

Fostering Conversion through Faith-Inspired Actions

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In a 2001 address to religious educators, Elder Henry B. Eyring, then a member of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, prophetically announced that if our youth are going to have the “spiritual strength sufficient” to negotiate a culture increasingly tolerant of wickedness, then “the pure gospel of Jesus Christ must go down into the hearts of young people by the power of the Holy Ghost . . . *while they are with us.*”¹ Teaching that penetrates deep into the heart and empowers students to detect and withstand wicked influences necessitates a conversion. Of conversion, Elder Dallin H. Oaks has taught, “This process requires far more than acquiring knowledge. It is not even enough for us to be *convinced* of the gospel; we must act and think so we are *converted* by it.”² Faith, as a principle of action, drives the conversion process.

Elder David A. Bednar explained that faith-inspired action, which opens a student’s heart to the converting influence of the Spirit, “requires spiritual, mental, and physical exertion and not just passive reception.” Hence, when students act in faith, they indicate their “willingness to learn and receive instruction from the Holy Ghost.” Such effort constitutes the “tuition of diligence” that must be paid personally if there is to be a true transformation of the heart.³ When students internalize such an attitude, they become “less concerned about a teacher or speaker holding [their] attention and more concerned about giving [their] attention to the Spirit.”⁴

The miracle of students who have learned how to receive the Holy Ghost through the exercise of faith is that they are in a position to become spiritually self-reliant. With the Holy Ghost as their companion, they will not only be directed to the “personal changes [they will] need to make for full conversion,”⁵ but they will also receive the sanctification that comes through the “baptism of fire” (2 Nephi 31:14). Accordingly, one way we can assist our students in the conversion process is to help them identify specific *faith-inspired actions* that they can apply and practice *while they are with us*.

Actions to Identify, Apply, and Practice

Significantly, the *Teaching Emphasis for Seminaries and Institutes of Religion* encourages active and meaningful student participation. Students are to teach, read, study, identify, apply, explain, share, testify, and memorize (see appendix). More to the point, if approached thoughtfully, the teaching emphasis encourages actions that not only foster conversion but also elevate student participation from the level of a discretionary teaching technique to that of a necessary principle of sound gospel instruction. These actions may entail public sharing or private pondering, but either way they always encourage interaction with the Holy Ghost. With this in mind, we will now consider some specific faith-inspired actions that students can *apply* and *practice* both in and out of the classroom.

Ask, seek, and knock. Students arrive in our classrooms under the stress and strain of daily life. Some may come primed to interact with the Holy Ghost, but others come with distracted minds, heavy hearts, or even defiant attitudes. Until their minds are focused and their hearts are softened, the Holy Ghost can have little converting impact on them. Upfront, simple teaching that clarifies personal responsibility for learning is imperative. When students willingly seek the Lord by choosing to focus their minds and hearts on the doctrines being discussed, then they are manifesting genuine faith. In the language of scripture, they have commenced the process of spiritual learning by *asking, seeking, and knocking*.

The scriptural mandate to ask underscores the importance of personal initiative in regard to receiving heavenly direction. In short, students who ask, seek, and knock are students who have internalized an “attitude of inquiry”⁶ and are positioned to experience revelation as a “personalized, dialogic exchange”⁷ with their Heavenly Father. In harmony with the Restoration’s pattern of prayer as a dialogue, we are not simply encouraging students to ask but to receive; not simply to speak

to God but to speak *with* God. Consequently, a “major part of teaching the gospel of Jesus Christ is teaching students this principle [of seeking] and encouraging them to use it throughout their lifetime.”⁸

In order to encourage in students an attitude of asking, seeking, and knocking, a teacher must resist the temptation to be the focal point of a class. A teacher’s knowledge, experience, pedagogical skills, and testimony can be important means to inspire students to seek interaction with the Holy Ghost, but should not be used to draw undue attention to the teacher’s abilities. Moreover, it simply is not good enough for students to be convinced that their teacher delights in the gospel feast. Teaching that leads to abiding conversion convinces students that they should come to the table of truth seeking to “feast upon the words of Christ” for themselves (2 Nephi 32:3). From the beginning of the year and with constant reminders throughout, students should understand that no one in our classes needs to be a passive spectator—all can be active participants.

As teachers, we can “raise our sights” by not merely helping students identify the need to ask, seek, and knock, but by providing them meaningful opportunities to do so. Elder Richard G. Scott has instructed, “Assure that there is abundant participation because that use of agency by a student authorizes the Holy Ghost to instruct.”¹⁰ We need not assume students will respond at our bidding or on our timetable, but we should approach each class with the confidence that if they are provided opportunities, in due time the majority will act in a manner that initiates meaningful interaction with the Holy Ghost.

Foster reverence. President Boyd K. Packer has taught that “reverence is essential to revelation.”¹¹ A reverent student embraces sacred truths with respect, wonder, and awe. In the words of Elder D. Todd Christofferson, only as we nurture a “sense of the sacred” can the “Holy Spirit [become our] frequent and then constant companion.”¹² In our noisy, fast-paced, secular culture, reverence is all but a forgotten virtue. Hence, it is critical that our students identify a reverent mindset as a manifestation of faith.

When reverent students approach “holy ground,” they sense the need to “put off [their] shoes” (Exodus 3:5). Their outward behaviors manifest an inward respect for sacred things. It is important to remember, however, that outward acts can tutor inward feelings when those feelings are insufficient. In other words, the relationship between inner feelings and behavior is interactive. Any student on any given day may come to class preoccupied or unmotivated to learn spiritual things. Nevertheless, if students will perform simple faith-inspired actions with

reverence, they will find that their inner feelings adjust in short order. We must help our students understand that faith moves us to righteous actions, especially when we are not feeling inclined to do so. Such simple actions as singing the hymns, bowing our heads in prayer, opening our scriptures, and showing respect to class members can become faith-inspired actions to prepare us to receive instruction from the Holy Ghost. How many times have we each entered a Church meeting weighed down with the daily demands of life only to be imbued with “a feeling of reverence”¹³ by singing a hymn?

Encouraging reverence as an act of faith has unlimited applications. Take, for instance, the ever-present distraction of the cell phone. We can tell students to be polite and put them away, or we can even confiscate them when they are misused. Both may be appropriate responses. Even so, at some time we must help students understand that the simple act of voluntarily turning off a cell phone when they enter a religious setting is a faith-inspired action that indicates their desire to show respect and reverence for sacred things. Our students will be greatly blessed if they see such seemingly “small and simple things” (Alma 37:6) as a means to send a clear signal to the Holy Ghost that they desire to receive instruction from him.

Meditate. The Holy Ghost most often communicates to us through a still, small voice. He whispers and “caresses so gently that if we are preoccupied we may not feel it at all.”¹⁴ Students who seek moments of quiet reflection in which they ponder precious principles of truth are more likely to hear the Spirit’s gentle whisperings. Meditating, reflecting, and pondering are all faith-inspired actions. They require mental effort and intellectual discipline. For example, the ancient Israelites were commanded to meditate upon the scriptures (see Joshua 1:8); after the Lord had expounded doctrine to the Nephites, he invited them to “ponder upon the things” he had taught (3 Nephi 17:3); before Joseph Smith experienced the First Vision, he engaged in “serious reflection” (Joseph Smith—History 1:8).

We can help students practice meditating, reflecting, and pondering by providing them moments of silence during class. Certainly there are precious moments in which the spoken word—from either teacher or student—is an irreverent intrusion to inspiration. Interludes of silence manifest a deep respect for both gospel truth and the Holy Ghost. Indeed, we need “not be afraid of silence,”¹⁵ but in those treasured moments of tranquility, heed the Lord’s injunction: “Be still and know that I am God” (D&C 101:16). Successful pondering moments in class can spill over into actual patterns for pondering in a student’s personal

life. As one young woman recounted, “I love having questions I don’t know the answer to and being able to ponder and search to draw my own conclusions. I find myself pondering about the gospel’s doctrine during my free time and it’s great!” Truly, when students ponder gospel truths in their “free time,” they are on the path of conversion.

Thoughtfully prepare for class. When students thoughtfully study assigned material before class begins, they indicate their thirst for gospel truth. Such previous preparation serves as a primer for heaven-sent inspiration. Studying and pondering assigned material before a class is persuasive evidence that one desires spiritual deepening.

Unfortunately, we may have students who have become accustomed to approaching their religion class as laid-back bystanders. They come to class as if they were attending a movie, passively waiting for a teacher’s wisdom and charisma to capture and keep their attention. Teachers with a talent for entertainment may find it all too easy to oblige this attitude, especially when students provide lavish praise for such a “fun” class. Furthermore, passive attitudes may have been unwittingly reinforced by the well-meaning and oft-repeated teaching cliché, “I will get a lot more out of this lesson than you will because I prepared for this class.” The principle, as applied to the teacher, is true; the implied expectation of student inaction is regrettable.

President Eyring has said to religious educators, “Your choices of what you expect will have powerful effect on their choices of what to expect of themselves.”¹⁶ If students come to class expecting a teacher to do all the work and their teacher willingly fulfills this expectation, then he or she may unwisely promote a class of teacher-dependent students who are satisfied to simply repeat what they think the teacher wants them to say. Such students may enthusiastically parrot the “right answers” but fail to recognize that intellectual effort is not optional for students who wish to receive revelation (see D&C 9:7–9). As BYU law professor John W. Welch noted, God commands us to not only love him with our hearts but also with our minds. Thus our students “don’t need to check [their] brains at the door”¹⁷ but should be encouraged to “treasure up in [their] minds continually the words of life” (D&C 84:85). Through thoughtful preparation our students can experientially verify that those who expend intellectual effort to obtain the Lord’s word are then positioned to explain, share, and testify of gospel truths by the power of the Holy Ghost within our classes (see D&C 11:21).

Faithfully attend class. Students attend religion classes for a variety of reasons. The motives may range from parental compulsion in seminary to increasing the opportunity of meeting a future spouse in

institute. Regardless of the reason, once students are enrolled, teachers legitimately use a variety of techniques to keep students attending class. And yet in all of this, if students are to move toward conversion, the time must come when they attend class willingly and with the primary intent to interact with the Holy Ghost.

Contemporary culture does not help in this matter. There seems to be a pervasive mentality that education must yield some type of tangible, pecuniary benefit to be worth pursuing. In the current educational climate, students are inundated with talk about credit, grades, graduation, and marketable job skills. Hence, the utilitarian attitude, "If this does not provide me school credit or improve my transcript or résumé, then it is not really worth my time." Viewing education through this lens, religion classes can be dismissed as an unnecessary waste of time. To battle such worldly attitudes, we cannot stand on the world's turf or rely on secular reasons for religious education.

As we address attendance, the principle of sacrifice could be discussed. The decision to attend a religion class when a sacrifice is required can be a clear signal to the Holy Ghost that students are taking their spiritual education seriously. The allotment of our time reveals our real priorities. Surely it is a demonstration of faith when a student sacrifices sleep and willingly gets up at 5:00 a.m. to attend an early-morning seminary class. Likewise, when a young adult makes time for an institute class between work and class commitments, his or her sacrifice constitutes an authentic manifestation of faith.

Sacrifice is essential to salvation. It may be helpful to have meaningful discussion time with students to establish in their minds a clear connection between faith, sacrifice, and their attendance in a religion class. They need to understand that each time they come, especially when there is a persuasive reason not to come, it is an application of faith that sends a clear message to the Holy Ghost that they are committed to spiritual learning. One returned missionary articulated this principle clearly when he confessed, "Before my mission and in high school, I never took seminary or institute serious enough. Now, it's a whole new ballgame. I'm excited to come and I am disappointed when we don't have class. . . . I learn more and more every time I come, and I love it."

Meekly listen. The importance of listening with genuine interest to the comments of class members is a dimension of learning that is often overlooked. True listening requires both effort and focused attention. Active listeners assume that others have something of value to contribute in a class discussion and therefore pay attention to what is being

said. They listen to learn and not to refute. They accept the doctrine that when someone shares a comment by the power of the Holy Ghost and they receive it by that same Spirit, then they “understand one another, and both are edified and rejoice together” (D&C 50:22).

In our efforts to solicit students’ comments, we must be careful we do not inadvertently undermine the importance of listening to each other. What good will come of students who can speak but who cannot hear? We might well consider the proposition that without a listening heart, an open mouth tends toward pretentious and self-serving comments. Furthermore, in our laudable efforts to encourage speaking by the Spirit, a simultaneous emphasis should be placed on listening to the Spirit. Clearly, there is a qualitative difference between those who speak to be heard and those who speak because they hear the Holy Ghost.

The importance of listening is powerfully articulated in the following student testimony: “Never before in my life have I had more promptings—well, I take that back—more promptings that I am actually listening to. I have acquired a habit of actively listening, and that has made more difference than any shattering story or testimony. Because of the truths I have learned, I want to live the gospel, rather than just using it as a lifestyle.”

A raised hand. A raised hand signals to a teacher that a student is ready to verbally participate in class. In an educational setting, sincere student questions and comments are essential avenues of learning. In a gospel setting a raised hand can imply much more. Elder Richard G. Scott observed, “When you encourage students to raise their hand to respond to a question, they signify to the Holy Ghost their willingness to learn. That use of moral agency will allow the Spirit to motivate them and give them more powerful guidance during your time together.”¹⁸

The nature of this guidance is at least twofold. For instance, a raised hand may signal an honest desire to receive instruction from the Spirit, but it also may signal a readiness to instruct others through the Spirit. Consequently, students may be prompted to ask inspired questions, but also they can be inspired to answer their peers’ questions. When both teacher and students trust the promptings of the Holy Ghost to the point that they heed them *straightway*, then the Holy Ghost orchestrates the comments within a class that, quite frankly, transcend anything a teacher can say or do. Such classes become enclaves of edification that nurture true conversion.

With the Holy Ghost at the helm directing classroom discussion, students gain confidence that their inspired comments matter. They

realize they have unique experiences to share and inspired insights to contribute. In such classes, students come to view their testimony as a gift to be revealed through their faith and not concealed by their fears. And yet, the prospect of raising a hand in response to a prompting of the Holy Ghost can be a daunting act for a shy student. The prompting to speak up may come and be quickly followed by a surge of rationalizations of why he or she should remain silent. We must gently and repeatedly encourage such students to not “take counsel from [their] fears”¹⁹ and courageously raise their hands and share their impressions. Ironically, for the outgoing vivacious student given to much verbal expression, there may be moments the Holy Ghost invites restraint in order to provide the timely opportunity for others to explain, share, or testify.

Record revelation. Students witness their desire to receive and remember revelation when they record inspired insights in writing. Revelations that are recorded and remembered become catalysts for further revelation. A young man noted: “Recording my learning has been like keeping track of what I’ve eaten all semester. I can go back and remember how good things tasted . . . and how I got to be spiritually healthy.”

Students need to understand that when they come to class, open their notebooks, and have a pen handy, they are saying to the Holy Ghost, “I am ready to be instructed and trust you will share something with me today.” A student’s Church experience can be transformed when they attend their meetings expecting to receive revelation and are prepared to record it as it comes. Furthermore, their personal scripture study will take on rich revelatory dimensions when they expect to receive and record personal revelation.

To encourage this faith-inspired action, teachers could regularly provide time during class for students to record inspired feelings and impressions. They could also provide time for students to review and reread what they have recorded. In the process, forgotten feelings will be revived, precious truths recollected, and the spiritual memory enlarged.

Personal scripture study. According to the teaching emphasis, teachers “are to help students develop a habit of daily scripture study” (see appendix). Students who develop this habit invite the Holy Ghost to become their personal tutor. Elder Bruce R. McConkie testified of this truth when he said, “One of the best-kept secrets of the kingdom is that the scriptures open the door to the receipt of revelation.”²⁰

In this light, we must do all in our power to encourage scripture study beyond the walls of a classroom. Of course we should reinforce

that studying the scriptures in a religion class or at church is a good thing. But it must be clear to our students that it is even better to seek personal revelation through private scripture study. One student made this point succinctly when she shared the following experience. While attending an institute class, which she very much enjoyed, a peer suggested to her, “If you just go to institute and don’t study your scriptures, you are lazy and want others to do the work for you.” Her friend was right. The faith-inspired act of personal scripture study is key to continual and deepening conversion.

Treasure the word of God through memorization. Personal revelation is preceded by thoughtful contemplation (see D&C 138:1–11). Students can practice pondering the word of God by memorizing scriptural passages and “inspired one-liners which will be remembered and retained”²¹ for continued edification. Students who have paid the price to memorize the words of scripture can have the truths embodied in those references brought to their remembrance by the Holy Ghost precisely when they are most needed. As one student noted, “I can read this scripture in my head and feel comforted.”

Write a ponder paper. Inspired writing requires reflecting, pondering, analyzing, organizing, and articulating thoughts and feelings of heaven-sent impressions. It is an act of discipleship that does not require the skills of scholarship. The action and effort writing requires have the potential to focus the mind on spiritual things and thereby open the way for further revelation. Thus, as students articulate principles of truth and associated feelings in a coherent manner, they are more apt to see the hand of the Lord in their lives.

This particular act of faith can have a significant impact on timid students. When a paper is shared with a trusted teacher, it provides to the socially apprehensive soul a low-key and nonthreatening avenue to express their understanding and share their testimony. A teacher, in turn, can provide much-needed encouragement and reinforcement of a student’s faith. One young woman, who specifically requested that she not be called upon in class, shared with me a thoughtful ponder paper near the end of the fall semester. This began a conversation between teacher and student, which in the winter semester provided her the confidence to raise her hand in class and publicly share what she privately knew.

Receive promptings with real intent. In all our discussion about faith-inspired actions, perhaps the notion of receiving promptings with real intent is paramount. Exercising faith in order to receive a prompting is a necessary part of conversion, but it is not sufficient. When an impression

or prompting is received, there must be a corollary action. Nephi taught that when the Holy Ghost shows us the “things what ye should do,” then it is incumbent upon us to do them (2 Nephi 32:5). Hence, if we seek truth with real intent, then we must be willing to act according to the demands of that truth when it is confirmed to our soul.

Students who receive impressions learn the will of the Lord, and when they act on those impressions and do his will, they are “irresistibly [drawn] close to the Spirit.”²² In words that verify the power of acting, a student wrote: “The whole semester was a huge testimony builder of how important it is to act on promptings. Having faith that the Holy Ghost will be with me when I act on those things is when I gained the evidence of things I desired and continued the cycle of me having faith, learning, and feeling the Spirit.” In words that resonate with conversion, this same student observed: “Acting on promptings has built me up, gotten me to higher ground. . . . Along with acting on promptings and feelings, I have gained a better understanding and stronger testimony of the importance of allowing my will to become the same as his.”

Conclusion

There is no presumption in this paper that the above faith-inspired actions are original or exhaustive, only that they are in harmony with gospel principles that foster personal conversion. Because these actions are principle based, they are not exclusive to a particular teaching style or setting. Whether a teacher has two hundred students in a lecture hall, twelve students around a table in a small classroom, or is visiting with one student in a hallway, in each setting a teacher can encourage his or her students to receive instruction from the Holy Ghost by acting in faith.

Considering the converting power of an action-oriented faith, it may be wise for us to specifically ask the following question during our preparation time: “What faith-inspired actions can my students practice today so they can open their hearts to the influence of the Holy Ghost?” And, yes, the keyword here is *practice*. Athletes and musicians know that practice is indispensable to performance. Great athletic feats and sublime musical performances are not merely a matter of talent but arise out of the sweat of hard work and consistent practice. During practice, individuals can master specific skills so that during a game or a concert, performance is proficient and effective. The principle of practice applies to spiritual matters. Students who regularly employ and practice faith-inspired actions will, in time, come to interact with

the Holy Ghost in a proficient and effective manner and thereby be on the path of true conversion. **RE**

Appendix: Teaching Emphasis for Seminaries and Institutes of Religion

Teaching Emphasis for Seminaries and Institutes of Religion

Our objective indicates that we have a significant responsibility in strengthening the youth of the Church and inviting them to come unto Christ. Preparing students for missionary service and temple ordinances has always been a focus in Church education.

By implementing the following emphases and adjustments, we will more directly prepare young people for effective missionary service, to receive the ordinances of the temple, and to exemplify and teach gospel principles throughout their lives. This will also help deepen their faith, testimony, and conversion.

- We are to learn and teach by the Spirit. We are to encourage students to learn and teach by the Spirit.
- We are to emphasize the importance of reading the scripture text for each scripture course of study. We are to help students develop a habit of daily scripture study.
- We are to help students understand the scriptures and the words of the prophets, identify and understand the doctrines and principles found therein, and apply them in their lives in ways that lead to personal conversion.
- We are to help students learn to explain, share, and testify of the doctrines and principles of the restored gospel. We are to give them opportunities to do so with each other in class. We are to encourage them to do so outside of class with family and others.
- We are to emphasize the mastery of key scriptural passages and help students understand and explain the doctrines and principles contained in those passages.

In seminary this means we will emphasize scripture mastery so that students better understand the doctrines and principles in the one hundred scripture mastery passages and are encouraged to memorize those passages.

In institute this means we will build upon the foundation of the one hundred scripture mastery passages and foster a depth of understanding of other key passages of scripture, with encouragement to memorize such passages.

- We are to help students identify, understand, believe, explain, and apply basic doctrines and principles. These include the Godhead; the plan of salvation; the Creation and the Fall; the Atonement of Jesus Christ; dispensations, apostasy, and the Restoration; prophets; priesthood; the first principles and ordinances; covenants and ordinances; and commandments.

Notes

1. Henry B. Eyring, “We Must Raise Our Sights” (address at CES conference on the Book of Mormon, Brigham Young University, August 14, 2001), 1–2; emphasis added.

2. Dallin H. Oaks, in Conference Report, October 2000, 40; or *Ensign*, November 2000, 32.

3. David A. Bednar, “Seek Learning by Faith” (an evening with Elder David A. Bednar, February 3, 2006), 3, 5.

4. A. Roger Merrill, in Conference Report, October 2006, 40; or *Ensign*, November 2006, 93.

5. Richard G. Scott, in Conference Report, April 2002, 29; or *Ensign*, May 2002, 26.

6. *Teaching the Gospel: A Handbook for CES Teachers and Leaders* (Church Educational System, 2001), 5.

7. Terryl L. Givens, *By the Hand of Mormon: The American Scripture That Launched a New World Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 217.

8. *Teaching the Gospel: A Handbook for CES Teachers and Leaders*, 5.

9. Eyring, “We Must Raise Our Sights,” 1.

10. Richard G. Scott, “To Understand and Live Truth” (an evening with Elder Richard G. Scott, February 4, 2005), 3.

11. Boyd K. Packer, in Conference Report, October 1994, 78; or *Ensign*, November 1994, 61.

12. D. Todd Christofferson, “A Sense of the Sacred” (CES fireside for young adults, Brigham Young University, November 7, 2004), 1.

13. “First Presidency Preface,” *Hymns* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1985), ix.

14. Boyd K. Packer, “The Candle of the Lord,” *Ensign*, January 1983, 53.

15. *Preach My Gospel* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2004), 185.

16. Henry B. Eyring, “Raising Expectations” (CES satellite training broadcast, August 4, 2004), 2.

17. John W. Welch, “And with All Thy Mind” (devotional address, Brigham Young University, September 30, 2003), 2.

18. Richard G. Scott, “Helping Others to Be Spiritually Led” (CES symposium on the Doctrine and Covenants and Church history, August 11, 1998), 3.

19. Boyd K. Packer, “Conversation with Teachers” (an evening with President Boyd K. Packer, February 29, 2008), 1.

20. Bruce R. McConkie, *Doctrines of the Restoration: Sermons and Writings of Bruce R. McConkie*, ed. Mark L. McConkie (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1989), 243.

21. Neal A. Maxwell, “Teaching by the Spirit—‘The Language of Inspiration’” (CES symposium on the Old Testament, August 15, 1991), 4.

22. Marion G. Romney, “Seek Not to Counsel the Lord,” *Ensign*, August 1985, 2.