classroom Climate," *Religious Educator* 9, no. 1 (2008): 105–14.

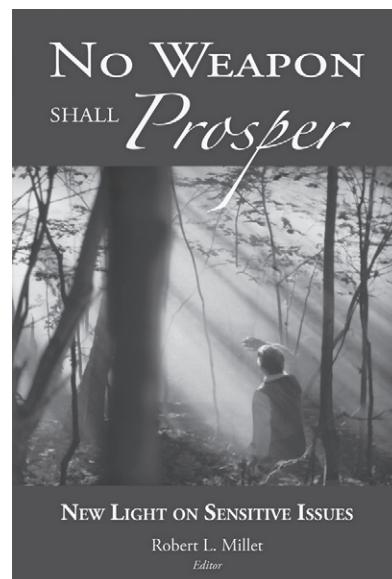
29. "The goal of gospel teaching . . . is not to 'pour information' into the minds of class members. It is not to show how much the teacher knows, nor it is merely to increase knowledge about the Church. The basic goal of teaching in the Church is to help bring about worthwhile changes in the lives of boys and girls, men and women. The aim is to inspire the individual to think about, feel about, and then do something about living gospel principles." Thomas S. Monson, "Thou Art a Teacher Come from God," *Improvement Era*, December 1970, 101; emphasis removed.

30. For a helpful discussion on this subject, see John Hilton III, "See That Ye Do Them," *Religious Educator* 10, no. 3 (2009): 115–22.

31. Stephen L. Richards, in Conference Report, October 1953, 86; emphasis removed.

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