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The Scriptures

Photo by Roger Tuttle

# Cafeterias or Chef Schools? Getting Students into the Scriptures

*Timothy L. Carver*

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Perhaps Church Educational System teachers are like good mothers. We always want to have a nice hot meal ready for our students when they arrive. But sooner or later a good mom realizes that someday her children will be on their own and will need to know how to cook for themselves.

Leaders of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and of the Church Educational System have long encouraged us not only to provide lessons that are ready to be eaten but also to help our students learn how to cook on their own. President Howard W. Hunter taught:

I strongly encourage you to use the scriptures in your teaching and to do all within your power to help the students use them and become comfortable with them. I would like our young people to have confidence in the scriptures, and I would like you to interpret that phrase two ways.

First, we want the students to have confidence in the strength and truths of the scriptures, confidence that their Heavenly Father is really speaking to them through the scriptures, and confidence that they can turn to the scriptures and find answers to their problems and their prayers. That is one kind of confidence I would hope you give your students, and you can give it to them if you show them daily, hourly, that you trust in the scriptures just that way. Show them that you yourself are confident that the scriptures hold the answers to many—indeed most—of life’s problems. So when you teach, teach from the scriptures.

Obviously another meaning implied in the phrase “confidence in the scriptures” is to teach students the standard works so thoroughly

that they can move through them with confidence, learning the essential scriptures and sermons and texts contained in them. We would hope none of your students would leave your classroom fearful or embarrassed or ashamed that they cannot find the help they need because they do not know the scriptures well enough to locate the proper passages. . . .

We have a great responsibility as religious educators in the Church to make sure our own members, our own young people, do not fall into that unfortunate category of being blinded, of being good, fine, worthy young men and women who are kept from the truths of the scriptures because they do not know where to find those truths and because they do not possess confidence between the covers of their standard works. . . .

Our great task is to ground these students in what *can* go with them through life, to point them toward him who loves them and can guide them where none of us will go. . . . Make certain that when the glamour and charisma of your personality and lectures and classroom environment are gone that they are not left empty-handed to face the world. Give them the gifts that will carry them through when they have to stand alone. When you do this, the entire Church is blessed for generations to come. . . .

We ought to have a Church full of women and men who know the scriptures thoroughly, who cross-reference and mark them, who develop lessons and talks from the Topical Guide, and who have mastered the maps, the Bible Dictionary, and the other helps that are contained in this wonderful set of standard works. There is obviously more there than we can master quickly. . . .

Not in this dispensation, surely not in *any* dispensation, have the scriptures—the enduring, enlightening word of God—been so readily available and so helpfully structured for the use of every man, woman, and child who will search them. The written word of God is in the most readable and accessible form ever provided to lay members in the history of the world. Surely we will be held accountable if we do not read them, and surely you will be held accountable as professional teachers if you do not wholly invest your students in them.<sup>1</sup>

## Four Helpful Scripture Study Skills

There are many scripture study skills that might be discussed. Space will allow only four:

**1. Teach students to read for understanding.** Many times students will skip over words, phrases, or verses they do not understand because they are more focused on getting *done* than they are on getting *understanding*. Encourage students to set an amount of *time* to read instead of a number of *verses* to read, and they will be much more likely

to *search* than to *skim*. President Hunter also stated: “It is better to have a set amount of time to give scriptural study each day than to have a set amount of chapters to read. Sometimes we find that the study of a single verse will occupy the whole time.”<sup>22</sup>

**2. Teach students how to use the scripture helps.** In 1982, Elder Bruce R. McConkie stated that the new Latter-day Saint edition of the scriptures was one of three most significant things that had happened in recent Church history. He then added, “We are somewhat saddened, however, that the generality of the Saints have not yet caught the vision of what our new scriptural publications contain and are not using them as they should. . . .

*“Never since the day of Joseph Smith; never since the translation of the Book of Mormon; never since the receipt of the revelations in the Doctrine and Covenants and the inspired writings in the Pearl of Great Price—never has there been such an opportunity to increase gospel scholarship as has now come to us.”<sup>23</sup>*

These scripture helps include chapter headings, the Joseph Smith Translation, alternate words, and maps.

*Chapter headings.* Prior to attending a Shakespearean play, many people will take the time to read a summary of the plot. Though doing so does not ensure total understanding, it greatly increases comprehension of the story they are about to see. A chapter heading does the same for a chapter of scripture. Teach the students to take a few moments to read the chapter heading.

*The Joseph Smith Translation.* In the confrontation between Moses and Pharaoh, the King James Version tells us that “the Lord hardened the heart of Pharaoh” (Exodus 9:12). At the bottom of the page, we find the Joseph Smith Translation to this verse: “And Pharaoh hardened his heart, and he hearkened not unto them.” Teach students that the term *appendix* in the footnotes refers to a section in the back of the Bible (just before the maps) containing longer additions of the Joseph Smith Translation that would not fit at the bottom of the page.

*Alternate words.* You will also see the following abbreviations in the footnotes:

“HEB” gives an alternate translation from the original Hebrew word. Genesis 6:6 reads: “And it repented the Lord that he had made man on the earth.” At the bottom of the page we find that an alternate Hebrew translation for *repent* is *to be sorry*.

“IE” provides a simple explanation of a difficult word or phrase. In 1 Samuel 17:6, we read that Goliath wore “greaves of brass.” The “IE” footnote at the bottom explains the word *greaves* as *shin armor*.

“OR” gives an alternate word for an archaic English word. For example, 1 Samuel 14:20 states that “there was a very great discomfiture.” The “OR” footnote informs us that *discomfiture* is an archaic word for *panic*.

*Maps.* How far did the Wise Men travel in their journey from Jerusalem to Bethlehem in their search for the Christ child? Your students will probably be surprised to learn that it is only about five miles. Maps are very helpful in visualizing the distances and locations of significant sites and journeys. The campaign of Joshua against the Canaanites, the locations of Gethsemane and Calvary, and the journey of the Saints from Nauvoo to the Salt Lake Valley are just a few examples of information that becomes much more visual with the help of maps.

**3. Teach students to use two dictionaries.** What is a *soothsayer*? What are *frankincense* and *myrrh*? What was Isaiah prophesying when he told disobedient Israel that “ten acres of vineyard shall yield one *bath*, and the seed of an *homer* shall yield an *ephah*” (Isaiah 5:10; emphasis added)? Helpful insights into all these words can be found in the Bible Dictionary. Show the students the value of taking time to look up words they do not understand.

Not all difficult words are found in the Bible Dictionary, however. Another great help is to have a regular dictionary on hand. How often do students come across the words *woe* and *verily* in the scriptures? Do they know what these words mean? Looking up these words in a dictionary will significantly enhance their understanding of this warning from the Lord: “*Verily*, I say unto you, that *woe* shall come unto the inhabitants of the earth if they will not hearken unto my words” (D&C 5:5; emphasis added).

A good dictionary will also offer insights into the meaning of a word by breaking it down into its roots. Isaiah teaches us that Jesus Christ “bare the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors” (Isaiah 53:12). The dictionary shows that the word *intercession* consists of two Latin roots: *inter* (between) + *cedere* (to go). This understanding provides greater insight into why Jesus Christ is called our Intercessor with the Father. Try it with the word *transgressor* and see what you discover.

**4. Teach students how to find doctrines and principles.** Though the terms *doctrine* and *principle* can be used interchangeably, it might be helpful to consider the following simple definitions:

*Doctrine:* “An eternal truth we learn.”

- The Father has a body of flesh and bone.

- There are three degrees of glory.
- Jesus Christ created the earth.

*Principle:* “An eternal truth we live.”

- Repentance
- Prayer
- The Word of Wisdom

What is the value of learning the doctrines? President Boyd K. Packer said: “True doctrine, understood, changes attitudes and behavior. The study of the doctrines of the gospel will improve behavior quicker than a study of behavior will improve behavior. . . . That is why we stress so forcefully the study of the doctrines of the gospel.”<sup>4</sup>

Living the principles always brings forth the blessings attached to them. The Prophet Joseph Smith taught, “There is a law, irrevocably decreed in heaven before the foundations of this world, upon which all blessings are predicated—and when we obtain any blessing from God, it is by obedience to that law upon which it is predicated” (D&C 130:20–21).

President Packer further said of principles: “The Word of Wisdom was ‘given for a principle with promise’ (D&C 89:3). That word *principle* in the revelation is a very important one. A principle is an enduring truth, a law, a rule you can adopt to guide you in making decisions.”<sup>5</sup>

A principle stated with its promised blessing becomes a “principle with promise.” Some examples of principles with promise are:

- True repentance brings a forgiveness of sin.
- Those who endure to the end will be saved.
- Those who live the Word of Wisdom will run and not be weary.

Determining the doctrines and principles within a block of scripture is not a quick skill to learn, but it is a skill well worth the time to develop. Elder Richard G. Scott has said: “As you seek spiritual knowledge, search for principles. Carefully separate them from the detail used to explain them. Principles are concentrated truth, packaged for application to a wide variety of circumstances. . . . It is worth great effort to organize the truth we gather to simple statements of principle.”<sup>6</sup>

Some scriptural writers point out principles with the phrase “thus we see”:

- “And thus we see that by small means the Lord can bring about great things” (1 Nephi 16:29).
- “And thus we see that the devil will not support his children at the last day, but doth speedily drag them down to hell” (Alma 30:60).
- “Thus we may see that the Lord is merciful unto all who will, in the sincerity of their hearts, call upon his holy name” (Helaman 3:27).

Principles are sometimes stated (or implied) in “if . . . then” terms:

- “And *if* it shall so be that they shall believe these things *then* shall the greater things be made manifest unto them” (3 Nephi 26:9; emphasis added).
- “If any man will do his will, he shall know of the doctrine” (John 7:17).

Some scriptures merely imply the “if . . . then” term:

- “And inasmuch as ye shall keep my commandments, ye shall prosper” (1 Nephi 2:20).
- “Behold, he who has repented of his sins, the same is forgiven” (D&C 58:42).

Many doctrines and principles lie quietly hidden within the stories of the scriptures. The story of David and Goliath can be told as an exciting tale of a boy who slew a giant. But the relevance to our lives is lacking unless we find the doctrines and principles that lie beneath the storyline:

- God is more powerful than any man, any armor, or any army. (doctrine)
- We should trust in the arm of God and not in the arm of flesh. (principle)
- Those who trust in God will be supported by God. (principle)
- The Lord will do battle for His people. (doctrine)

The stories, events, revelations, and sermons of the scriptures are filled with doctrines and principles. How unfortunate if our youth see only facts and history.



## Gullible Gulls

President Marion G. Romney, former member of the First Presidency, tells a story from *Reader's Digest* that ties directly to our students' development of scripture skills. Part of it reads as follows:

In our friendly neighbor city of St. Augustine, great flocks of sea gulls are starving amid plenty. Fishing is still good, but the gulls don't know how to fish. For generations they have depended on the shrimp fleet to toss them scraps from the nets. Now the fleet has moved. . . .

The shrimpers had created a Welfare State for the . . . sea gulls. The big birds never bothered to learn how to fish for themselves and they never taught their children to fish. Instead they led their little ones to the shrimp nets.

Now the sea gulls, the fine free birds that almost symbolize liberty itself, are starving to death because they gave in to the "something for nothing" lure! They sacrificed their independence for a handout

We as teachers must avoid the temptation to provide a daily hand-out and concentrate on developing in our students the skills needed to feed themselves from the scriptures. Sharing with students the hope of Church leaders that students acquire these skills will increase their desires to learn how to cook and lessen their disappointment in not always being served a hot meal. **RE**

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## Notes

1. Howard W. Hunter, "Eternal Investments," address to religious educators, Temple Square Assembly Hall, February 10, 1989.
2. Howard W. Hunter, "Reading the Scriptures," *Ensign*, November 1979, 64.
3. Bruce R. McConkie, *Doctrines of the Restoration: Sermons and Writings of Bruce R. McConkie*, ed. Mark L. McConkie (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1989), 236, 239; emphasis in original.
4. Boyd K. Packer, "Little Children," *Ensign*, November 1986, 17.
5. Boyd K. Packer, "The Word of Wisdom: The Principle and the Promises," *Ensign*, May 1996, 17.
6. Richard G. Scott, "Acquiring Spiritual Knowledge," *Ensign*, November 1993, 86.
7. Marion G. Romney, "The Celestial Nature of Self-Reliance," *Ensign*, June 1984, 3.