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Peter as a Learner and Teacher

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Over a century ago, biblical scholar Phillip Shaff wrote, “Generally speaking, the character of Peter is described with essential harmony in all the Gospels. He appears as an admirable type of the Galilean: well-meaning, confiding, freedom-loving, and courageous, yet changeable, capricious, and eager for novelty.”¹ Indeed, as Markus Bockmuehl points out, “Peter is, after Jesus, the most frequently mentioned individual both in the Gospels and in the New Testament as a whole.”² Peter’s enthusiasm and forward nature can be seen throughout the four Gospels in the manner in which he speaks for the disciples and at times acts impetuously (for example, Matthew 17:24–25). Elder Jeffrey R. Holland praised Peter, saying that after Christ’s ascension, Peter “would preside over the Church of Jesus Christ with dignity and great power, not in spite of his need for divine assistance, but clearly and admittedly because of it. Heavenly guidance and spiritual manifestation would be the marks of his administration.”³

There are many lenses with which one can examine Peter’s life. For example, Matthew J. Grey used the lens of archaeology to examine Peter’s sociocultural environment. While scholarly debate continues with regard

to Peter's background, Grey points out that "first-century Capernaum was a lower to 'middle' class Jewish fishing village. . . . Most of the village's population, it seems, lived at or modestly above subsistence level. Within this environment, it appears that Peter and his brother Andrew were able to support their families, own a courtyard house, and pay their taxes through their work as fishermen . . . but likely enjoyed little additional revenue or affluence."⁴ Such a background no doubt had a significant influence on Peter as a person.

I will focus on Peter as both a learner and a teacher and demonstrate how Peter is an excellent model of one who seeks to learn and a capable educator. Indeed, some biblical commentators have referred to Peter as "the authoritative teacher without peer."⁵ In addition to citing instances from Peter's life, I will discuss modern educational theories, along with inspired counsel from Church leaders, that relate with principles of learning and teaching that Peter illustrates. I acknowledge that there are limitations to this approach, given the relatively small corpus of scriptural information regarding Peter as a learner and teacher. Moreover, the authors of biblical books had different purposes in their writing and thus may have portrayed Peter in distinctive ways.⁶

Peter as a Learner

Observing Peter as a learner can provide multiple suggestions for Latter-day Saints in terms of what they can do to increase their abilities to learn from the Spirit. In this section, I discuss three aspects of Peter's learning that we can implement in our lives today. Peter is a model of a learner who asks questions, learns line upon line, and is willing to try new things.

Learners Ask Questions

Asking questions is an important part of learning. The Prophet Joseph Smith taught, "I have a key by which I understand the Scriptures. I enquire what was the question which drew out the answer or caused Jesus to utter the parable."⁷ Peter initiated a powerful learning opportunity by asking Christ, "How oft shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? till seven times?" (Matthew 18:21). This important question provided an opportunity for Christ to expand Peter's understanding. As Elder James E. Talmage phrases it, Peter "would fain have some definite limit set, and he probably considered the tentative suggestion of seven times as a very liberal measure."⁸ Without this question we might not have the powerful parable of the unmerciful servant.

On another occasion he, along with James, John, and Andrew, were together with Christ, sitting on the Mount of Olives overlooking the temple. On this private occasion they asked Christ, "Tell us, when shall these things be? and what shall be the sign when all these things shall be fulfilled?" (Mark 13:4). The answer to this significant question increased Peter's understanding and brought forth from the Lord substantial teachings regarding the destruction of Jerusalem and signs that would precede the Second Coming.

As another example of Peter's willingness to ask questions, consider the following. After Christ told the rich young ruler to sell all his possessions, Christ said to his disciples, "A rich man shall hardly enter into the kingdom of heaven. . . . It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, than for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of God" (Matthew 19:23–24). While this is a straightforward story with which modern-day readers are familiar, it is important to note, "When his disciples heard it, they were exceedingly amazed" (Matthew 19:25).

Picture Peter, along with others, in a setting where something was being taught that they could not quite understand. Some learners might remain silent, embarrassed that they couldn't comprehend the teaching. However, we read that his disciples asked, "Who then can be saved?" (Matthew 19:25). Christ's answer, "With men this is impossible; but with God all things are possible" (Matthew 19:26) apparently wasn't fully satisfactory to Peter, who went on to ask, "Behold, we have forsaken all, and followed thee; what shall we have therefore?" (Matthew 19:27). While we cannot be certain what happened in this scene, I imagine something similar to what I have often seen in a classroom. A teacher explains a principle, and many students do not comprehend its meaning. However, nobody wants to be the one to voice their lack of understanding. In this instance, I picture Christ teaching a principle, "A rich man shall hardly enter into the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 19:23), leaving many of the disciples feeling confused. Christ perceives their confusion and provides an answer. The disciples remain puzzled, but nobody wants to voice their confusion. Peter, perhaps tentatively or maybe bravely, voices a further question and receives additional learning. In response to Peter's question, the Savior provides important principles regarding judgment (see Matthew 19:28–30). Once again, the result of Peter's question was additional growth and learning.

Scholarly studies in pedagogy indicate that students who generate questions have increased capacity for critical thinking on the subject matter⁹ and

are more likely to perceive that their classroom experiences are relevant to their lives.¹⁰ Researchers have also found that students who ask questions may use otherwise untapped strategies for deeper levels of thinking¹¹ and improve their test scores.¹² In a gospel context, former Relief Society General President Julie B. Beck observed that there is a connection between learners asking questions and their ability to be taught by the Spirit. She said, “The more questions we can get from the learners about something, the more they are engaged in the learning. . . . But that to me is a challenge as a teacher—not so much the questions I am asking but what is happening that is helping other people to ask questions so the Holy Ghost can teach them.”¹³

Learners at all levels can benefit from asking questions. One practical way that this can be done is to ask questions as we engage in scripture study. President Russell M. Nelson declared, “Achieving scriptural guidance is aided by posing pertinent questions.”¹⁴ Similarly, Elder D. Todd Christofferson taught, “I see you sometimes reading a few verses, stopping to ponder them, carefully reading the verses again, and as you think about what they mean, praying for understanding, *asking questions in your mind*, waiting for spiritual impressions, and writing down the impressions and insights that come so you can remember and learn more.”¹⁵ As we ask questions, whether in a classroom setting or in our personal gospel pursuits, we will find greater growth in our learning.

Learners Discover Truth Line upon Line

Often as learners we want to receive a complete answer all at once. But instead, learning frequently occurs “line upon line” (2 Nephi 28:30). An episode from Peter’s life illustrates the unfolding process of learning. One afternoon “Peter went up upon the housetop to pray” (Acts 10:9), and while others were preparing the meal, Peter “fell into a trance” and saw “all manner of fourfooted beasts of the earth, and wild beasts, and creeping things, and fowls of the air. And there came a voice to him, Rise, Peter; kill, and eat. But Peter said, Not so, Lord; for I have never eaten any thing that is common or unclean. And the voice spake unto him again the second time, What God hath cleansed, that call not thou common” (Acts 10:10, 12–15).

Peter did not immediately understand the meaning of this vision (see Acts 10:17). As he was pondering the vision, Cornelius arrived with two companions. “The Spirit said unto [Peter], Behold, three men seek thee. Arise therefore, and get thee down, and go with them, doubting nothing: for I have

sent them” (Acts 10:19–20). Then Peter declares that although it was “an unlawful thing for a man that is a Jew to keep company, or come unto one of another nation; but *God hath shewed me* that I should not call any *man* common or unclean” (Acts 10:28; emphasis added). The phrase “God hath shewed me” indicates Peter’s growing understanding, particularly in that he appears to recognize that his dream was not merely about animals.

After Peter heard the story of Cornelius, the meaning of his dream became evident and he proclaimed “Of a truth I perceive that God is no respecter of persons” (Acts 10:34). In Acts 11, Peter explained to others the meaning of his dream and later bore testimony regarding it at the Jerusalem Council (see Acts 15:7–11). Peter’s ability to teach and testify only came as he had learned line upon line. Ultimately Peter’s revelation had great significance for the early church. As Frank F. Judd Jr. has explained, “The conversion of Cornelius is extremely important. Before this point in the history of the early church, all Christians were either Jews, who were already keeping the law of Moses, or ‘proselytes’—Gentiles who had previously converted to Judaism and were also keeping the law of Moses at the time they became Christians. . . . Cornelius’ conversion was the first time in the early church that an individual who was not already keeping the law of Moses was allowed to be baptized.”¹⁶ It is important to note that even in a matter as vital as Cornelius’s conversion, Peter did not receive all of the information he needed all at once.

In a fashion similar to Peter, learners today can grow in their understanding line upon line. Lev Vygotsky, an influential researcher in educational psychology, proposed the idea of a zone of proximal development. This theory posits that some tasks are too easy for learners and that others are too difficult. The best tasks for increasing learning will be those that push learners to stretch beyond current abilities but not so far that they have no chance of success.¹⁷ Students build their capacity a piece at a time, or line upon line.

As Peter continued to move forward with the knowledge he had, he was able to obtain a greater understanding. Similar instances of line-upon-line institutional change can be found in the modern Church. For example, Elder David B. Haight cited the instance of the development of the primary as one way in which incremental insight led to great change.¹⁸

In addition, the principle of learning line upon line is true when it comes to individual spiritual growth. As President Dieter F. Uchtdorf explained, “Revelation and testimony do not always come with overwhelming force. For many, a testimony comes slowly—a piece at a time. Sometimes it comes so

gradually that it is hard to recall the exact moment we actually knew the gospel was true. The Lord gives us 'line upon line, precept upon precept, here a little and there a little.'¹⁹

Peter's example can provide encouragement for students who worry about doctrines that they cannot currently comprehend. Many questions that seem perplexing at one point in time are resolved on later occasions. Just as Peter's dream was not immediately understood, some issues that cause learners to struggle may need time to be fully resolved; learners can take heart and continue to move forward with the principles they *do* understand. Robert L. Millet, former dean of Religious Education at BYU, explained how he handles such issues, saying, "One thing I have learned through the years is not to become preoccupied with unanswered questions, not to obsess over them, not to allow them to make me spiritually dysfunctional. . . . I have learned to place many items *on the shelf* for the time being to allow time and study and seasoning and maturity either to prepare me for an answer down the road or to prepare me not to receive an answer, perhaps even in this life."²⁰ Just as Peter came to realize the meaning and significance of his dream, so too can modern learners come to understand issues and concepts that had previously brought only confusion.

Learners Are Willing to Try New Things

As learners push on the outer edges of their comfort zones, they will find many opportunities to grow and develop. Peter evidenced a willingness to try new things in a dramatic way when he walked on water. It was a stormy night at sea; Peter's boat was "tossed with waves" (Matthew 14:24). As Christ approached the ship, walking on water, the disciples "were troubled, saying, It is a spirit; and they cried out for fear. But straightway Jesus spake unto them, saying, Be of good cheer; it is I; be not afraid" (Matthew 14:26–27).

Before Christ invited Peter to walk on the water, Peter himself initiated the learning process by stating, "Lord, if it be thou, bid me come unto thee on the water" (Matthew 14:28). It is difficult to know precisely what was transpiring in Peter's mind during this incident. Charles Swift suggested two possibilities: first, perhaps Peter was testing whether the entity on the water truly was Christ (manifesting his confidence that if it were in fact the Savior, Christ could give him the power to walk on the water). The second possibility put forth by Swift is that Peter felt that he could not actually walk on water without the Lord inviting him to do so.²¹

In either case, it may be that a key factor leading to Christ's invitation to "come" (Matthew 14:29) was Peter's willingness to try something new. Had he been fearful and unwilling to get out of the boat, he would have missed a great learning opportunity. This episode from Peter's life can provide encouragement to learners to stretch themselves and try something new. Those who try may fail, but this does not need to be an impediment, metaphorically speaking, to get out of the boat. By taking the opportunity to act and walk on water, Peter learned more than he would have had he stayed safely in the confines of what he already knew. While the scriptural account does not specify, I imagine that Peter was a different person after walking on water. Having done the impossible, he likely had a different perspective on life and his own capabilities. Educational researcher Rosemary Rushmer has pointed out that to develop deeper learning, people need to have "the courage to try new things."²² For example, Georgea Sparks found that those learning how to become better teachers benefited when they were able to move past their current practices and experiment with new techniques.²³

One practical way that some learners can get out of the boat and try something new is by bearing their testimonies. As a new gospel learner steps into the uncharted territory of bearing testimony of truth, they discover the veracity of President Boyd K. Packer's statement, "A testimony is to be *found* in the *bearing* of it! Somewhere in your quest for spiritual knowledge, there is that 'leap of faith,' as the philosophers call it. It is the moment when you have gone to the edge of the light and stepped into the darkness to discover that the way is lighted ahead for just a footstep or two."²⁴

While this episode connects with Peter as a learner, Elder David A. Bednar has also used it as an example to encourage teachers to try new approaches in the classroom. Specifically, Elder Bednar voiced a concern that teachers are sometimes so tied to their lesson plans that they are unwilling to deviate from those outlines and follow an invitation from the Spirit to do something different. Speaking to a worldwide audience of seminary and institute instructors, he said:

May I suggest that if we go into a classroom pretty well confident we know what to say, you're totally unprepared. Now that doesn't mean you just walk in and you're clueless, but you have to jump out of the boat.

Now let me explain what I mean by jumping out of the boat. I don't think, personally, Peter knew he could walk on the water sitting in the boat. It wasn't until the Savior beckoned him. He had his gaze fixed on the Savior, and then he went to

the Savior. And I suspect he may have even been a little surprised to find himself walking on the water. But he didn't know it sitting in the boat.

So for you and for me, as religious educators, you and I have to jump out of the boat. And you and I have to fix our gaze on the Savior. And as we go—and, yes, we have prepared, and, yes, we have treasured up—but in the moment, it will be given us that very portion that is needful. That can be a little scary. And if you're not willing to jump out of the boat, then there cannot come an increased portion of the Holy Ghost—not to help you, but to bless the students so they may learn for themselves.²⁵

In an academic setting, Jane Tompkins described her attempts to radically alter her pedagogy and attempt a fresh way of interacting with students.²⁶ She describes the trepidation she faced in changing her teaching methods, but she also explains the benefits accrued by both the students and herself from this approach. At the heart of her experience was the willingness to get out of the boat and try something new. In addition to the principle of getting out of the boat, teachers can learn many other important lessons from Peter, as described in the following section.

Peter as a Teacher

Peter provides several examples of a powerful teacher in action. Peter used the scriptures in his teaching. He was bold in inviting people to act, and he utilized various gifts of the Spirit to bring people to Christ. He taught others by his example and instructed others to do likewise. I next address each of these principles in turn.

Teachers Use the Scriptures When Teaching

Peter shows a propensity for utilizing the scriptures when teaching others. For example, in response to accusations that the believers in Christ were drunken, he cited scripture: “But this is that which was spoken by the prophet Joel; and it shall come to pass in the last days, saith God, I will pour out of my Spirit upon all flesh: and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams” (Acts 2:16–17; compare Acts 2:17–21; Joel 2:28–32). Peter's discourse in Acts 2 is replete with scripture citations as he refers to multiple psalms (for example, Acts 2:25–28; compare Psalm 16:8–11), using them to testify of Christ and the Resurrection.²⁷ After hearing Peter preach from the scriptures, those present “were pricked in their heart, and said unto Peter and to the rest of the apostles, Men and brethren, what shall we do?” (Acts 2:37). In the following

chapter, Peter refers to Moses's words in order to establish the veracity of Christ's mission (Acts 3:22–23; compare Deuteronomy 18:15–19). Surely it was at least in part Peter's use of scriptures that led to thousands joining the Church after hearing his words (see Acts 2:41; 4:4). This penchant for quoting scripture seems to be part of Peter's vocabulary, and it carries over into his writing as well.

For example, the Apostle Peter encourages the Saints by telling them that they have been “Born again, not of corruptible seed, but of incorruptible, by the word of God, which liveth and abideth for ever. For *all flesh is as grass. . . . The grass withereth, and the flower thereof falleth away: But the word of the Lord endureth for ever*” (1 Peter 1:23–25; emphasis added). Although Peter does not explicitly cite a source, he refers to Isaiah 40:6, 8: “*All flesh is grass. . . . The grass withereth, the flower fadeth: but the word of our God shall stand for ever*” (emphasis added). An overarching message of Isaiah 40 is that God is almighty and will deliver his people. Recognizing the connection between Isaiah 40 and 1 Peter 1 adds additional strength and vigor to Peter's words, illustrating that Peter was able to utilize the scriptures so as to encourage those who received his messages.²⁸

Modern religious educators can follow Peter's example by treasuring up the word of God (see Joseph Smith—Matthew 1:37) as they prepare to teach. While there are many teaching aids available to assist in lesson preparation, President Ezra Taft Benson counseled teachers, “Always remember, there is no satisfactory substitute for the scriptures and the words of the living prophets. These should be your original sources.”²⁹ Rob Jones, a trainer of religious educators, wrote that “teachers should be careful that the ‘resource’ materials do not become the ‘source’ of their teaching. Some teachers skim through the scriptures once and then spend most of their time studying the resource materials. This procedure will short-circuit the process of becoming confident and excited about the scriptures.”³⁰ Joseph F. McConkie had similar advice for those desiring to become master teachers. He stated, “Sometimes we feel like we have to improve on the scriptural story because we are afraid it will not be interesting to our students. So we focus on a hair-raising or emotional story in its place. . . . This kind of thing can get in the way of the bearing of a pure testimony. We get in the habit of using a lot of doctrinal substitutes and a lot of faith substitutes. We would be better served if we just spent our major attention and effort on asking, ‘What is this [scripture] saying, where is it taking us, and why?’”³¹ As teachers focus on the scriptures in class, they will foster, as did

Peter, a climate where the Spirit can bear testimony of the truth and provide an opportunity for students to make changes in their lives.

Teachers Invite People to Act

President Thomas S. Monson taught, “The goal of gospel teaching . . . is not to ‘pour information’ into the minds of class members. . . . The aim is to inspire the individual to think about, feel about, and then do something about living gospel principles.”³² Peter provides an example of one who was willing to boldly invite others to make changes in their lives. After preaching on the day of Pentecost, he invited listeners, “Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins” (Acts 2:38). This invitation was accepted by many; we read that “they that gladly received his word were baptized: and the same day there were added unto them about three thousand souls” (Acts 2:41). What would have happened had Peter not extended an invitation to act? We cannot be certain; however, I suspect that significantly fewer people would have acted.

On another occasion, Peter healed a man outside the temple, causing many people to gather in amazement at Solomon’s porch. As Peter preached, he invited those present, “Repent . . . and be converted, that your sins may be blotted out” (Acts 3:19). Although Peter’s message was interrupted by “the priests, and the captain of the temple, and the Sadducees” (Acts 4:1), Peter’s invitation to act was accepted. We read that although Peter was cast into prison, “many of them which heard the word believed; and the number of the men was about five thousand” (4:4). His writings are full of invitations to act, such as “Be ye holy in all manner of conversation” (1 Peter 1:15) and “I beseech you as strangers and pilgrims, abstain from fleshly lusts, which war against the soul” (1 Peter 2:11).

Inviting people to act is crucial role of religious educators. *Preach My Gospel* states, “Rarely, if ever, should you talk to people or teach them without extending an invitation to do something that will strengthen their faith in Christ. . . . People will not likely change unless they are invited to do so.”³³

Elder David A. Bednar similarly emphasized the important of issuing invitations:

We put way too much importance on what we say. We think that by telling people things that somehow that will connect and get inside. My observation is that the role of a parent [teacher] includes talking and telling, but it extends beyond that to inviting a child [student] to act in accordance with truth. And only when the



The more questions we can get from the learners about something, the more they are engaged in the learning.

child [student] acts in accordance with the truth that has been explained or taught can the child [student] come to know for himself or herself the truthfulness of what they have heard and what they are doing. . . . It's only when in that process of communicating, loving, and working with a child [student] you help them act in accordance with truth that they get it for themselves. It moves from their head to their heart.³⁴

In a *Religious Educator* article published in 2011, two seminary teachers explained how they had initiated a process of regularly issuing invitations to their students and following up to see whether or not the students had acted on these invitations. In a survey taken by 203 students, the authors found “eighty-six percent of these students said that receiving and reporting on these invitations helped them act on what they learned more than they normally would have.”³⁵

Similarly, Gregory Loving taught world religions classes in which he gave students activities to complete so that they could implement the newly acquired information into their lives. He said that giving the students these activities helped them to appreciate and understand the diversity of different religions. After the students completed the activities, they discussed them and what they learned. Loving said that as students did these activities, they reported that their actions had started to change the kind of person they were becoming: “Students learn what it is like to be subject to an external discipline and in their words ‘live consciously’ instead of merely going through life not thinking about what they do and why. They are often profoundly affected by their recognition of the selfishness and materialism of contemporary culture. They report a new openness and appreciation for diverse religious practices that might first strike them as strange or threatening.”³⁶

Peter directly invited learners to act as a result of his message, and thousands of individuals accepted his invitation. As teachers likewise invite those they teach to make changes in their lives, they provide their students with the opportunity to deepen their conversion.

Teachers Employ the Gifts of the Spirit

Spiritual gifts are vital for religious educators. After quoting from Moroni regarding gifts of the Spirit that enable us to teach, President Henry B. Eyring exhorted, “You have been given those gifts. I pray that you will claim them. You can and you must to be faithful to your trust.”³⁷ Peter was a teacher who was able to utilize several spiritual gifts in his teaching. He spoke in tongues (see Acts 2:4), healed the sick (see Acts 3:6–7; 9:40), and exercised the gift of

discernment (see Acts 8:23). Discernment is an important spiritual gift for teachers to obtain in order to ascertain and meet the needs of their students. Consider the following teaching situation in which Peter used discernment in a teaching setting.

After Philip “went down to the city of Samaria, and preached Christ unto them” (Acts 8:5), many people believed in his words and were baptized, including a man named Simon, who had earlier “in the same city used sorcery, and bewitched the people of Samaria” (Acts 8:9). When Church leaders in Jerusalem learned of the Samaritan converts, Peter and John went to give them the gift of the Holy Ghost. “When Simon saw that through laying on of the apostles’ hands the Holy Ghost was given, he offered them money, saying, Give me also this power, that on whomsoever I lay hands, he may receive the Holy Ghost” (8:18–19). Peter responded to Simon by saying, “Thy money perish with thee, because thou hast thought that the gift of God may be purchased with money. Thou hast neither part nor lot in this matter: for thy heart is not right in the sight of God. Repent therefore of this thy wickedness, and pray God, if perhaps the thought of thine heart may be forgiven thee” (8:20–22).

Peter’s response might seem unreasonably stern. However, the gift of discernment allowed Peter to see that Simon’s heart was not right. He told Simon, “I perceive that thou art in the gall of bitterness, and in the bond of iniquity” (Acts 8:23). Peter’s ability to discern Simon’s thoughts allowed him to respond appropriately in this situation. Moreover, his words may have prompted Simon to make changes in his life; the final words we read from Simon are, “Pray ye to the Lord for me, that none of these things which ye have spoken come upon me” (Acts 8:24). These words perhaps indicated a desire on Simon’s part to repent. Had Peter not clearly discerned Simon’s needs, he might have neglected a rebuke and therefore an opportunity for Simon to reconsider his motivations.³⁸

Teachers must clearly identify the needs of their students. Gerardo Aladro and Robert Ratner in outlining their philosophy of teaching both mathematics and English courses listed identifying student needs as the first priority of a teacher.³⁹ In teaching subjects such as mathematics, identifying student needs may be relatively easy; diagnostic tests can provide information regarding areas in which student comprehension may be lacking. In teaching spiritual matters however, the gift to perceive or discern the thoughts, concerns, and needs of others is vital. In many instances teachers will not clearly

be able to ascertain the specific needs of the students; however, through the gift of discernment, needed inspiration can be provided. This spiritual gift is one that can be obtained by every teacher. President George Q. Cannon wrote, “One of the gifts of the Gospel which the Lord has promised to those who enter into covenant with Him is the gift of discerning of spirits—a gift which is not much thought of by many and probably seldom prayed for; yet it is a gift that is of exceeding value and one that should be enjoyed by every Latter-day Saint.”⁴⁰

Writing to religious educators regarding the gift of discernment, Peter Rawlins stated that we need to “maintain a heightened awareness of those around us. We are alert to others’ needs and are sensitive of their feelings. We develop a kind of peripheral vision, the ability to see what is outside the central area of focus. We prayerfully cultivate the special spiritual gift of discernment, increasing our capacity to recognize by the power of the Spirit the longings and desires in another person’s heart.”⁴¹

Teach by Example

Peter taught by example, providing a courageous model of one who boldly defended the work of the Lord. Consider just one example. Peter and John were arrested for preaching that through Jesus came the resurrection of the dead (see Acts 4:2). After spending the night in prison, Peter and John were brought before an assembly of “rulers, and elders, and scribes, . . . [including] Annas the high priest” (Acts 4:5–6). As “unlearned and ignorant men” (Acts 4:13), Peter and John might have felt intimidated in an environment dominated by religious scholars. This council of learned men threatened them and “commanded them not to speak at all nor teach in the name of Jesus” (Acts 4:18).

Nevertheless, Peter and other Apostles continued to preach and heal causing the high priests and his associates to be “filled with indignation” (Acts 5:17). Peter and his fellow laborers were arrested and put “in the common prison” (Acts 5:18). After being delivered by an angel, Peter and the other Apostles returned to the temple and taught the people who were there. When the chief priests learned of this, they sent again for Peter and the other Apostles to be arrested.

On trial again, Peter was asked, “Did not we straitly command you that ye should not teach in his name?” (Acts 5:28). In response, Peter boldly declared, “We ought to obey God rather than men” (Acts 5:29). This striking

statement is made all the more powerful because Peter *lived* it. Peter taught not only by his words but also by example that it is more important to obey God than man. Had Peter’s actions not matched his words, many followers of Christ likely would have been disheartened.

Peter’s example included standing up to fellow believers. After Peter’s interaction with the Gentile Cornelius and his household (Acts 10), Jewish Christians “contended with” Peter (Acts 11:2). Rather than back down, Peter explained and then testified of the revelation he had received (Acts 11:4–18). The result of his testimony was that the Jewish Christians “held their peace, and glorified God, saying, Then hath God also to the Gentiles granted repentance unto life” (Acts 11:18).

Not only did Peter provide a good example to the early Saints, he also encouraged *them* to set an example for others. He wrote, “The elders which are among you I exhort, . . . Feed the flock of God which is among you, taking the oversight thereof, not by constraint, but willingly; not for filthy lucre, but of a ready mind; neither as being lords over God’s heritage, but being ensamples to the flock” (1 Peter 5:1–3).

Indeed, one of the most important ways teachers communicate is by the examples they set—by the type of people they are. Mary E. Hess, former president of the Religious Education Association, wrote, “Authentic personhood is more appropriately evident in theological contexts when teachers use autobiographical examples to illustrate concepts and theories they are trying to explain, when they talk about ways they apply specific skills and insights taught in the classroom to their work outside, and when they share stories of how they dealt with the same fears and struggles that their students are currently facing as they struggle with new learning.”⁴² Similarly, J. Mark Halstead, an educational philosophy professor, expressed the importance of this idea: “Many [students] also observe their teachers, think about what sort of people their teachers are and make judgments about them, and thus may end up being influenced by their values and attitudes, even if the process is not conscious on the part of students or intentional on the part of teachers.”⁴³

While it is perhaps a simple concept, I love the message recorded by an anonymous writer:

No written word, no oral plea
Can teach our youth what they should be.
Nor all the books on all the shelves,
It’s what the teachers are themselves.⁴⁴

Connected with teaching by example is a pedagogical principle known in education writing as the “Peter Effect,” based on the account of Peter being asked for money by a beggar in Acts 3. Peter’s response to the beggar was “Silver and gold have I none; but such as I have give I thee” (Acts 3:6). The Peter Effect refers to the fact that people cannot give what they do not possess and has been used to illustrate a variety of principles, such as that teachers who do not love reading may struggle to impart a love of reading to their students.⁴⁵ Whether they consciously intend to or not, teachers always teach by example, and cannot effectively help students become something they are not. President Gordon B. Hinckley put it cogently when he said to religious educators, “Your example will count for more than all of your words concerning Church history and doctrine. Let them see in you the sweet fruits of a life well lived after the pattern of the Lord. Let your marriage be strong and solid and sweet and ennobling. Let your parenthood be an example of what they wish to be in their own parenting.”⁴⁶

Conclusion

Peter is a towering figure of strength in the New Testament. There are many areas in which Peter can be praised; in this essay I have focused on Peter as a model learner and teacher. He provides a shining example of an exuberant learner who asks questions, discovers truth line upon line, and is willing to try new things. Peter was also a model educator. He used the scriptures in his teaching, boldly invited people to act, and employed gifts of the Spirit to bring people to Christ. He led by his example, providing a path for modern religious educators to follow. In 1 Peter 1:10, he spoke of “prophets [that] have inquired and searched diligently,” providing a model for modern-day learners. He also encouraged his readers to be the kind of teachers who are “ready always to give an answer to every man that asketh you” (1 Peter 3:15). Peter walked these paths, as both a learner and a teacher. As we emulate his actions, we also will “grow in grace, and in the knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ” (2 Peter 3:18). **RE**

Notes

1. Philip Schaff, “Peter,” *New Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge*, vol. 8, *Morality-Petersen* (Grand Rapids, MI: Christian Classics Ethereal Library, 1953), 479.
2. Markus Bockmuehl, *Simon Peter in Scripture and Memory* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2012), 5.

3. Jeffrey R. Holland, “The Lengthening Shadow of Peter,” *Ensign*, September 1975, 33.
4. Matthew J. Grey, “Simon Peter in Capernaum: An Archaeological Survey of the First-Century Village,” in *The Ministry of Peter, the Chief Apostle*, ed. Frank F. Judd Jr., Eric D. Huntsman, and Shon D. Hopkin (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2014), 27–66.
5. W. D. Davies and D. C. Allison Jr., *The Gospel According to Saint Matthew* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1994), 2:639.
6. In this paper, I do not account for these potential differences, acknowledging the possibility that this could alter the analyses herein.
7. JS, History, 1838–1856, vol. D-1 [1 August 1842–1 July 1843], *The Joseph Smith Papers*, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/history-1838-1856-volume-d-1-1-august-1842-1-july-1843/102#source-note>.
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9. Jarene Fluckiger and others, “Formative Feedback: Involving Students as Partners in Assessment to Enhance Learning,” *College Teaching* 58, no. 4 (Fall 2010): 136–40.
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13. Julie B. Beck, in Jeffrey R. Holland, “Teaching and Learning in the Church,” *Ensign*, June 2007, 101.
14. Russell M. Nelson, “Living by Scriptural Guidance,” *Ensign*, November 2000, 18.
15. D. Todd Christofferson, “Becoming Converted,” *Ensign*, May 2004, 11; emphasis added.
16. Frank F. Judd Jr., “The Jerusalem Conference: The First Council of the Christian Church,” *Religious Educator* 12, no. 1 (2011): 61–62.
17. See Lev S. Vygotsky, *Thought and Language* (Cambridge, MA: MIT, 1986).
18. David B. Haight, “The Primary Enriches the Lives of Children,” *Ensign*, May 1978, 24.
19. Dieter F. Uchtdorf, “Your Potential, Your Privilege,” *Ensign*, May 2011, 60.
20. Robert L. Millet, *Holding Fast: Dealing with Doubt in the Latter Days* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2008), 75–76; emphasis in original.
21. Charles Swift, “Three Stories,” in *My Redeemer Lives!*, ed. Richard Neitzel Holzapfel and Kent P. Jackson (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 2011), 136.
22. Rosemary Rushmer, Diane Kelly, Murray Lough, Joyce E. Wilkinson, and Huw T. O. Davies, “Introducing the Learning Practice—II. Becoming a Learning Practice,” *Journal of Evaluation in Clinical Practice* 10, no. 3 (2004): 390.
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25. David A. Bednar, "A Discussion with Elder David A. Bednar" (Seminaries and Institutes of Religion satellite broadcast, 2 August 2011).
26. See Jane Tompkins, "Pedagogy of the Distressed," *College English* 52, no. 6 (1990): 653–60.
27. For additional references to Peter's allusions to Psalms in Acts 2, see Howard Marshall, "Acts," in *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament*, ed. G. K. Beale and D. A. Carson (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007), 538–43.
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29. Ezra Taft Benson, "The Gospel Teacher and His Message" (address to religious educators, 17 September 1976).
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33. *Preach My Gospel* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2004), 196.
34. David A. Bednar and Susan Bednar, *Conversations*, "Episode 1" (MP3 audio file), radio.lds.org/eng/programs/conversations.
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37. Henry B. Eyring, "To Know and to Love God" (address to CES Religious Educators, Salt Lake Tabernacle, 26 February 2010).
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40. *Gospel Truth: Discourses and Writings of President George Q. Cannon*, comp. Jerreld L. Newquist (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1974), 1:198.
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43. J. M. Halstead, "Is Moral Education Working? Extracts from the Diary of a Twenty-first Century Moral Educator," *Journal of Moral Education* 40, no. 3 (2011): 339–47.
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46. Gordon B. Hinckley, "A Challenging Time—a Wonderful Time," in *Teaching Seminary: Preservice Readings, Religion 370, 471, and 475* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2004), 19. This teaching has been echoed by many other Church leaders. For example, see David A. Bednar, "Marriage Is Essential to His Eternal Plan," *Ensign*, June 2006, 82; Dieter F. Uchtdorf, "See the End from the Beginning," *Ensign*, May 2006, 45; Elder Neal A. Maxwell, "Glorify Christ" (address to Church Educational System religious educators, 2 February 2001).