



Religious Educator: Perspectives on the Restored Gospel

Volume 9 | Number 1

Article 4

4-1-2008

The “How” of Scripture Study

Joseph Fielding McConkie
joseph.mcconkie@yahoo.com

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/re>

BYU ScholarsArchive Citation

McConkie, Joseph F. "The “How” of Scripture Study." *Religious Educator: Perspectives on the Restored Gospel* 9, no. 1 (2008). <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/re/vol9/iss1/4>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in Religious Educator: Perspectives on the Restored Gospel by an authorized editor of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact scholarsarchive@byu.edu, ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu.



**Effective scripture study has everything to do with
the intensity and consistency of our efforts.**

© by Intellectual Reserve, Inc.

The “How” of Scripture Study

Joseph Fielding McConkie

Joseph Fielding McConkie (joseph.mcconkie@yahoo.com) is a professor emeritus of ancient scripture at BYU. This address was given at Campus Education Week, August 2006.

If the heavens were to open today and God were to speak, would you not want to listen to what He had to say? In like manner, were a messenger to come in His stead, would your interest be any the less? If the message were written, would you not want to read it?

A great many faithful people gave their lives so that the word of the Lord as given to His people anciently would be preserved for us. Careful study of this record can only be a source of great blessing to us, while failure to become acquainted with it would be a great loss.

Let Correct Principles, Not Techniques, Direct Our Study

Over the years many of my students and others have come to my office inquiring as to how they might become better students of the scriptures. I have also frequently been asked how men like my father, Elder Bruce R. McConkie, and my grandfather President Joseph Fielding Smith, both of whom had the reputation of being gospel scholars, studied the scriptures. Implicit in such questions is the idea that there is some methodology or secret known to but a few, and that secret gives those who know it a marked advantage in scriptural understanding. Indeed, I will reveal the great and grand secret. It is that there is no secret.

As to my father and my grandfather, their method consisted in not having a method. Methods are not the answer! Effective scriptural study has nothing to do with the marking system you use. It has nothing to do

with the choice of a blue marking pencil over a red one. It has nothing to do with whether you study a particular subject chronologically or topically. It has nothing to do with your using a quad instead of a triple combination. It has nothing to do with the size of the type unless you are getting older.

It has everything to do with the *intensity* and *consistency* with which you study. There are no shortcuts; there are no secrets.

There are, however, basic principles that are fundamental to a correct understanding of scripture. I will present seven such principles. Each brings with it additional light. Together they can increase your scriptural understanding sevenfold and more.

It Takes the Spirit of Revelation to Understand Revelation

The first and most basic principle of scriptural understanding is that revelation given by the Spirit can only be understood with the Spirit.

An acceptance of scripture as such requires a belief in the principle of revelation. It requires a belief that God can and does convey His mind and will to us. Most scripture is written only in the hearts and minds of people. This form of scripture is known as the Light of Christ. It is universal to the children of men and always has the purpose of preparing them to receive greater light. Scripture also embraces all that is spoken under the influence of the Holy Ghost. The Holy Ghost is a revelator. As the third member of the Godhead, His purpose is to teach and testify of the truths of salvation. Thus, the voice of the Holy Ghost is reserved for a higher order of truths than those dispensed through the Light of Christ.

While right to the Light of Christ is universal, revelation from the Holy Ghost requires faith in Christ and compliance with principles of righteousness. Nephi teaches the principle in this language:

I, Nephi, having heard all the words of my father, concerning the things which he saw in a vision, and also the things which he spake by the power of the Holy Ghost, which power he received by faith on the Son of God—and the Son of God was the Messiah who should come—[Note that it was faith in Christ that granted Nephi the right to the companionship of the Holy Ghost.] I, Nephi, was desirous also that I might see, and hear, and know of these things, by the power of the Holy Ghost, which is the gift of God unto all those who diligently seek him, as well in times of old as in the time that he should manifest himself unto the children of men.

For he is the same yesterday, to-day, and forever; and the way is prepared for all men from the foundation of the world, if it so be that they repent and come unto him.

For he that diligently seeketh shall find; and the mysteries of God shall be unfolded unto them, by the power of the Holy Ghost, as well in these times as in times of old, and as well in times of old as in times to come; wherefore, the course of the Lord is one eternal round. (1 Nephi 10:17–19)

Among the countless revelations that have come from the God of heaven some few have found their way into writing. Among their number fewer still have found their way into a collection of such writings that have been preserved for us in book form. One such collection of inspired writings is known to us as the Holy Bible. The word *bible* comes from the Greek *biblia*, which means “the books.” Thus, the Bible is a library of books believed to be sacred or holy.

It is important to note that Catholics, Protestants, and Jews disagree as to which books ought be included in this collection. The Latter-day Saint library of sacred books contains appreciably more scriptural records than is found in the libraries of other faiths. While others cannot agree among themselves as to which books ought be in the Library of Faith—or the Bible, as we call it—they regard our adding to that library as an act of heresy.

We, on the other hand, believe that if we have the same faith the ancients had, we will receive revelation that is immediate to our situation just as they did. The ancients were edified by the revelation given to people who had preceded them, but they were not limited to old revelation. As it was with them, so it is with us. Indeed, this principle is fundamental to our understanding and interpretation of all we read in the canon of scripture. By breaking communication with the heavens—that is, by saying that the library of revelation is closed—we lose not only the opportunity to receive additional revelation but also the key to understand all we possess. Nephi explained the principle in these words:

Yea, wo be unto him that saith: We have received, and we need no more!

And in fine, wo unto all those who tremble, and are angry because of the truth of God! For behold, he that is built upon the rock receiveth it with gladness; and he that is built upon a sandy foundation trembleth lest he shall fall.

Wo be unto him that shall say: We have received the word of God, and we need no more of the word of God, for we have enough!

For behold, thus saith the Lord God: I will give unto the children of men line upon line, precept upon precept, here a little and there a little; and blessed are those who hearken unto my precepts, and lend an ear unto my counsel, for they shall learn wisdom; for unto him

that receiveth I will give more; and *from them that shall say, We have enough, from them shall be taken away even that which they have.*
(2 Nephi 28:27–30; emphasis added)

Never in all the eternities has the Lord revealed that there would be no more revelation. To do so would rob us of the ability to understand the revelation He has already given us. He would hide the evidence of His existence and camouflage gospel truths.

The Bible is a very different book in the hands of someone who rejects the spirit of revelation than in the hands of someone who is open to that spirit. The words are the same, but the vision is entirely different. A book that came by revelation is only revelation to people who have the spirit of revelation.

The spirit you bring to the reading of a book predetermines what you are going to get out of it. The Gospel of Matthew read by one man may be scripture but, when read by another, may not be scripture. They may be in the same room together sharing the same book, and it may be scripture to one and not to the other. The difference is not in what has been written but in the spirit in which it is read. Holy writ read in the spirit of contention is not scripture; it is not the voice of the Lord, and it does not represent His Spirit. It is simply black ink on white paper. If the spirit in which something is read is not right, then the interpretation of what was written cannot be right either.

Let me share two classic scriptural texts that teach this principle. The first comes from a revelation given to teach us how to discern truth and error, good spirits from bad spirits, correct doctrine from false doctrine. As we begin our reading, the Lord, the master teacher, provokes thinking on this matter of discerning spirits with a question:

Wherefore, I the Lord ask you this question—unto what were ye ordained? [Then in response to His own question, the Lord says,]

To preach my gospel by the Spirit, even the Comforter which was sent forth to teach the truth.

And then received ye spirits which ye could not understand, and received them to be of God; and in this are ye justified? . . .

Verily I say unto you, he that is ordained of me and sent forth to preach the word of truth by the Comforter, in the Spirit of truth, doth he preach it by the Spirit of truth or some other way? [Note that the text assumes that what we are teaching is true—that is not the issue—the issue is the Spirit in which it is being taught.]

And if it be by some other way it is not of God.

And again, he that receiveth the word of truth, doth he receive it by the Spirit of truth or some other way?

If it be some other way it is not of God.

Therefore, why is it that ye cannot understand and know, that he that receiveth the word by the Spirit of truth receiveth it as it is preached by the Spirit of truth? (D&C 50:13–21)

Did you see it? The truths of heaven are not the truths of heaven if we attempt to justify them in any manner other than by the spirit of revelation. If we are to be “edified and rejoice together” we must both teach and learn by the spirit of revelation.

As a second illustration of this principle, consider the words of an earlier revelation, a revelation given to the Quorum of the Twelve six years before they were called. Speaking of the Book of Mormon, the Lord says, “These words are not of men nor of man, but of me; wherefore, you shall testify they are of me and not of man; for it is my voice which speaketh them unto you; for they are given by my Spirit unto you, and by my power you can read them one to another; and save it were by my power you could not have them; wherefore, you can testify that you have heard my voice, and know my words” (D&C 18:34–36).

The principle does not confine itself to the Quorum of the Twelve. No gospel principle does. We only have one gospel, and it must apply to all who are honest in heart in like manner. When you or I read or study scripture under the direction of the Lord’s Spirit, we are hearing the voice of the Lord and can so testify. To read scripture without that Spirit is an entirely different matter.

Thus, the first principle of scriptural understanding is that scripture must be understood by the same spirit by which it was written. Without the spirit of revelation, there is no scripture. Some would say this is circular reasoning, and so it is. It takes life to give life. You cannot read in the dark. You cannot see and hear the things of the Spirit without the Spirit. As light cleaves to light, so darkness is the parent of the deeds of darkness.

There Is But One Gospel

Our second principle centers on the eternal nature of the gospel. All gospel principles are absolute; from eternity to eternity they are the same. They were the same in our pre-earth life as they are in this our second estate. They do not change in the world to which our spirits go at death, nor will their weight and measurement be any more or less in the Resurrection. There are no principles of salvation that were not decreed before the foundations of the earth. The Lord declared His house to be a house of order, not a house of confusion. In a revelation

given to the Prophet Joseph Smith, the Lord dramatizes this principle by asking three rhetorical questions. First, “Will I accept of an offering . . . that is not made in my name?” Second, “Will I receive at your hands that which I have not appointed?” And third, “Will I appoint unto you, . . . except it be by law, even as I and my Father ordained unto you, before the world was?” (D&C 132:9–11).

The answer to each of these questions is a resounding no. Their purpose is to dramatize that there is but one gospel, one plan of salvation, one system of authority, and one organization in which legal and lawful administrators can be found. If God’s house is a house of order, it will not be governed by laws of someone else’s making, and it will not honor offerings made to other gods, nor will ordinances performed without its permission or authority be accepted.

I cannot become your heir by reading your journal and learning of the promises your father made to you. In like manner, you cannot be God’s heir by reading the promises He made to people in an earlier day. Your salvation and mine requires revelation that is immediate and personal.

It would be equally true that if people could legitimately claim the right to teach the gospel and act in the name of the Lord by reading the Bible, they could also become the president of the United States by reading our nation’s Constitution.

“Seek Learning, Even by Study and Also by Faith”

I take our third principle from the curriculum given by the Lord to the school of the prophets: “Seek learning, even by study and also by faith” (D&C 88:118). The statement first affirms the importance of study and then suggests the necessity of reaching beyond our study to embrace the principle of faith.

Let me illustrate what is involved here. The Prophet Joseph Smith was studying the book of James when he came to a passage that directed him to ask of God and to do so in faith with nothing wavering (see James 1:5–6). When he set the book down and went in search of a quiet place to pray, his faith supplanted his study, and by that faith he was able to do what his biblical mentors had done: open the heavens.

My faith that the Book of Mormon has a proper place in the library of sacred books grants me a great host of knowledge that I would not otherwise enjoy. It restores to me the knowledge of the plain and precious things that were taken from the Bible. From it I learn that the peoples of the Old Testament had what is known to us as the Melchizedek Priesthood. They also had baptism, the gift of

the Holy Ghost, and all other saving principles and ordinances of the gospel. From the Book of Mormon I can gain more knowledge and understanding of what was taught in Old and New Testament times than I can from reading all the scholarly commentaries ever written on the matter.

From the book of Abraham, I learn that the peoples of the Old Testament had the Abrahamic covenant with the promise of the continuation of seed and the eternal family unit. By faith in Joseph Smith’s translation of the book of Moses, I learn that Jesus—the Messiah—was known to Adam, Enoch, Noah, and Abraham and that the plan of salvation they knew is the same as the plan of salvation we know today.

This is not a retreat to the anti-intellectual stance common to much of the historical Christian world. It is the bold declaration that bringing faith to the act of study is like a loving couple bringing a child into the world. The child is a living thing who brings to his or her parents a depth of love and understanding that they never could have known before. Similarly, my faith in Jesus of Nazareth as the long-sought Messiah, Savior, and Redeemer of mankind gives me an entirely different understanding of the Old Testament than I could otherwise have.

All things produce after their own kind, and so it is that faith begets faith. Faith in one gospel principle will infuse faith in another. My faith in the Resurrection—that is, the inseparable union of body and spirit (an idea that is not scientifically defensible)—infuses faith in the story of the Creation (a matter over which there are endless scientific arguments).

It is only by adding faith to our scripture study that we capture the essence of what we read. True religion is a living thing. It demands that signs follow believers. It speaks of miracles so that we will know that we can work miracles. It describes the voice of God so that we will know His voice when we hear it. It reports the ministering of angels so that we will know that we may entertain the same; if we have planted the same seeds as did those of whom we read in holy writ, then we may harvest as they harvested.

Keep Things in Context

The fourth principle I would call to your attention is the need to keep things in their proper context. Context gives color to or changes the color of everything we or anyone else says. When my wife tells me that I ought to say “I love you” more often, she does not mean that I should say it to other women. Every scriptural text has two contexts: the immediate moment or circumstance that evoked the statement and

the larger context in relation to all other correct principles or utterances. An obscure or isolated statement will not be called on to bear the weight of the gospel or to assume the responsibility to establish any principle essential to salvation.

When Christ said, “In the resurrection they neither marry, nor are given in marriage” (Matthew 22:23–30), we need to know whether He was speaking of every soul that ever lived or of the Sadducees (who had rejected Him as their Messiah), who had asked the question that sparked Jesus’s response.

When He said, “Take therefore no thought for the morrow” (Matthew 6:34), was He speaking to you and me, or was He speaking to the Twelve who had been called to the full-time ministry?

When He said, “Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do” (Luke 23:34), did He have in mind the Roman soldiers who drove the nails in His hands and feet, or did He mean everyone throughout all history who seeks to crucify Him afresh?

When Christ said, “Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel” (Mark 16:15), was He giving a commission to everyone who feels so inclined, or was He speaking to the Twelve whom He had commissioned and trained?

When the Apostle Paul said, “If they cannot contain, let them marry: for it is better to marry than to burn” (1 Corinthians 7:9), was he suggesting that marriage is for people who are innately weak and lack moral character, or was he suggesting that those then laboring as missionaries ought to wait until they had completed their missions before they married?

When John warned that none were to add to or take from what he had written, was he forbidding others from tampering with the words of his epistle, or was he announcing that all other inspired writing had ceased? (see Revelation 22:18–19).

The immediate context answers each of the questions just raised, but if we are still confused, we must defer to the greater context of all that has been revealed on the matter in question.

As a young man, I served as a chaplain in the military. Whenever our unit received orders to go into combat, some of the soldiers discovered that they were conscientious objectors and could not take up arms. Their claims were always treated with respect, and among other things they were sent to see the chaplain to seek his aid in establishing their case, if indeed they had one. In such cases I would ask if they had ever done anything that could be cited as evidence of their newly professed belief. None of them were ever able to do so. The second question I

would ask was if there was any religious basis for their profession. The only answer to this question I can remember being given was that God commanded Moses, saying, “Thou shalt not kill” (Exodus 20:13).

Without detailing all the discussions I had with these young men, I note that without exception they were surprised to learn that the word translated *kill* in this text comes from a Hebrew word meaning *murder*. They were further surprised to learn that the penalty for murdering in the days of Moses was death. They were equally surprised to learn that Moses himself was a great general who repeatedly led the army of Israel to battle against their enemies whom they killed in rather staggering numbers.

The point here is that this is the greater context for the sixth commandment. It places it in an entirely different context than the young men I worked with had previously understood.

Balance Correct Principles

Our fifth principle concerns the balance necessary among gospel principles. Correct principles often conflict with each other—a difficulty we can trace all the way back to Eden. God deliberately placed Adam and Eve in a position in which they had to make a choice between conflicting commandments. They had been commanded to multiply and replenish the earth, something they could not do without partaking of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, which they had been commanded not to do. Their situation required them to make a choice and then live with its consequences. Wisely and properly they chose to keep the greater of the two commandments, that being to have children, which, of course, required their partaking of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. We refer to this event as Adam’s *transgression*, not Adam’s *sin*. Transgression involves the breaking of a law. Sin, on the other hand, is willful disobedience. In this matter there was no sin, but there was a broken law. The consequences of this broken law, known to us as the Fall, created the need for Christ and His Atonement.

What I desire to call your attention to in the context of our discussion is that on occasion—appreciably more often than we would like—correct principles conflict with each other. We, like Adam and Eve, are often faced with conflicting commandments. Like them, we too must make a choice as to which is the greater and which is lesser, and, like our first parents, we too must live with the consequences of those choices.

Consider these illustrations. On the one hand we want to be

honest; on the other we do not want to be hurtful or insensitive. Both are virtues, but any virtue overdone becomes a vice. We are taught to be forgiving and merciful, and yet, as any good bishop knows, mercy cannot deny justice. Were it to do so, it would destroy personal responsibility, the doctrine of repentance, and ultimately the entire plan of salvation.

There is a letter of the law and a spirit, and a time and place for each to take center stage. So it is that there is a balance to maintain between gospel principles. The doctrine of grace, as marvelous as it is, cannot be allowed to become a bully and chase all other gospel principles out of the chapel. We cannot get so infatuated with one principle that it overshadows the others. The world is full of examples of this kind of gospel mutiny, wherein the ship of faith has been taken over by one principle, and the others are either enslaved or forced overboard.

What must be remembered here is that no principle remains a correct principle when used incorrectly. Any principle that is isolated from the body of principles becomes corrupted in its isolation. What frequently happens is that we are invited to give a lesson on a particular principle. So we isolate it from its companion principles for study. We then do such a good job of explaining its importance that when we are through, it has been inflated to the point that it no longer fits in with the other principles, so they have to be evicted to make room for it. The recipe of gospel principles does not permit the omission of one ingredient to be made up with a double dose of another. All principles, properly understood, must remain in their proper relationship with all other gospel principles.

Thus life is full of choices, and even the best of choices comes with consequences. Indeed, the best of choices generally comes at a high cost. We did not come to this earth to see how many difficulties we could avoid or how long we could rest in the shade, but rather to see if we would choose to stand in the light and labor energetically in the cause of truth.

Use Commentaries and Common Sense

The sixth principle of scriptural study is to freely seek help from sources that may exceed your knowledge on any particular matter. We have a number of excellent helps provided for us in the Church's latest edition of the scriptures. Chapter headings not only give a concise summary of chapter content but also often contain explanation and commentary. The footnotes can be helpful, but do not suppose that they themselves are scripture. In the Church's English edition of the Bible, the Topical Guide, Bible Dictionary, lengthy extracts from the

Joseph Smith Translation, and the maps are also very helpful. Secular commentaries can be helpful in matters of history and geography. In doctrinal matters the help they give is very limited. As for Latter-day Saint commentaries, no one is going to be right about everything, but that does not mean they cannot help in some things.

It has frequently been said that the best commentary on scripture is scripture. Certainly this is the case, but it is not just a matter of using one verse to interpret another; it is seeing that the Old Testament is a marvelous commentary on the New Testament and that the New Testament is equally important in unlocking or understanding the Old Testament. Additionally it is not sufficient for us as Latter-day Saints to see the Book of Mormon as "Another Testament of Jesus Christ"; we must also recognize that it is a key with which we unlock the true meaning of the Old and New Testaments. It is the stick of Joseph spoken of by Ezekiel that was to become one with the stick of Judah for the purpose of gathering scattered Israel (see Ezekiel 37:19).

Thus Joseph of Egypt said: "Wherefore, the fruit of thy loins shall write [speaking to those of his own seed]; and the fruit of the loins of Judah shall write; and that which shall be written by the fruit of thy loins, and also that which shall be written by the fruit of the loins of Judah, shall grow together, unto the confounding of false doctrines and laying down of contentions, and establishing peace among the fruit of thy loins, and bringing them to the knowledge of their fathers in the latter days, and also to the knowledge of my covenants, saith the Lord" (2 Nephi 3:12; Joseph Smith Translation, Genesis 50:31).

The point is that the message of the two books is the same. Properly understood, they are teaching the same principles, testifying of the same God, and leading us to the same end. The Book of Mormon restores to our understanding many of the "plain and precious things" that were lost or taken from Bible manuscripts before they were printed in book form. No book of scripture is threatened by another book of scripture. Though they differ in detail, the Gospels sustain each other. So it is with what we call the standard works. They are not competitors; they are companions.

I have heard many disparaging remarks about commentaries. Remember that much of scripture, if not most, is commentary on other scripture. Anything written or said about the gospel is commentary on the gospel; even the statement that we should not use commentaries is a commentary.

It might also be noted that few things are more important in understanding scripture than common sense. No scriptural passage cannot be

misunderstood, and perhaps no scriptural text has not been misused. Bad causes and bad politics are often sustained with scriptural quotations. It was with scriptural arguments that those of Jesus's day rejected Him. To those who sought His death, Christ said,

Search the scriptures; for in them ye think ye have eternal life: and they [that is, the scriptures] are they which testify of me.

And ye will not come to me, that ye might have life.

I receive not honour from men.

But I know you, that ye have not the love of God in you.

I am come in my Father's name, and ye receive me not: if another shall come in his own name, him ye will receive.

How can ye believe, which receive honour one of another, and seek not the honour that cometh from God only?

Do not think that I will accuse you to the Father: there is one that accuseth you, even Moses, in whom ye trust.

For had ye believed Moses, ye would have believed me: for he wrote of me.

But if ye believe not his writings, how shall ye believe my words?

(John 5:39–47)

As for scriptural mischief, the grand key is to declare the figurative literal and the literal figurative. In so doing, you can profess a love for scripture while turning its meaning upside down.

In the book of Moses we read that Adam was created from the “dust” of the earth (see Moses 3:7). Some would argue that the first man was made from clay. However, the same text states that you and I “were born into the world by water, and blood, and the spirit,” which God had made “and so became of dust a living soul” (Moses 6:59). The same author who used “dust” to describe Adam's birth uses it to describe yours and mine also.

In this same context, we read that Eve was created from Adam's rib (see Moses 3:21–22). The text does not bother to tell us that this is figurative, that it is a metaphor to teach that the place of the woman is at the side of man. Scripture does not tell us this. We must deduce it. Our understanding comes from the “doctrine of common sense.” Little girls are not made from sugar and spice, nor are they made from their husband's rib. Some things we are just left to figure out on our own.

When we studied algebra, we learned we could take the known and use it to solve for the unknown. We can do the same with gospel principles. If, for instance, we know that a people had the Melchizedek Priesthood, then we know they also had the gift of the Holy Ghost because it is the Melchizedek Priesthood that bestows this gift.

I have had students ask for evidence that the principle of eternal marriage was practiced in Old Testament times. Would it not stand to reason that if we got the authority to perform eternal marriage from Abraham or someone from his dispensation that the authority must have existed in that dispensation? In like manner, we would reason that if baptism is an ordinance of the Aaronic Priesthood, then a people having the Aaronic Priesthood would also have the ordinance of baptism.

Knowing that God is eternal and that the saving principles that come from Him are absolute, repeatedly opens the scriptures to our understanding. It defies, for instance, the idea that there was one plan of salvation for people in Old Testament times and a different plan of salvation for people in New Testament times and still another for people living in the present era. It surely sets aside the idea that there was no Church of Christ before New Testament times.

“Likening Them unto Yourselves” (1 Nephi 19:24)

The seventh and final principle that I would suggest to enhance your scriptural study is that of applying, or likening, the scriptures unto yourselves (see 1 Nephi 19:23–24). In a number of Doctrine and Covenants revelations the Lord says, “What I say unto one I say unto all” (D&C 93:49). For instance, Doctrine and Covenants 25 records a revelation to Emma Smith in which He calls her “an elect lady” (v. 3). She is given the specific assignment to compile a hymnbook for the use of the young Church and then is given some general counsel. At the conclusion of this revelation, the Lord says, “And verily, verily, I say unto you, that this is my voice unto all” (D&C 25:16). Thus, every member of the Church has equal claim to this revelation. It is as much ours as it is Emma’s.

Understanding this principle requires a little of the common sense of which we have spoken. The Lord did not intend to have every member of the Church compile a hymnbook, but rather we should all avoid the temptation to “murmur” about our lot, we should seek the Holy Ghost to aid in our learning, and we should lay aside the things of this world and seek for the things of a better one, as Emma was instructed to do. In so doing, we have the same promise that Emma did—we will receive a “crown of righteousness” with all the blessings that go with it.

In like manner, the Lord gave a revelation to Joseph Smith Sr. It is a revelation on service, and it is found in the fourth section of the Doctrine and Covenants. Missionaries quote it frequently when they meet together, but the revelation really belongs to all of us. It is ours

because the principles in it apply to us in exactly the same manner they applied to Joseph Smith Sr.

So it is that we take the cloth of scripture and tailor it to fit our own circumstances. We do so with integrity, laying hold to eternal principles and leaving to the primary subject of each revelation the promises that were his or hers alone.

Conclusion

This brings us full circle. It welds our seven principles together. We began with the idea that scripture, meaning revelation, is only revelation when it is attended by the spirit of revelation.

Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery provide us with a remarkable illustration of this principle. After John the Baptist had restored the Aaronic Priesthood to them and after they had been baptized and the Holy Ghost had fallen upon them, Joseph Smith said, “Our minds being now enlightened, we began to have the scriptures laid open to our understanding, and the true meaning and intention of their more mysterious passages *revealed unto us in a manner which we never could attain to previously, nor ever before had thought of*” (Joseph Smith—History 1:74; emphasis added).

We add to that a second principle, the idea that gospel principles are everlastingly the same. All scripture comes from the same source, has the same purpose, and teaches the same doctrine. The gospel of Jesus Christ did not and does not evolve. It is not subject to change; it is absolute and eternal. The doctrine by which Adam and Eve found salvation is one and the same with the doctrine by which each of their children through all generations of time will find salvation. It will center on the same Savior, the same Atonement, obedience to the same laws and ordinances, and require the same priesthood.

As there is but one Savior, so there is but one gospel. When the resurrected Christ visited the people in the New World, He did as He had done in the Old World. He went to His temple, He called and ordained twelve men to be special witnesses of His name, and He taught the same gospel He had taught to those of His own nation. The gospel and its covenants and promises remain everlastingly the same. There was not one gospel for the pioneers and another for us, or one for apostles and prophets and another for the rest of the Church. We only have one gospel just as we only have one Savior. Each of us makes the same covenants, and each of us receives the same promise of blessings. In this context the promises in the revelations are ours; they were given to us; we can read our names into them.

Our third principle was that of seeking learning by both study and faith. It must be obvious that the only way we can truly learn faith is to exercise it. The idea that we are to seek learning by both study and faith suggests that faith does not require us to leave our minds at the door when we go to Sunday School class or when we seek to learn about the gospel. It does suggest, however, that it would be a puny gospel that did not reach beyond the bounds of our understanding and the knowledge we have accumulated. The same revelation that tells us to seek learning by faith also tells us that God, not nature, is the author of all laws. This revelation declares that all law, light, and life come from God and that He is above them all. He is their maker, not their copartner.

Our fourth principle noted that everything has its proper context. All gospel principles have an immediate context and a more general context which is the fulness of the gospel. No gospel principle was intended to stand alone. Isolating any principle from the congregation of principles that constitute the gospel is perverting that principle. The gospel does not consist of grace alone, love alone, faith alone, or any principle alone. Gospel principles sustain each other.

Thus we noted as our fifth principle the balance necessary among gospel principles. Ignorance cannot nurture faith, nor can the intellect substitute for it. The Bible remains a sealed book to those who worship at the shrine of their own intellect. Its meaning and purpose are also lost upon those who reduce its message to a few phrases that they endlessly quote to justify the shallowness of their understanding and the quickness with which they embrace that which has no place in the household of faith.

Our sixth principle encouraged seeking the wisdom and help of any and all sources that lead us to a greater understanding. No source would exceed the voice of a living prophet; indeed, the united voice of all past prophets tells us to listen to the living prophet.

We observe in our seventh and final principle that we seek the same destination as did the faithful of ages past, and thus the path they marked in their writings is of great value to us. To be of help to us, we must align the map they have given us with the same principles known to them and read it by the light of the same Spirit known to them.

Anytime anyone interprets a passage of scripture, we get a measure of their common sense and their spiritual integrity. What you do with scripture, including the neglect thereof, is a wonderful way for the Lord to get a measure of your soul. That each of us might give Him a good measure is my prayer. **RE**