



Most topics cannot be covered completely during a class period or even over the course of a term.

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## *The Myth of Coverage*

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One of the things teachers often say in class is, “We still have a few things left to *cover*” or “Let’s see how much we can *cover* today.” The idea of coverage is ever-present in the classroom and seems often to have a prominent place in the teacher’s lesson preparation. When teachers get together, they often bemoan the lack of time they have to cover all of the necessary material in a given hour or in the term. As one who has not only listened to those conversations but also participated in them, I have recently wondered what we mean by *cover*. Do we mean cover in breadth or in depth? Breadth coverage would be something like trying to touch on all the verses in a chapter. Depth coverage would be to work on a particular verse or passage until it is fully understood and digested by the students. Since teachers generally have large blocks of scripture to deal with in each class session, both of those types of coverage are impossible in the time allotted and cannot reasonably be expected of a teacher or a class. The sooner a teacher lets go of the idea of coverage, the better will be the learning experience for his or her students.

I have on my bookshelf a copy of *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah* by Alfred Edersheim. It is over fifteen hundred pages long. It is a marvelous

book and one may think that, given its length, it adequately covers the life of Jesus Christ. Next to it I have *Jesus the Christ* by James Talmage, which is about eight hundred pages long. Nearby is *The Life of Christ* by Frederic Farrar with over seven hundred pages, followed by Bruce R. McConkie's *Messiah* series, which is six volumes and around three thousand pages. Add to that the first volume of Elder McConkie's *Doctrinal New Testament Commentary* at almost eight hundred pages, and I have a total of over sixty-seven hundred pages written on the life of Jesus Christ. Does any one of those works adequately cover the life of Christ? Taken together, do they cover it sufficiently? Who is to say that sometime in the future another volume or series will not be written that sheds even more light on his life? In fact, Elder McConkie said that in the millennial day we will learn "a thousand times more about the earthly ministry of the Lord Jesus than we now know."<sup>1</sup>

Here is another example. In 1994, Deseret Book published a volume entitled *The Allegory of the Olive Tree: The Olive, the Bible, and Jacob 5*. It is a collection of twenty-one scholarly essays about olive culture in the Middle East and how it is directly tied to Jacob 5 in the Book of Mormon. It is over five hundred pages long, meaning this book, which is devoted to explaining one chapter of the Book of Mormon, is almost as long as the entire Book of Mormon. There is that much information about and insights into just one chapter of this sacred volume. Can we say that, because of the publication of that book, the fifth chapter of Jacob is now covered? Probably not. Coverage in depth is an illusion. There seems to be a desire among teachers to be able to say "we covered" that topic today, but when I teach Jacob 5, I use one fifty-minute period to do it, as do most of my colleagues. That chapter cannot be covered in depth in that period of time or in ten such periods of time because there is simply too much there.

Likewise, the idea of coverage in breadth is not realistic. We do not have the time or the stamina to move from verse to verse, probing all of the possible implications and interpretations of each.

So what can we do in a class period or over the course of a term that will help students to understand and learn? If we acknowledge that we cannot really cover everything, what can we do? Here are three ideas, followed by some explanations:

1. We can fully accept the idea that the Holy Ghost is the real teacher for all of us in the classroom and that our teaching and student learning

happens by and with the Holy Ghost. Once we really believe that, we will be free from the idea that all aspects of student learning rests on our shoulders. It will dissolve the need to cover everything because we will willingly acknowledge that only the Holy Ghost can cover what is necessary.

2. After we have accepted the Holy Ghost as the real teacher, we can address doctrines and principles rather than ineffectively trying to cover them.
3. When we are no longer focused on trying to cover everything, we can give more studied focus to what happens at the end of class—the outcomes—rather than how much we are able to pour on at the beginning of the lesson.

### Accepting the Holy Ghost as the Teacher

From page 12 of the *Teaching the Gospel* handbook, we read: "Teaching by the Spirit is defined as taking place when the Holy Ghost is performing his role or functions with the teacher, with the student, or both. This can happen during lesson preparation and lesson presentation. It can happen as teachers interact with students outside of class, or even while teachers are just thinking how best to help their students. In some cases, the Spirit may touch a student's mind or heart long after class is over."<sup>2</sup> The role of the Holy Ghost is broad and expansive and includes such things as

- Showing a person what to do (see 2 Nephi 32:5)
- Testifying of gospel principles (see John 15:26)
- Bringing things back to our remembrance (see John 14:26)
- Carrying truth to our hearts and softening our hearts (see 2 Nephi 33:1; 1 Nephi 2:16)
- Edifying both the student and the teacher (see D&C 50:22–23)

The above list is only a small sampling of what the Holy Ghost can and will do. He locks the truth into our hearts and minds. Long after the stories and examples from the teacher have faded from the memory of the student, the pure testimony, confirmed by the Holy Ghost, will still vibrate within the heart and the mind.

In 1953 Elder Harold B. Lee taught: "And the greatest thrill that our teachers can give each of our youth is the thrill that comes when the Spirit

of the Almighty comes into his soul and whispers that testimony—when he knows that God lives and that this is the Church of the kingdom of God. That is the greatest of all the thrills.”<sup>3</sup> The Holy Ghost is eager to do that. We should provide the opportunity for Him to whisper testimony in and around our classrooms and that often means that we need to step back and say less. We need to worry less about covering what we have planned to cover. However, getting out of the way does not allow us to become lax in our preparations or in our classroom presence.

Elder Neal A. Maxwell said, “When we speak about teaching by the Spirit, it is not about a mystical process. Teaching does not remove responsibility from the teacher for prayerful and pondering preparation. Teaching by the Spirit is not the equivalent of going on ‘automatic pilot.’ We still need a carefully worked out flight plan. Studying out something in our own minds involves the Spirit in our preparations as well as in our presentations.”<sup>4</sup> We need to come to class well prepared, with a well-thought-out lesson plan, and then allow the Holy Ghost to direct our informed mind and use our preparations to begin to work on the hearts and minds of the students. When we are committed to doing that, the issue of coverage ceases to be an issue.

### Addressing Doctrines and Principles Rather Than Covering Them

To address something is “to speak to” or “to direct to the attention of” or “to devote the energy or force of oneself.”<sup>5</sup> This seems like a better aim than trying to cover things. We should use our energy to direct our students to the life-changing principles of the gospel. When a block of scripture is in front of us and we picture a classroom full of students with their needs and desires, we realize that we must plan a lesson that meets those needs. Because of our study and experiences, we may feel a desire to speak extensively about certain verses or chapters (coverage), but generally students do not have that same desire or even that need. What do they need? They need the Holy Ghost to fill them, to help them deal with personal concerns and issues in their own life. They need personalized revelation, and much of that comes from the existing canon of scripture, wherein God has already answered many of the questions we ask. They must learn to understand the scriptures to see those answers.

How do we best help them while they are our students? We direct their attention to doctrines and principles found in the scriptures and expound and explain those doctrines. It is as Elder David A. Bednar taught:

When you and I are called to a position and set apart to serve in the Church, our responsibility is not to teach. It is to preach. The word “preach” in our contemporary vocabulary has some negative baggage associated with it. We think of people ranting and raving and pounding the pulpit; that is not it at all. Preaching is explaining and articulating the doctrine of Christ by the power of the Spirit. If you and I, as we are properly set apart, fulfill that responsibility, who then does the teaching? The answer is found in [Doctrine and Covenants 50:14]: “Even the Comforter which was sent forth to teach the truth.” We are taught by the third member of the Godhead, even the Holy Ghost.<sup>6</sup>

If we can devote our energy in class to expounding doctrines and principles in a way that softens the hearts of students and urges them on to further inquiry, then we have set the stage for the Holy Ghost to do the real teaching. We will not need to worry about not covering all of our material, for we will have accomplished what was most important. Useful to this end is another thought from Elder Bednar, as shared by Garry Moore:

Recently I read this insightful comment given by Elder David A. Bednar to Church members in Australia: “The role of a teacher is not just to talk and dispense information. Rather, the role of a teacher is to invite, encourage and entice learners to act in accordance with truth. . . . The very process of formulating a question, raising a hand, asking a question and listening attentively is an expression of faith. This principle of seeking learning by faith invites individualized teaching by the Holy Ghost.”<sup>7</sup>

### More Concern with Outcomes Than Pouring Out Information

The outcome we seek is not to expose our students to all of the facts or information we know; instead, it is to assist in their conversion to the gospel. “What we are being asked to accomplish is not a program based on procedures but an outcome based on eternal principles. Programs and teaching practices are important, but only to the extent that they accomplish the desired outcome, and that outcome is the conversion of our students. Therefore, the challenge and the opportunity that is ours is to identify and implement ways of inviting the Holy Ghost into the learning experience more often and with more power.”<sup>8</sup>

Once we come to understand our real role in the classroom, we are more able to let go of the feeling that the whole learning process is our task alone. The role of the classroom teacher is “to direct the learning experience,” to impose a “logical or progressive order to the presentation,” to “decide what to emphasize and what to summarize,” and to provide appropriate pacing during the teaching hour. “One of the most common mistakes teachers make is

taking too much time on the first part of the lesson and then running out of time and having to rush through the last part.”<sup>9</sup> Being organized, thoughtful, well-planned, and well-paced will invite the Spirit to the learning experience. When the Spirit is there and students and teacher alike allow him to do his job, then real learning takes place. Elder Holland gave this caution about lesson preparation and presentation: “In discussing preparation, may I also encourage you to avoid a temptation that faces almost every teacher in the Church; at least it has certainly been my experience. That is the temptation to cover too much material, the temptation to stuff more into the hour—or more into the students—than they can possibly hold! Remember two things in this regard: first of all, we are teaching people, not subject matter per se; and second, every lesson outline that I have ever seen will inevitably have more in it than we can possibly cover in the allotted time.”<sup>10</sup>

One of the outcomes that should be included as we prepare and then enter the classroom is the chance for the teacher or a student to bring things to a conclusion at the end of class. There should be time for a thoughtful recap of what just happened, what was learned, and why it matters. For example, there could be time given to bear testimonies and an invitation given for all involved to make changes in their life to order it more in accordance with the lessons from that day. In this regard, Elder Holland taught:

I have been painfully disappointed over the years at wonderful lessons, given by loyal, gifted teachers who, somehow, at the end of a class, say, “Well, there is the bell. Brother Jones, would you give the prayer?” And it’s over. There’s no closing of the books, no looking in the eye for just a minute, no settling down to say, in effect, where have we been and where are we going and what does the Lord want us to do? In some cases—I’m being a little unfair and a little extravagant, but to make a point—not a single reference is made to what this lesson was supposed to mean to the student or to the teacher. I’m left to walk away saying, “I wonder how he felt about that. I wonder what she thought about it or what it was supposed to mean to me.” There is so much effort to get some doctrine, some principle, some map, some video clip across to the students, but not a hint of personal testimony about what that doctrine or that principle meant to the teacher, the one who was supposed to lead us and guide us and walk beside us.<sup>11</sup>

## Summary

The use of the words *cover* and *coverage* will probably never disappear from a teacher’s vocabulary, but hopefully some of the negative connotations and unrealistic expectations associated with those words will fade away. So if I am not going to *cover* topics in class, what am I going to do? Consider this

possibility: I will address certain doctrines and principles in the classroom in a way that will engage my students, challenge them to think and ask questions, and stir them up so as to invite the Holy Ghost into their life to help them understand the doctrine and solve the concerns they have. I will prepare and plan in a way that allows the Holy Ghost to lead my informed mind and employ my preparations for the learning of my students. And I will not be bothered if I do not get through everything that I planned or tell all the stories or use all the examples or do all of the activities that I wanted to do. As Elder Richard G. Scott said: “Remember, your highest priority is not to get through all the material if that means that it cannot be properly absorbed. Do what you are able to do with understanding. Determine, according to the individual capabilities and needs of your students, what is of highest priority. If a key principle is understood, internalized, and made part of the students’ guidebooks for life, then the most important objective has been accomplished.”<sup>12</sup> **RE**

## Notes

1. Bruce R. McConkie, *The Millennial Messiah: The Second Coming of the Son of Man* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1982), 676.
2. *Teaching the Gospel: A Handbook for CES Teachers and Leaders* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1994), 12.
3. Harold B. Lee, “The Mission of Church Schools,” address to CES religious educators, August 21, 1953, 5.
4. Neal A. Maxwell, “Teaching by the Spirit—‘The Language of Inspiration,’” CES Symposium on the Old Testament, August 15, 1991, 2.
5. *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*, 4th ed., “address.”
6. David A. Bednar, “Teach Them to Understand,” Ricks College Campus Education Week devotional, June 4, 1998.
7. Garry K. Moore, “Enrolling, Teaching, and Empowering the ‘One,’” Seminaries and Institutes of Religion satellite broadcast, August 5, 2008, 3.
8. Chad H. Webb, “Deepening Conversion,” CES satellite broadcast, August 7, 2007, 1.
9. *Teaching the Gospel: A Handbook for CES Teachers and Leaders*, 22–36.
10. Jeffrey R. Holland, “Worldwide Leadership Training Meeting: Teaching and Learning in the Church,” February 10, 2007, 1.
11. Holland, “Teaching and Learning in the Church,” 1.
12. Richard G. Scott, “To Understand and Live Truth,” address to CES religious educators, February 4, 2005, 2–3.