



Eric Paul Rogers interviewing Tom Tyler at his home in Provo, Utah

Photo by Juan Henderson

“I Have Chalk in My Blood!” An Interview with Thomas L. Tyler

Eric Paul Rogers

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After thirty-nine years as a religious educator, Tom Tyler retired from the Church Educational System (CES) in 2002. Brother Tyler’s unique talents as a curriculum designer, teacher, and administrator had a profound impact on countless individuals and upon CES as a whole. Although retired, he is still actively engaged in teaching the gospel of Jesus Christ. I visited with him just prior to his departure for California, where he was to deliver a Know Your Religion lecture in San Luis Obispo. He remarked, “I love to teach. I have chalk in my blood!” Returning to San Luis Obispo is like going home for him. One of his early teaching assignments with CES was at the institute at California Polytechnic State University.

Where did your curriculum experience come from?

My mother and father were always teaching in the Church. They often shared their preparations with us kids. That was my earliest curriculum experience. I worked in curriculum from early on. I had learned printing in high school. I loved printing and graphics. When I went on my mission to Chile, we didn’t have Church distribution centers. Each mission just did its own thing in terms of Sunday School, priesthood, and Relief Society manuals. We also borrowed from other missions. When they created the Chilean Mission in 1961, President A. Delbert Palmer brought me into the office because I had printing experience. I spent almost half of my mission producing

the Church curriculum in Spanish for the mission. That was back when we had approximately two thousand members of the Church in Chile in about fifteen branches.

When I came back from my mission, my brother Lynn was at the Church College of Hawaii. He wanted family around him because he had been away from family for so long. He is ten years older than I am. He sent me a plane ticket to Hawaii. I went over to go to school, but I needed a job. I am one of nine kids, and my parents didn't have the resources to help. The Church College of Hawaii was looking for someone to help in the production of curriculum and graphics for religious education in the Church schools in the Pacific. Those schools had kindergarten through twelfth grade. I was hired, and I worked for two and a half years. I worked with artists and writers and then would get the materials in printed form for use in the Pacific schools. So my first couple of years in curriculum development were spent with the Pacific schools of the Church. My brother Lynn was one of the writers and supervisors of that effort.

I had just graduated with my bachelor's degree from the Church College of Hawaii when the Pacific schools were merged with the Church Educational System as one unified system under Harvey Taylor. Then they brought the whole Pacific operation to the Brigham Young University campus, where there were more resources. I continued to work for them for another eight months, starting my master's degree in the process. I was then drafted in the army.

When I came back two years later, I was married and needed a job to support my family. They were just starting experimental seminary home-study program in 1967. In those early days, Gerald Lund, David Christensen, Arnold Stringham, and Don Jessee were among our writers. I was the graphic artist who worked with all of them. They hired me part time. A month later they came to me and said, "We need you full time." I went to work full time in January 1968 and was in curriculum until 1975. Other than doing my student teaching in order to be hired and spending the eight months in institute in California, I worked entirely on curriculum. I student taught for five weeks at Orem High School. Nylene Allphin was my supervising teacher. Twenty years later I was his mission president! What's that old statement? "Be careful how you treat a deacon, because someday he may be your bishop."

Did you have any previous teaching experience before being hired full time by CES or working on curriculum?

While in the Pacific, I had the chance to teach four credit hours of religion as an undergraduate teaching assistant at the Church College of Hawaii. During my junior and senior years, I was a part time instructor. They treated me just like faculty even though I was still a student. I learned a lot about dealing with people from that experience. There was no difference between us three returned missionary undergraduate students who were teaching the non-Latter-day Saint kids and the rest of the faculty. When Harvey Taylor became the commissioner, he came to get acquainted with the faculty in Hawaii. In anticipation of a meeting with Brother Taylor, the faculty explained that they had these three undergraduate students who were teaching assistants in the religion department. He said, "They are part of the faculty. Please have them come." He treated us with such gentility. There was no status. We were all just a team to bless the kids. That established the set of my sails in how to deal with teachers, faculty, and students. That was a wonderful experience.

About thirty-one years ago, I was working in the CES Curriculum Department at BYU on the lower campus, which is now the Provo City Library. I got a call and they said, "Wally Montague has had a serious operation and will be out of circulation for four, five, or six months. We don't want his program to drop. Can you be down there Monday morning?" Now this was Friday! Marcia was about five months pregnant. She agreed—bless her heart. I left immediately and got

down to Cal Poly that weekend. Marcia put the house up for sale, and I came back two weeks later to move the family. I taught Wally's institute classes at Cal Poly and coordinated seminars all through that area. Eight months later they invited me back to Utah when George Horton was brought into the central office as director of curriculum. He wanted me to work with him because of my previous experience in that area.

You have spent a considerable amount of time in your CES assignments in Latin America. Was your mission experience your first exposure to that part of the world?

No. My stepfather, whom my mother married when I was two and a half, had served his mission in the Spanish-American Mission in south Texas, New Mexico, Arizona, and northern Mexico. I grew up with my dad always telling us stories about Latin America. He loved the Mexican people. He spent the last fifteen years of his life, from about the age of seventy-five to ninety, as an active patriarch in a Spanish-speaking stake, giving most of his blessings in Spanish. So I grew up with a love for the children of Lehi from my dad. To go on a mission to Chile was just frosting on the cake.

Most of my early teaching experience was intercultural. At the Church College of Hawaii, starting my second semester, Lynn McKinley was on sabbatical leave over there. Brother McKinley was a professor of speech and did some part-time religion teaching—masterful teacher, powerful, dynamic speaker—one of my heroes. When he came there and the administration said, “Let’s have a special religion class specifically for all the nonmembers,” there were only about eight hundred in the student body, of which about one hundred were not Latter-day Saints. That first semester, on Tuesday mornings, Brother McKinley would give them a lecture. On Thursday mornings at the same hour, we three returned missionaries would meet with them in small-group discussions. An assessment at the end of that first semester indicated that Brother McKinley was too powerful for them as investigators. But they really loved the small-group discussions. So I spent the next three semesters teaching four credit hours of religion to students at the Church College of Hawaii who were not Latter-day Saints.

In 1964, Trevor Christensen was the seminary coordinator in Hawaii. His son and I were good buddies at the college. Brother Christensen came to me and said, “I need a teacher in the Hau’ula ward near Laie to teach early-morning seminary.” So in my senior year I also taught early-morning seminary. We had about five delightfully friendly Samoan kids who would just smile at me. I could never get them to say anything in class. There were three or four Hawaiian kids who would speak mainly Pidgin English, which I didn’t understand too well. I didn’t know what they were saying much of the time. There were also about three kids who were Asian-Americans. If it hadn’t been for them with their openness and precision in their answers and understanding, I would have gone bonkers. It was an unusual seminary class, but I loved the kids.

Tell us about the historical development and philosophy behind CES curriculum.

When I was working on the home-study pilot project, Ernie Eberhardt was director of curriculum. He was at the tail end of his long and illustrious career. Boy, I tell you, he was a pioneer—just a glorious old warhorse of the kingdom! I loved to just listen to him talk about life and the gospel and kids and teaching. He’s the one that coined the phrase, “Keep a growing edge.” We now have the CES newsletter called *The Coordinator*, but in those earlier years it was called *The Growing Edge*. Ernie was impressed with what our little pilot group was doing with the experimental home-study program. He said that we needed to put that same kind of effort into our regular seminary curriculum.

In the early days of seminary, there were books written by wonderful brethren who had a gift, like Brother Tanner and his Old Testament book. We didn't really use the scriptures that much. They used textbooks like William E. Berrett's *The Restored Church*. Ernie Eberhardt began the movement to get us out of these textbooks and into the scriptures themselves. Don Jessee, Arnold Stringham, and later Richard Sudweeks, Doug Larsen, Jerry Lund, and David Christensen—all young guys in their careers—were on that team that started doing the writing. That's when we went from a textbook approach to more of a content approach centered in the scriptures. We would have lessons on different subjects based on either Church history or New Testament or whatever volume of scripture. The curriculum, as I recall, was largely oriented to the "stand and deliver" method.

The seasoned seminary teachers I knew early in my career, the old warhorses, had learned to love kids and deal with kids. We did not give them much help in methodology and how to appeal to getting kids involved in the learning process, but they did it remarkably out of their own experience and by the Spirit directing them. It was in the late sixties and early seventies when we started to redirect the curriculum into the use of exercises, student workbooks, activities, student involvement, and participation in the process. That was a major move forward.

In 1972 we moved into the Church Office Building. Writers were brought in like Steve Iba, Randy Hall, Stewart Glazier, Cory Bangert, and others. The experience of so many of those brethren in developing curriculum was a foundation stone for them as administrators years later. Those who had had the curriculum experience were very *teaching* oriented; they focused on helping the teacher connect with the student. I have observed, on the other hand, other brethren who had brilliant minds with a great research orientation and ability but were focused more on disseminating information. However, those who had worked in curriculum were more focused on helping students to obtain a testimony, helping them to feel the doctrine that made a difference, not just becoming acquainted with factual information. They focused on what makes a difference in the testimony of a young person.

In about 1980 Jerry Lund, David Christensen, and Jay Jensen had the revelatory experience of sequential scripture teaching—study the scriptures in the order in which the Lord inspired them to be put together and to study the doctrine in context. That was a major move forward. I was fascinated over the years as I watched that develop. **Some teachers have perceived the call to sequential scripture teaching to involve a systematic treatment of every verse of scripture. How do you explain sequential scripture teaching?**

To go verse by verse is almost ludicrous because there is no way to cover all the information in a forty-five minute or an hour-long class period. To illustrate, recently I had a teacher ask me to substitute for him when he was going to be out of town. The lesson was on Isaiah. Only one student showed up for this continuing education adult religion class. She was a bishop's wife. This sister asked me, "How am I to understand Isaiah?" I said, "Let me give you several little keys that I have learned from good teachers on Isaiah. Why don't we use as an example Isaiah 61:1–3 to illustrate these keys?" In the hour and a half we completed only those three verses. By the time we looked at the doctrinal content and the cross-references to passages by other prophets and discussed the Hebrew literary style, we had spent an hour and a half on three verses.

Now there is no way in all of mortality that a teacher in a classroom setting is going to get sequentially through the scriptures going verse by verse. What you do is follow a general sequential pattern. You teach the ideas in the order and context that the prophets talked about them. For example, in chapter 1 of 1 Nephi, Nephi makes some key points that set the stage for

what he says thereafter. In a first period-class, you may hit three of those points, while in the second period you discuss two of the three, but the Spirit says to talk about another one. Sequential scripture teaching suggests that we look at the general flow and the essential ideas in the order and the context in which the prophet was inspired to write them—what is going on before certain verses and what is going on after them. You don't have to get into a whole lot of Alma's early life when you later cover Alma 36. You can say, "Remember back earlier to the end of Mosiah what Alma was doing." Now you have put it in a context. Then you point out to the students, "Now notice from chapter 36 how Alma's feelings affect how he deals with his son, Corianton, in chapters 39–42." That is sequential scripture teaching, but it is not going verse by verse. That is the spirit of sequential scripture teaching as I understand it.

A teacher of the gospel has to be flexible. The Lord says, "If ye receive not the Spirit ye shall not teach" (D&C 42:14). We go around saying if you don't get the Spirit, then you are not going to be able to teach. What the Lord is saying is if you don't *receive* or accept the Spirit He is sending you, you won't have the *ability* to teach, because it is the Spirit who is the teacher. Preparing your heart like Ezra is vital. The law of consecration in ancient Hebrew was described in words of open-handedness, receiving, and giving. The Lord says, "Receive the Holy Ghost." There has to be an openness and a willingness on the part of the teacher to receive what the Lord prompts. An effective teacher of the gospel is not saying, "What are my exciting ideas, and what is my agenda for teaching?" No, I have to receive the Spirit's direction on what to choose out of this certain block of scripture because I can't cover all the detail and information. What is the Spirit instructing me to prepare and to teach to the young people? You pay attention to that. You "receive it," and you write essential ideas down.

Another thing that I have learned from the old warhorses in CES that were effective in the battle is that you never finish your preparation. You don't sit down for an hour in your office and prepare a class. You may study awhile and do some of the mechanical aspects of preparation, but your mind never turns off. You are preparing constantly. While you are driving home, your mind is thinking about a certain block, verse, or passage of scripture. I keep a piece of paper close by because part of the act of receiving, like Elder Richard G. Scott has taught, is to write it down. When you get an impression, write the essence of the idea down. It is an act of showing the Lord we have received it. It also helps us to remember it. That *receiving* is essential.

Many years ago, I lived in Couer d'Alene, Idaho, and supervised CES in three-fourths of the state of Washington. I was driving down to Yakima to visit one of our teachers there. It was a three-and-a-half-hour drive, so I listened to the Old Testament on tape as I drove. I had my scriptures open on the seat next to me as I listened to Isaiah while driving down Interstate 90. When an idea would strike me as I was listening, I would reach over and scribble pencil notes in the margins of my scriptures that would help me remember the insight that came. All of a sudden, there were these red lights flashing behind me! As the policeman looked at my license—there were my scriptures in plain sight. He said, "Our aircraft overhead has noticed that you are weaving and wandering down the highway." I said, "Oh my! I'm a teacher of religion, and I've just been listening to scripture on tape. When an idea strikes me, I've been jotting it down." He laughed and said, "Please drive more carefully," and left.

As you look at these notebooks here in my office, the idea of writing down ideas as you prepare is illustrated. The greatest value that I got out of my college education was learning how to synthesize information, how to think in a logical way, how to analyze and process, how to look at and evaluate references, and how to review literature. That process I went through was far

more valuable than most of the information. By working through an idea and preparing your heart, the inspiration flows and you write it down.

John Lund ignited my interest in Isaiah. Let me show you my study notes from over thirty years of my love affair with Isaiah. I've thought a lot of what my dad said about looking at life through the lens of the gospel. As I have raised my children and inspiration guided me as a father, the Spirit would say, "Write it down." I have hundreds of short articles that I have written to my children of what I have learned in life from the scriptures that has helped me to be a dad and a husband. Take the time to write it down. I know very little about my computer except as a word processor. When I was demoted to administration, I began to collect and write what I was being taught by the Spirit. I have three volumes of insights on what I have learned about leadership. I have ten file drawers full of notes and materials containing spiritual insights into scriptural passages that I was reading. I don't say that to brag or show off; I'm just trying to illustrate that I've learned from experience that writing down the spiritual insights is a critical part of the act of *receiving* inspiration. It makes a big difference.

I'm currently going back through decades of my family and Church correspondence. My boy is coming home from his mission next week, and I have a notebook for him with a copy of all of our correspondence. A couple of years ago I was having some real challenges, and I was very troubled. I was directed by the Spirit to go through some old correspondence and came upon a letter my mother had written to me in 1964 when I was a student at the Church College of Hawaii. Her bearing her testimony about something she had just had an experience with in the scriptures—in the first paragraph of that letter—was just like her talking to me today in my need. The value of writing those things down is immeasurable. It is scripture. Some teachers don't realize that the process is more than just underlining verses or writing a relevant cross-reference. As the impressions flow, write them down, get them organized. A lot of times, like when I was driving to Yakima, I was getting enough of the essence of the idea in some key words to remember it. Then you go back and organize it in a lucid and logical sort of way. I have found what I have written in *that* process is what the Spirit often calls forth when I get in the classroom. At other times it may be something totally different than what I was planning on but usually springboarding from what was written in my notes.

In the early 1960s, a speech professor Preston Gledhill used a saying that I have found very valuable as a teacher. He taught, "When you are preparing a talk, think yourself empty, read yourself full, and then speak yourself clear." For a teacher of the gospel, you think yourself empty. You ask yourself, "What do I already know about this subject? What have I already learned?" Next, you read yourself full. You get into the scriptures, you go to the cross-references, and you may read a few carefully selected reference books. But about extensive reference books, I like what President Marion G. Romney said, "When I study the scriptures I want to go right to the fountain, not downstream where the cows have waded in it." Then you speak yourself clear, or in Elder Scott's terms, you *write* yourself clear. In the process of thinking myself empty, reading myself full, and writing or talking myself clear with family and colleagues, I have filled volumes. I have a great testimony of the value of writing. It's not writing to publish; it's writing so that you are formally receiving what the Lord is giving you and organizing it in your mind.

In 1960 when I went through the old mission home on Main Street in Salt Lake, starting my mission where the Conference Center is now, Elder S. Dilworth Young gave us motley bunch of missionaries a talk about learning and memorizing scripture. He said, "Use all your senses, take that scripture, and watch yourself copy it down on a piece of paper, and you say it out loud as

you are writing it.” There has been great value in that for me. The process helps you get it into your mind and your heart and opens you up for revelation. You find yourself asking, “What does that word mean? What is that phrase trying to tell me?” We don’t just gloss over in casual reading!

Why does this process of gospel learning you have described not have a more prominent place in our training and curriculum?

Many of our teachers encourage students to engage in this process through the use of journals. But there is a phenomenon in the Church that President Boyd K. Packer described years ago when we made the change from ward teaching to home teaching. Ward teaching was a formalized visit with a printed lesson out of Salt Lake. With the change to home teaching came an expanded vision of the role of the home teachers. They outlined principles of caring for the needs of your families and giving them spiritual encouragement. Rather than reading the printed message in two or three minutes and feeling like you’ve done your duty for the month, they taught us to care for families. I remember at the time, President Packer said, “It will take about twenty years for this idea to get into the consciousness of the Saints.” I’ve watched that time frame in the move to sequential scripture teaching. We are now, twenty years later, to the point where sequential scripture teaching is becoming as natural as breathing. Well, perhaps it isn’t natural yet for everyone because there are still those who are hammering verse by verse. But it takes time to learn and implement an idea.

When Elder Jacob de Jager was touring our mission in Texas years ago, we were talking about having to teach and teach and teach and reteach. “Just when you think you’ve got the missionaries ready, they are released. They go home and you have a whole new set of missionaries and it begins all over again.” Elder de Jager told me, “You know that quotation of the Prophet Joseph that we quote all the time about teaching correct principles? That is the *Reader’s Digest* version. The real version, what the Prophet really said, was ‘I teach and I teach and I teach and I teach and I teach, and *finally* they begin to govern themselves.’”

What was the focus of your own formal training in curriculum?

I did my master’s and doctorate in secondary education with an emphasis in curriculum and development. My doctoral dissertation was on the readability of the Book of Mormon course we were producing that year. We used Dale Chall’s formula, which was the preeminent readability formula at that time. There have been some refinements in readability formulas since then, but it gave us an indication of the readability of our materials. Our writers had never had a lot of formal experience in curriculum and readability, but we had good hearts, a little experience, and a humble desire for the Lord’s help. When I did the readability study on the home-study course, we found such crazy aberrations as doctoral-level instructions on how to do a third-grade-level exercise. We went through a little training exercise after that to teach our writers to write to the grade level of the kids—the seventh- to tenth-grade reading level! I also ran the Book of Mormon through the formula, and it came out to seventh- to tenth-grade reading level! I marveled at that. Here is a book written more than two thousand years ago, with Hebrew thought patterns and Egyptian alphabet, translated by a prophet with only a third-grade education. Yet the quotations that we were using in the course from the Prophet Joseph were postdoctoral level. He was brilliant! Yet the Book of Mormon, with that interesting background, came out at the seventh- to tenth-grade reading level. That is the level I had learned editors write to in order to reach the broadest readership in the public. I bore my testimony one day soon after that as to how remarkable that was to me. A sister in our ward who held a master’s degree and was a principal of a junior high school came to me and said, “Your testimony discouraged me.” I replied, “Oh?”

She explained, “I read the Book of Mormon, but I don’t understand it.” That triggered in me a question that has occupied my thoughts over the next twenty-five years. Why didn’t she understand what she was reading in the Book of Mormon?

When I watched good teaching that was having an impact, I was enthralled with trying to understand how the Spirit was working in the teaching process. What was the Spirit’s methodology? What technique is at play? What is the Spirit doing in the way the lesson is being presented that gives it impact? It isn’t just the Spirit bearing witness to the heart but also the Spirit giving you lists, showing relationships of ideas or contrasts. I made a list of over sixty different kinds of things that I observed great teachers doing when the Spirit was working powerfully through their teaching to help students understand. It was powerful to watch how our brethren, who were preparing curriculum, were guided into those kinds of things. Jerry Lund obviously is a master. He has the gift of teaching. I learned a lot from watching him and David Christensen and from my own experiences. That kind of awareness and focus on how to effectively reach out and involve students in the learning process in the atmosphere of the Spirit was a great effort during the eighties.

My dealing with curriculum after the formal schooling and several years in central office curriculum was as a supervisor of teachers in the field. About 1975, I left seminaries and institutes and went to the office of the Presiding Bishopric for two years. Elder Carlos E. Asay had been my early-morning seminary teacher. I idolized him. He came to BYU in the education department and then went to the Church College of Hawaii. He then came back to Salt Lake City as executive secretary to the Presiding Bishopric before being called as a Seventy. He asked me to come to the Presiding Bishopric’s office to be his staff assistant. I worked with them for a couple of years and came back to CES and went out as a coordinator. I learned many things about curriculum watching the Brethren and their concerns about curriculum.

My coordinating assignment was in Couer d’Alene, Idaho. I did that for about a year and a half and then was called to be the area director. I have fought my whole career to be in the classroom, and they kept me relegated to administration. I was area director of the U.S. Northwest area from about 1978 to 1982—in the eastern half of the Northwest area, the eastern half of Washington, northern Idaho, and Oregon. In 1982, I was transferred down to Nevada as the area director. I was there for about one year and then went out to Texas for three years as mission president. I came back from the mission and spent four years as area director in Nevada in the late eighties, and then in February of 1990 Stan [Peterson] asked me to be a zone administrator and absolutely bowled me over.

Describe the events surrounding your assignment as zone administrator and what you learned in that assignment.

I was just trying to keep my nose clean and stay out of the eyes of the administration and not be a problem—kind of “skin my own cat” down there in Nevada. Stan came down and visited the Nevada area. We spent about three days acquainting him with the programs in Nevada. We became good friends. One of my sisters had been in his ward when he was a young bishop in California. A woman in that ward whom Stan was very close to—a new convert—is now my stepmother. My father married her after my mother died about seventeen years ago. Stan and I have had a connection through family as well as a professional association. He just called me up one day in February 1990 and said, “Tom, I’ve discussed your name with President Hinckley. He’s in agreement. We would like you to come up and be one of the zone administrators.” You could have knocked me over with a feather! He said, “Go home and talk it over with Marcia and then call me back.”

It was fascinating to be a zone administrator and work with a group of brethren where our paths had crossed and crisscrossed over the years. I had worked previously with Garry Moore and Bryan Weston. I knew Clarence Schramm quite well from his early days in the system. Bruce Lake had been a long-time friend. I felt such a nurturing, mentoring spirit, where these more experienced brethren, like Stan and Clarence and Bruce, were always reaching out. I felt appreciated. I grew up as a poor city kid. I've often struggled with feelings of inadequacy. Watching these great and humble men as leaders and teachers as they reached out, mentored, loved, and gave opportunities profoundly impacted my life. I have tried to emulate those qualities as I have served in religious education. The old adage "They don't care how much you know until they know how much you care" is true. The first role of a great teacher is to get acquainted with the kids. Get acquainted as an administrator with your teachers. Have dinner with them. I used to think as a young man, "Why did the Savior spend so much time talking with people over the dinner table?" Over the years I found out that sitting down and socializing with somebody and listening to their heart over a meal was one of the Savior's very effective tools of reaching the heart of people.

You have mentioned several principles related to effective gospel *learning*. What makes for effective gospel *teaching*?

I was supervising seminaries up in the Panhandle of Idaho—1977 or 1978. I went into the class of a young married man, Carl Tenney. I had known his father for years. I sat in that early-morning class in Bonners Ferry. He was not an outwardly enthusiastic teacher. It was just kind of matter-of-fact. But the kids were all with him. He had twelve or fifteen in the class. There were no discipline problems. None of the kids were stirring it up and making it difficult for him. He would just make an ordinary statement about truth or something in the scriptures. The kids would turn to the scriptures and mark. Carl would ask a question, and one of the kids would raise a hand and answer. I thought, "Boy, this is remarkable. How does he do this?" If I sat there with Dan Bell's checklist, I wouldn't have checked very many things on this guy for being an effective teacher. But after class every kid had thirty seconds with him on the way out the door. One kid said, "Hey, here's my photography project I'm turning in today." Carl took a minute and looked at it. He gave an interested response and approval to him, "I like this picture here." Every student had a special moment of a few seconds with the teacher. He did that with every one of them. One of them said, "My motorbike isn't working right." Carl replied, "I'll stop by on my way home from work today and look at it." I saw the power of his teaching, because he cared about kids, not in a major, time-consuming way but in a caring way. He was involved with each student as a person. That personal connection tends to get lost when you get classes of fifty, sixty, one hundred, or two hundred people. The Savior seemed to prefer the smaller groups. Even when He came to the Nephites and He had two thousand, He adjusted His schedule to make time for every one of them. That is the foundation of making a difference in a student's life. Show that personal, caring concern, one-on-one, as much as you possibly can.

That combines with the other essential ingredient of an effective religious educator. Let me explain in the words of my father. We called him Papa. When I was a young kid growing up, Papa would say, "Look at life through the lens of the gospel, and you will better understand what is going on in your life." Once when I was a teenager I did a stupid, foolhardy thing. Papa took me out for a ride with him to run an errand. I think he made the errand up just to have some time with me. As we rode along, he told me about a similar experience he had as a teenager. He never told me what he did, but he told me about his father and how his father had dealt with him. Now I was receiving the benefit of my grandfather's caring, gentle concern. Papa taught me what he

had learned from the experience. Then he said something that emblazoned itself on my soul. He said, “Tommy, never forget how you feel right now as you deal with your own children.” I have tried to do that in the classroom. When you talk about doctrine, you don’t just talk about it from your current, wiser, older, more mature, scholarly interest in the scriptures. You look at it through the lens of these kids’ experiences in life. The effective gospel teacher never forgets how he felt when he was that age. He doesn’t teach just from his exhilaration and fascination with information. He looks at the lives of the kids and what they’re experiencing. Then, based upon his own experience, with the Spirit giving that awareness to him, he helps the kids see their own lives through the lens of the gospel.

It isn’t just a matter of disseminating information. Every class is different. Each class has its own “chemistry.” First, remember how you felt when you were that age. Second, help kids to look at their own lives through the lens of the scriptures. For example, the scriptures speak of David and Bathsheba and the law of chastity, but those were two married people. I had a more potent experience as a young man reading about Amnon and Tamar, who were David’s son and daughter by different wives. Amnon tempted and seduced his half-sister. She said, “No such thing should be done in Israel.” That story is more realistic for kids and teenagers than is David and Bathsheba. David and Bathsheba ought to be in Relief Society and Melchizedek Priesthood meeting. You look and select based on those kinds of things.

The other thing that makes all the difference in the world is what Ernie Eberhardt used to say, “Keep a growing edge!” There are two kinds of spirits in the gospel teaching process. One is the spirit of preparation; that’s the spirit of Elias—the spirit that prepares. The Spirit will reveal truth to a teacher who is energetic in his constant eagerness to be in the scriptures and studying and understanding the word of the Lord. There will be a spirit that energizes his own soul and enlivens and broadens his own understanding. This spirit of preparation relates to Ezra. He went to prepare his heart in order to teach the people (see Ezra 7:10). A teacher having that vital, constant fascination—eagerness, hunger to be learning himself—keeps vitality in his ability to teach. But he has to realize that when he steps into the classroom, all those things that prepared his heart may not necessarily be the content that he’s going to give in the class.

I see so many teachers frustrated because they don’t “cover all the material.” You as a teacher, in an hour of prep time, may learn fifteen ideas that just absolutely spark your soul with an excitement to share. When you get in the classroom, the Spirit may reveal two other things that you didn’t see in your preparation. Those are the only two that you may get through in the class. So you learn to walk out of the classroom not feeling frustrated that you didn’t cover the material; but you fed them spiritually that day in that class. You enjoyed the spirit of preparation and the spirit of *presentation*. The Lord says, “It shall be given you in the very hour, yea, in the very moment, what ye shall say” (D&C 100:6). The presentation doesn’t happen very well if the preparation is neglected. That’s what the Lord was telling Hyrum in Doctrine and Covenants section 11. If you don’t have the spirit of *preparation*, then the spirit of presentation is not going to be with you in its strength.

When I was a young teacher, overhead transparencies were the new innovation. That was the hot technology of the early seventies. It swept the country like PowerPoint does today. But I also discovered something. With overhead transparencies, you can get so locked into a content delivery that you forget the kids, and you forget the Spirit. You can have the Spirit guide you in the preparation of a PowerPoint presentation. PowerPoint has its place in certain types of formalized training. Recently I watched a guest professional educator using PowerPoint here in the chapel across the street. It was interesting. But when he left the formal presentation at

scattered moments, here and there, and interacted with the audience, we felt a burst of spirit and vitality. Then he hurried back to his PowerPoint presentation. Transparencies did that for us back then. I learned early that you can forget the student when you get too technologically or methodologically focused on the presentation. Maintaining balance is crucial.

I used to do a lot of Know Your Religion lectures, and I had all my outlines prepared. I would go in with my overheads to facilitate the audience's note taking. I then found that sometimes the Spirit wanted me to teach something differently or to use a different illustration to bless somebody in that particular group. I battled trying to stay true to my outline with teaching what the Spirit was directing me to teach. As I got older I moved away from a lot of technology in teaching. What you need are the scriptures and kids. The scriptures themselves have enough "technology and methodology" to them that you don't need a lot of extraneous things.

I learned a great lesson in this regard. When I was serving as a mission president, I noticed that one of the truly great BYU teachers was coming down on a Know Your Religion lecture tour. I called Mac Palmer at Continuing Ed and asked if I could use the man at some zone conferences. I told Mac, "I'll save you a few travel bucks, and I'll drive him to his locations. We'll have zone conferences in those cities where he is going to be. I would love to have him teach the missionaries." He was one of the foremost authorities on the life of the Prophet Joseph. I had never had a class from him, but I had friends who had. The first two zone conferences bombed. I was stunned! He didn't connect with the missionaries. On the way to the final zone conference, he showed me his old "instant preparation" notebook of all these talk outlines that he had used as a mission president twenty years before. He would flip to something that he thought would be good, and then he would deliver it. His third zone conference had the same mediocrity. I prayed in my heart, "Heavenly Father, this man feels terrible. He knows he hasn't connected. The missionaries were expecting something, and they didn't get it. What can we do?" The impression came immediately. I jumped back up to the pulpit and said, "This man is one of the foremost authorities on the life of the Prophet Joseph Smith in the Church today. Brother, would you come back up here, take all the time you need, and tell these young missionaries how you feel about the Prophet Joseph." That was one of the most touching, powerful experiences of my life. All of a sudden he came alive, because he put his own heart and soul into it.

That was a great lesson for me. You don't get locked into outlines and informational dissemination. You teach from your feelings for the Lord's word. When you do, there is a power that changes lives. The missionaries from the earlier two zone conferences hardly made any reference to our guest having spoken to them in their weekly letter to the mission president. But most of those missionaries at the last zone conference wrote back and said, "Now I understand like never before why we preach Joseph Smith."

Who stands out in your mind as being the kind of teacher you are describing?

I loved Wally Montague because he had that kind of a gift. Ernie Eberhardt did. Leland Anderson would tell us young bucks in summer school, "I've been a farmer long enough to know that you don't back up the wagon and dump the whole load in front of the cows. Don't do that to a seminary student. They're not any different than cows." Lynn McKinley had a tremendous impact on my life because I loved his dynamics. I loved his delivery. I loved how he focused on doctrine. I took a couple of classes from him at BYU as a young student. When he came to the Church College of Hawaii on a sabbatical, I took every class I could from him. In one class there were seven of us: three girls and four returned missionaries. Ray Sasaki was one of those students. He became a CES man in Hawaii and retired recently. Brother McKinley walked one day into class. It was a class on speech criticism—how to evaluate good public

speaking. He put his books aside, and he said, "As I was walking to class, the Spirit whispered to me that this group would have a tremendous influence in building the kingdom of God." He said, "I'm to teach you the three things I have learned that make a difference when you teach and talk in the Church." That was powerful. With his books aside, he said, "Let me give you three keys. Number one, always direct your teaching to the youngest experience level in the group." So when you are in a seminary class you don't talk just to the active kids who come from faithful homes, you talk to the inactive boy sitting over in the corner whose parents are divorced and who doesn't have much background in the gospel. Brother McKinley said, "The others will pick up on it. In sacrament meeting you talk to the children, and the adults will get the message." He also taught us to avoid the use of clichés. He explained, "Clichés deaden the mind. You can teach the same principle, but find a fresh way of saying it. Increase your vocabulary. Learn to use the metaphors of the gospel. They are many." I don't remember if he used this example or not, but it came to me at some point. How many times have you sat through home-teaching motivation talks to get you to get your home teaching done? I remember when I realized that home teachers are mortal ministering angels and the bishop has the keys or directing powers of the ministering of angels. All of a sudden, my function and duty as a home teacher took on a whole different meaning. You don't have to give me a "rah, rah, rah!" to get it done by the end of the month. No, I have a vision now. I see how the Lord views my labor. So Brother McKinley said, "Find fresh ways to say it."

The third piece of counsel he gave us was to teach the doctrine. Brother McKinley said, "Take your message and put it into a doctrinal frame of reference." There are subjects that don't carry the same convincing power of the Spirit as others. I'll give you an example that I have observed. For seven years I supervised Mexico and Central America, the heartland of Father Lehi's children. In the course of doing my work, I saw a lot of evidences, ruins, locations, and places where the events of the Book of Mormon took place. I read some of the academic books that tried to pinpoint archaeology and locations of various things. I remember reading a manuscript of a book on Book of Mormon archaeology that was later published. I was asked to read through it. I had the hardest time getting through it—not that it wasn't interesting; it just didn't carry the Spirit. But when you talk about what happened in a place like that site and the doctrine the Lord taught, there is a power, there is a majesty that touches your soul! I think as religious educators our first and foremost charge is to reinforce and strengthen the testimony of young people by teaching the doctrine. A testimony of the Lord, His love, and His doctrines will allow them to live happy and productive lives.

Another point, I loved my university training because I had responsibility for my learning. I appreciated it when teachers dealt with me as a colearner. But on the other hand, I was subjected, like many students, to an informational overload. Between the time I finished my master's and my doctorate, there had been so many changes in educational fads in those four years that two other fellows and I spent three months boning up on the latest fads and fashions of education in order to be able to pass our written exams. I watched preferred informational things come and go. But I can still see in my mind's eye an undergraduate physics class taught by Richard Ord that I sat in forty years ago. I don't remember much of the content of the course, but I do remember when Brother Ord, teaching us some law relative to our universe, opened his triple combination and said, "Look at what the Lord says about this." That's the one thing I remember from a whole semester because the power of the Spirit drove it into my heart.



Tom Tyler in his office at home explaining the process of gospel learning with study notes in binders in the background. Photo by Eric Paul Rogers.



Tom Tyler explaining to Juan Henderson the process of writing spiritual impressions while studying the scriptures. Photo by Eric Paul Rogers.