



Elder Bruce R. McConkie, his wife Amelia, and son Joseph in Saigon, 1968; at the time Joseph was serving as a chaplain in the U.S. military, and Elder and Sister McConkie were on Church assignment.

Courtesy of Joseph Fielding McConkie.

From Father to Son: Joseph F. McConkie on Gospel Teaching

Interview by Devan Jensen

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The following is an interview the Religious Educator had with Joseph F. McConkie, son of Elder Bruce R. McConkie and author of a biography of his father titled The Bruce R. McConkie Story: Reflections of a Son.

Jensen: Please share with us some of the important lessons you learned from your father that have been helpful to you as a gospel teacher. You have probably been asked this a thousand times, but how did your father study the gospel?

McConkie: If you had been able to direct that question to my father, he probably would have responded, “You don’t really want to know.” Often people ask me that question in the hope that there is some kind of secret I could share with them, a shortcut of some sort. There are no shortcuts where gospel scholarship is concerned. Dad simply paid the price.

Next to his family, he made teaching the gospel the great priority of his life. He knew he could not teach what he did not know, so he paid the price that always goes with true competence. If his understanding of the gospel was matched by few, so was his effort.

Jensen: Did he have a particular system for scripture study?

McConkie: No, he did not believe that scriptural understanding is the result of a particular system of marking scriptures, or whether you studied in the morning or the evening, or whether you went through the scriptures topically or chronologically. What mattered to him was

the spirit of the thing. When it came to studying scriptures, for Dad it was like a bear to honey. The scriptures and gospel were the very air he breathed. The stories have been told of how he would assign himself a topic to speak on and organize the talk and give it to himself as he walked from the family home on the Avenues to his classes at the University of Utah, or how he would do the same thing as he drove to stake conferences. He would just find a time and way to learn something because he wanted to.

Jensen: What was the most important principle your father shared with you about teaching the gospel?

McConkie: The single most important principle that I learned from my father about teaching and studying the gospel was to be true to the revelations of the Restoration. They are the key, he said, by which we unlock the true meaning of all that was taught or revealed to the ancients. I remember as a young teacher asking a curriculum writer why in an Old Testament course they had chosen not to use the scores of revelations in the Doctrine and Covenants that amplified and explained what was going on in the Old Testament. He responded to the effect that he felt each book of scripture should stand independently. My father did not believe that. His position was that without modern revelation, we would not know any more than the sectarian world. The doctrine my father taught me was that the measure of a man's spirituality was to be found in his loyalty to Joseph Smith and the revelations given through him.

I am fully aware of the argument that to interpret the Old or New Testament through the eyes of the Restoration is to read Mormonism into the ancient texts. I am equally aware that to do otherwise is an admission that we are not really converted to the message of the Restoration. The testimony we have been commissioned to bear to all the world is that the gospel in its pristine purity has been restored again to the earth. That is to say that we make no claim to any priesthood, keys, power, authority, or doctrine that has not been given to us by direct revelation. The greater part of the gospel we received from the ancient prophets themselves. These were the men who tutored Joseph Smith and restored the gospel to him.

Christ told those who rejected Him with arguments from the law of Moses that it would be Moses, not Him, who would stand as their accuser at the day of judgment, for Moses taught and testified of Him (see John 5:39–45). The same principle will hold sway in our day. Those using the words of dead prophets to fight the living ones will

find those very prophets as their accusers come the day of judgment. My father believed, and I have come to know that he was right, that there is a spirit and power that comes from being true to the message of the Restoration that can be had in no other way. It is this same key that unlocks the meaning of ancient texts that also unlocks the hearts of those we seek to convert in our labors as missionaries. Repeatedly in the Doctrine and Covenants the Lord tells His missionaries to “declare the things which have been revealed to my servant, Joseph Smith, Jun” (D&C 31:4).

Jensen: Will you share with us a principle that you would not know if Elder McConkie had not been your father.

McConkie: Shortly after joining the religion faculty at Brigham Young University, I was assigned to teach a couple of Book of Mormon classes for returned missionaries. I felt reasonably confident in doing so until we got to 3 Nephi where Christ quotes Micah’s prophecy about a young lion that would “both treadeth down and teareth in pieces” (3 Nephi 20:16). Christ is recorded as having quoted the passage three times, but no direct commentary is appended to it. Were one of my students to ask about the meaning of this passage, I could do no better than say, “I have no idea.”

I took the occasion to visit each of our faculty who regularly taught Book of Mormon to learn how they understood this passage. I received an interesting range of answers, no two of which were the same. I had occasion a few days later to ask the same question of my father. Without a moment’s hesitation he said, “That is a passage that the Lord has not chosen to make clear to us at the present time.”

As one pursues the implications of his answer, an important principle in scriptural study emerges. I call it the doctrine of ambiguity. There is a greater depth and breadth to prophecy and scripture than most of us want to accord it. I have students who argue that the Lord would not deliberately put anything in scripture that He did not want us to understand. I usually respond by asking if they have read Isaiah or the book of Revelation and, if so, if they thought they understood all that was contained in these books. Their objection usually ends at this point.

When we go back and review the messianic prophecies in the Old Testament, we find much that the people of that day could not be expected to understand. For instance, when the Psalm says, “They gave me also gall for my meat; and in my thirst they gave me vinegar to drink” (Psalm 69:21), the meaning is plain to all who have read the Gospels but could hardly be clear to those living a thousand years

before the event described would take place or be recorded by Matthew, Mark, or Luke.

One would have to think that it was not intended that those people living during that period identify this prophecy for what it was, while it would be obvious and plain to all who lived after the event. It would appear such passages are given to confirm the verity of significant events rather than to foreshadow them.

In any event, I went into my Book of Mormon classes more confident and comfortable knowing that I had no obligation to clarify every scriptural text.

Jensen: What kind of expectations did your father have for your family as far as gospel understanding was concerned?

McConkie: He loved the gospel. His children loved him and just naturally followed his example. If we were going to speak up on a matter, he expected us to know what we were talking about. He expected us to stand on our own two feet and not lean on him or his understanding. I remember as a relatively young man taking a position opposite some of my uncles in a gospel discussion at a family reunion. I was confident that Dad agreed with the position I was taking. When I turned to him for support I discovered he had slipped out of the room. I was on my own. Later, I learned he was in the kitchen with my mother. She said, "Aren't you going to go in and help Joseph?" He said, "No, he is doing just fine," which I understood to mean "Let him stand on his own."

Jensen: What kind of formal instruction did he give you?

McConkie: There was not a lot of that, though I suppose the way he prepared me for my mission fits in that category. I went a year earlier than we had expected. As soon as he knew I was going, he came to me and said he wanted me to read the Book of Mormon and then report to him. I read the book and reported. His response was, "Now, read the Book of Mormon and report." I read it again and reported. Again he responded, "Now, I want you to read the Book of Mormon and report." I read it a third time and reported that I had done so. By this time, I was in the mission field. Then he wrote and said, "Now you are ready to begin to begin." Then, in his letters, he began to tutor me not just about the Book of Mormon but in all the standard works, showing how the Book of Mormon unlocked their meaning.

Jensen: What attributes did he have as a teacher that you would most like to emulate?

McConkie: One of the most important lessons I learned from my father is to trust the Spirit. He did that when he spoke and taught. I think of this classic illustration. When my grandfather, Joseph Fielding Smith, passed away, Dad was asked by the First Presidency to be one of the speakers at his funeral. I had just written a short biography on President Smith, so Dad sat down with me and asked if I had any suggestions as to what he ought to say. I reminded him of the events that surrounded Granddad's birth. Each of his father's plural wives wanted their firstborn son to bear his name. Joseph F. Smith felt the right should go to Juliana Lambson, the first of his wives. The others all gave birth to sons while she had not. Juliana, like Hannah of old, went before the Lord and vowed that if the Lord would give her a son to bear his father's name, she in turn would do all in her power to see that he lived worthy of it.

In telling the story to Dad, I told him my only source was one of Granddaddy's younger sisters and that she was eighty-three at the time of our interview. I had just completed a master's degree in history and was worried that historians would not think this a very good source. I sat next to my brother Mark in the Tabernacle at the funeral the next day. I told him I was a little worried about what Dad might say. Mark told me that Dad had told him he was quite aware of my concern, but he said, "What Joseph doesn't understand is that I will know."

Dad spoke with great power that day and, among other things, received a confirmation from the Spirit as he spoke that the story was indeed true. Some other rather remarkable things were also revealed to him at that time. This experience simply reflected countless other occasions when he stood on his feet to speak, wholly dependent on the Spirit for the direction he should take. He was fearless in taking it when it came.

Jensen: Your father seemed to have an unusual confidence about who he was and what he stood for. How do you think he came to that?

McConkie: I asked my father once how he could be so confident in teaching a particular matter when others to whom we look for clear instruction were reluctant to say much. I noted that some with whom I taught would jump on me for saying the same thing, suggesting that I was going beyond the period that ended the sentence. His response was, "If you cannot go beyond the period that ends the sentence, you do not have the Spirit, and if you do not have the Spirit, you have no business teaching in the first place."

Some are uneasy with such an expression, immediately fearing that if we actually give people the license to use the gift of the Holy Ghost,

someone will abuse it or err in judgment. Occasionally, they will. On the other hand, if we have taught people how to properly use that gift, those they are teaching will easily be able to discern the matter. Dad felt that the greater danger lies in the idea that unless we hold a particular office or position, we are without the ability to use the gifts that God has given us. Such a conclusion does not represent the gospel as Bruce McConkie understood and taught it.

My experience also suggests that people whose understanding is grounded in scripture have a confidence about them in teaching not enjoyed by others. I never saw my father assume competence or knowledge that was not his. He would not bluff. Either he was confident that he could speak as one having authority or he remained silent.

He was called to the First Quorum of the Seventy at the age of thirty-three. He had not served as a bishop, a high councilor, or in a stake presidency, yet he was expected to train those holding these offices. In doing so, he refused to step beyond his own experience and knowledge. Rather, he chose to stand on his own ground. He taught what he knew, and that was the gospel.

A few weeks ago a friend from across campus called to thank me for writing the book on my father. He told me that he had had two personal experiences with him. He said one was a stone, the other a fish. The experience he referred to as the stone dealt with a counseling situation he faced as a young bishop. Not knowing what to do, he had sought the help of his stake president. His stake president was also at a loss as to what to do but told him that Elder McConkie would be their conference visitor in a few weeks and he could ask him.

When the opportunity presented itself, he sought the needed counsel only to have my father respond, "Why in the world are you asking me that question? You are the bishop, you know these people, I do not. It is for you to get the answer, not me." My friend was greatly disappointed with such a response.

What my friend referred to as the fish was a priesthood training session in which my father exploited a few Mormon myths posing as sacred cows and suggested that they could be replaced with the kind of practical gospel that people could actually live.

Both experiences are vintage Bruce McConkie. I suggest, however, that in the first instance my friend was given a gem, not a stone, and failed to recognize its true worth. He was being taught the importance of his growing up into the office that was his. What Elder McConkie was doing was expressing his confidence in a young bishop and his confidence that the Lord would give that bishop the direction he needed.

Dad had too much respect for the office of a bishop to suppose that he had any right to replace the bishop and get the inspiration the bishop was entitled to. He was doing exactly what the bishop should have been doing, and that was teaching those involved to stand on their own feet and solve their own problems.

Jensen: When it came to doctrinal matters, your father rarely quoted other people. Why was that?

McConkie: Some years ago, Dad came down and spent a few hours teaching those of us in Religious Education and responded to some of our doctrinal questions. In response to one question, he explained how he went about writing the books in his Messiah series. He said, “When I wrote *The Promised Messiah*, I read the standard works from cover to cover and elicited from them everything I could find that dealt with the first coming of Christ, organized the material, and then wrote the book.”

He then said, “When I wrote *The Millennial Messiah*, what I did was to read the standard works from cover to cover and elicit from them everything I could about the Second Coming of Christ, organize the material, and then write the book.”

I could not help but contrast this with the approach that we as a faculty generally take. I think you could anticipate that the first thing we would do is get a research assistant and assign him or her to collect everything that any of the brethren had to say about the subject. My father would have considered that drinking downstream. He preferred drinking at the fountain head—he had little interest in what others had said about the subject at hand until he had seen what the scriptures say. Then everything else was measured against that standard.

In fact, he said, “I would never quote another man unless I could first square what he said with the scriptures and unless he said what was involved better than I could.”

This often led him to different conclusions than those popularly held in the Church. Yet he was confident in where he stood. As would be expected, he was and still is the source of some criticism, but precious little of it comes from those who are grounded in the scriptures.

Jensen: Behind the pulpit, your father was not a storyteller. Was he more likely to tell stories with the family?

McConkie: Yes, he shared experiences and stories that were both amusing and instructive. He could tell a story as well as anyone; but, in teaching the gospel, he preferred to get to the point and teach the

principles involved. Others could tell the stories. He also was very sensitive about the way stories could improve with each telling. He told me once that in his lifetime he had known only two honest storytellers. One of them was Heber J. Grant. I do not remember who he said the other one was.

In any event, he wanted to be a gospel teacher, not a storyteller. Those who felt to coach him constantly told him that he would be more popular as a speaker if he would tell stories. Privately, he would remind his children that the storytellers would soon be forgotten, whereas the gospel teachers would be quoted for years to come. In my judgment, the passage of years has proven him right.

Jensen: So did he teach you, as his children, to be as independent in their thinking as he was?

McConkie: Yes, he did. As to doctrinal questions that came from his children, he followed the principle enunciated in Doctrine and Covenants 9. He would probe to find out what thought and preparation went into asking the question. He did not want just to be the source of an answer; he wanted us to learn how to get answers. What we got by way of an answer always reflected the effort we had made to obtain it.

I have a distinct recollection of discussing a matter with him and getting some very plain and direct instruction, only to go into the classroom with him and hear someone ask the same question and have him respond that he really did not know how to answer the question. It was quite clear that the answers given in both instances were a measure of the confidence and maturity he sensed in the one asking the question.

In answering my questions, the time came, however, when he said, “Look, Junior, you have the same sources available to you as I do to me. You get your own answers.” From then on, I discussed my conclusions with him but did not seek answers from him.

This experience takes us back to the young bishop who thought he had been given a stone. What I had been given was the confidence that I could find answers, a knowledge of the sources to which I should turn, and the standard by which I could test the verity of my answers. I hope that I can do as well by my own children and those I am privileged to teach. Some may think that a stone, and perhaps it is—a seer stone.

Jensen: For what would your father like to be remembered most?

McConkie: It would have to be his family. He often said, “True greatness is found only in the family.” That is the standard by which he expected to be judged.

Jensen: In your judgment, what was your father's most important contribution in the area of gospel scholarship?

McConkie: It would certainly include his role on the Scriptures Committee that gave us our most recent edition of the standard works. When this committee met, the Church generally was unacquainted with the Joseph Smith Translation [JST]. Many viewed it with suspicion. He played a key role in acquainting the Church with the JST and getting the Saints to trust and use it. With that comes a greater testimony of the Prophet Joseph Smith. The generation we are now teaching has no memory of it being otherwise. They have no idea that there was a time when people were reluctant to use the JST.

As most people are aware, Elder McConkie also wrote the chapter headings for the Bible, the Book of Mormon, and the Pearl of Great Price. What is often missed here is that these headings constitute a commentary, howbeit brief, on each chapter in these books.

His loyalty to the message of the Restoration also found expression in his book *New Witness for the Articles of Faith*. Instead of attempting to give credence to the Articles of Faith by using Bible texts, he gave them a greater credence by sustaining them with revelations given to Joseph Smith. The proof of Joseph Smith's prophetic role is not in what the ancients said but in what he said. There is a spirit and power that attends the message the Lord gave us to take to the world that exceeds our redelivering the message given to prophets of old. He did the same thing in the writing of his Messiah series. Though it is commentary on Old World scripture, its true meaning is unlocked for us by revelations given through Joseph Smith. No one in our dispensation has done more to illustrate how the revelations of the Restoration unlock the past and enhance our understanding of Christ and His ministry than Bruce McConkie.

Jensen: You have just had an experience with cancer. Could you share some of your feelings about what you learned and how it has influenced you.

McConkie: Cancer is a great teacher. It commands your attention and sharpens your views on what is important like few things can. One of the great lessons you learn is how real the faith and prayers of others in your behalf are. You discover that there was never any intent that you make it through this life without the help of others. Everywhere I have gone I have met people—people whom I do not know—who have been praying for me. That has been a very touching thing. It brings the realization of how kind and good people are and how important it

is that I live the way I ought to. We have no realization of how much hurt it would cause if we failed to live the way people expect us to.

Cancer also brings with it citizenship in a new world, one in which you realize how many people have things much tougher than you and how much they are aided by your prayers. You become very sensitive to the suffering of others, and your prayer list becomes a lot longer than it ever was. At the same time, you learn to live within the bounds of your strength. You do what you can and then accept the fact that you have to stop and let others help while you get your strength back.

Jensen: As a final question, what advice would you give to new faculty or instructors?

McConkie: I know of no privilege that matches that of being a teacher, and nothing improves teaching more than an understanding of what you are teaching. There are no teaching methods or classroom gimmicks that can substitute for knowledge of your subject. Let me cite just one example. In recent years, we have heard a lot about being facilitators or discussion leaders; this method has its place, but it is no substitute for teaching. It is not the way Christ taught; it is not the way Joseph Smith taught; it is not the way my father taught; it is not the way anyone of whom we read in the scriptures taught. In my judgment, class discussions should center on how the principles taught can best be applied or how we can help each other better understand them, but it is the role of the teacher to first clearly enunciate those principles. Gospel principles are not negotiable, nor are they to be determined by the class or its most vocal member. The principles should be as clear to the teacher when he or she goes into the classroom as they are when the teacher comes out of it. If you are prepared to teach, the Holy Ghost will be the best source of your methodology. No two classes will be the same any more than two people will be the same. They have different personalities and different needs. For the most part, you will discover how to respond to those differences in the classroom—and not before you get there. This is the miracle of teaching. It belongs to you as a teacher and should not be surrendered to technology, mythology, or a curriculum writer. **RE**