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President Packer's Teachings: An Interview with Clyde J. Williams

Clyde J. Williams

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The Religious Educator held the following interview to acquaint readers with a new resource for students of the restored gospel called Mine Errand from the Lord: Selections from the Sermons and Writings of Boyd K. Packer (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2008).

RE: *This is now your fourth compilation of the teachings of prophets and apostles. What led you to pursue such ambitious projects?*

Williams: As a young seminary teacher, I had come to prize and value next to the scriptures the teachings of the living prophets. I remember in the late 1970s wondering why no one had compiled the teachings of President Lorenzo Snow. After some investigation, I decided no one had made such a compilation because President Snow had served such a short time as Church President and there were not as many of his full discourses preserved. Because I wanted his teachings on my library shelf, I began the task of selecting and compiling his teachings for a potential book. This was before the days of home computers and search engines, so it was a little slower in coming about than the others I did.

The Teachings of Harold B. Lee had also not been done because he served only a short time as President of the Church. I had always loved President Lee and often turned to his teachings for help in my teaching and Church administration. My colleague Reed Benson kept urging me to put together a book of President Lee's teachings. Finally, I agreed to call Brent Goates, who was married to President Lee's oldest

daughter, and ask if there were plans or desires for a teachings book to be done. He indicated that at one time he had intended to undertake such a project but felt he was no longer able to do so and would be delighted to have it done. And so that project began.

A similar thing occurred in the case of Howard W. Hunter. President Hunter served as Church President for such a short period, and when I learned that Deseret Book did not intend to do a teachings book, that was my cue to pursue one.

RE: *Did you need any permissions or clearances to work on these teachings books?*

Williams: That is a very important question, and I am glad you asked. In each case the projects were cleared through the First Presidency's office, and the manuscript was sent for a review under their direction before it went to the publisher. I would never have presumed to compile or write about the Brethren without their approval.

RE: *How about President Packer's book? Why did you choose to focus on President Packer?*

Williams: As a young seminary student, I remember hearing and watching President Packer's presentation entitled "The Very Key" on the importance of staying morally clean. Ever since then, I have been impressed repeatedly by President Packer's forthright messages on important spiritual and doctrinal issues. Because of his background in seminaries and institutes, he always seemed to have a real interest in those of us who were teachers in the Church Educational System, and thus I have had a particular interest in his teachings for many years. When I completed *The Teachings of Harold B. Lee* in 1995, I told one of my colleagues that if I could do one more teachings book I would love to do the teachings of Boyd K. Packer.

After finishing *The Teachings of Howard W. Hunter*, I periodically thought about asking President Packer if he would be willing to allow me to compile his teachings. I was a bit concerned because I know such books were usually done for the Presidents of the Church. But I was aware of George Q. Cannon's teachings, *Gospel Truth*; Joseph Fielding Smith's teachings, *Doctrines of Salvation*, published while he was an Apostle; and *The Neal A. Maxwell Quote Book*. These all helped me to finally decide to ask. On September 15, 1999, I wrote to President Packer requesting the opportunity to work on a teachings or a quote book from his talks and writings. Two weeks later he responded that such a project was under way and had been for a while.

RE: *So you were turned down the first time?*

Williams: Yes. After that letter I mentioned I laid the idea aside and went on with my life. A few years later I put together my own collection of as many of President Packer's talks as I could find and made a Folio file so I could search his teachings for quotes and stories I wanted to use. I gathered over two hundred written talks and many of his recorded talks. I listened to them as I exercised each morning and when I traveled long distances. They were and are a great blessing in my life.

After seven years had passed, I woke up one morning with some impressions about doing a book of President Packer's teachings. I thought to myself, "This is strange. Why would I have these feelings?" The idea had not been on my mind for years. I pondered what to do. I did not want to appear foolish or presumptive, and I certainly did not want to pester President Packer. I sat on that idea for about a week and kept thinking about it. I got out the old letter I had received and reread it. I finally decided that if I wrote another letter all President Packer would need to do was say thanks but no thanks. I really had nothing to lose, so I wrote to President Packer indicating I had written seven years earlier about the possibility of doing a compilation of his teachings. I indicated that I felt such a book would be most helpful to so many. I apologized for taking his time but asked if there were a change that I was still willing to work on the project. This was mid-November 2006.

This time a letter came inviting me to come and visit with President Packer about the book. Of course, I was thrilled. I called his office, and his secretary had me speak with President Packer. After a few questions about my interest in the project, President Packer arranged to meet with me just after the holidays. He asked if I could send him a copy of the three other teachings books I had compiled.

When we met early in January 2007 for the first time, on his desk was the copy of *The Teachings of Harold B. Lee*. He reminded me that President Lee had been his mentor. President Packer was very personable and friendly, yet you don't go into such visits without feeling like your spiritual pulse is being checked. He was very interested in the project but made no commitment that day. I told President Packer that I sought no financial gain. I merely wanted the opportunity to help strengthen the kingdom, which I felt this book would do. I am sure he wanted time to ponder and reflect and let the Spirit work on him to decide if this was the thing to do. He asked me to call Cory Maxwell at

Deseret Book, and then about two weeks later President Packer gave me the green light to proceed.

He indicated that his secretary had been putting together a Folio file of all of his talks and that she would get a copy of the file to me once the restricted talks (temple presidents' seminars, General Authority training meetings, etc.) were removed.

RE: What was it like to work with him personally?

Williams: I had met President Packer on a couple of occasions when he had come to our stake conference and I was in the stake presidency. So he recognized my face, but I really did not have a personal acquaintance with him. As I indicated before, President Packer was personable and very willing to have the project proceed. However, as President of the Twelve, his schedule is generally filled to overflowing. I realized that I would not be able to spend much time with him personally on the book. He had done his part by researching, studying, pondering, writing, and delivering the talks and writing the books. His secretary was a great resource and could get materials to him when he had time to work them into his busy schedule. The only time I can think of that anything was really held up was after the first draft of the manuscript was done and President Packer came down with a serious bout of the flu. We had to wait a few weeks to get him the manuscript at that point. President Packer exhibited a great deal of trust and confidence in allowing me to select, compile, and organize the selections from his teachings and writings. I told him that this carried a much higher level of pressure for me since the authors of the previous three books I had done were already deceased. I never once felt pressured or limited by President Packer. Any pressure or limitations were self-imposed as I tried to consider what would be wise to put in the book and at the same time be pleasing to him.

Once the manuscript was done, there were a few occasions where I was able to meet with President Packer and others whom he had read the manuscript. These occasions were very encouraging and upbeat. I could tell that they collectively were pleased with the manuscript. Their suggestions were minimal but most helpful.

RE: How has the process of compiling these books affected your own teaching?

Williams: Each of the teachings books I have done has affected my life profoundly. Consider spending years studying and searching the teachings of living prophets. My bus rides, my evenings, and my weekends were filled with searching the teachings of living prophets, and this, of course, was on top of preparing for and teaching all of my

scripture courses each year. How could one go wrong doing this on a regular basis? There have been important statements from each of those I have studied that have become key principles or insights that I use to this day in my teaching. My testimony and desire to follow the Savior have been profoundly affected by these experiences.

RE: How did you come up with the organization of the quotes and teachings in the book?

Williams: The use of computers made the process of putting the book together much easier for the last three of the books I did. In President Packer's case, the process was a little easier in that his secretary provided us with a full Folio version of all of President Packer's talks. We then made a hard copy on paper of every talk that was read and marked, so we had a clear paper trail. Each talk was given a number consisting of a year and the talk within that year. In some cases we checked multiple published versions of the same talk. In the first reading of each talk, I tried to select anything that I thought might be worthy of including in the book. This was hard because so much was worthy. I did not worry about duplication or length during this reading because I knew we could search out the best accounts when we were finished. We selected tentative topics and chapters to put the statements into and altered and adjusted these depending on what we found in President Packer's talks. Over the many months of selecting and compiling this book, I was blessed to work with five wonderful student research assistants. They were all very qualified and helped in so many ways. This book could never have been completed in the time frame it was without their expert help. I sought for and used the input of my research assistants to help in making decisions on how to break down and organize the chapters. While much of this work is somewhat subjective, it was great to have a couple of other opinions or views to consider for what should be done.

One of the challenges I faced with President Packer's talks was that so very often he introduced his theme with a story or illustration and then later, as he taught the doctrine or principle, he would hearken back to the story. This would sometimes make it very difficult to select the shorter thoughts for inclusion in the book.

After searching well over four hundred of his talks and his three books—*Teach Ye Diligently*, *The Holy Temple*, and *Our Father's Plan*—my selections had all been placed in a searchable Folio file that made it possible for us to go through the manuscript looking for duplicate quotes, stories, and so forth. The best or most concise versions were retained. The others were eliminated. Sometimes the same idea was

taught, but additional insights were shared or a different approach was used, so we decided to retain both statements. An example of this is a quote that I had personally heard President Packer use more than once on the two occasions he attended the stake conference where I live. However, I did not have a published source for the statement. I found two versions among his talks and because of the additional insights I retained both statements. They are as follows:

1. **“You cannot make a major mistake without having been warned.** I will make a promise to you, and you can test it. I have no hesitancy in making this promise in your young life. As you move forward in life, you cannot make a major mistake, any mistake that will have any lasting consequence in your life, without having been warned and told not to do it. It cannot be done in this Church. It doesn’t work that way. You try to do something that is wrong, and the Spirit will say no. Now you may plug your ears—you don’t plug your ears, you plug your feelings, and you let your desires or some other thing get hold of you. But you cannot make a mistake that is going to have any consequence without knowing about it” (*Mine Errand from the Lord*, 130–31).

2. “You will be warned of danger. . . . You cannot make a major mistake in your life without being warned” (*Mine Errand from the Lord*, 131).

We decided to keep both statements because one is a nice concise one or two liner and the other gives a more in-depth explanation. You will note that the quotes are preceded by a bolded statement. I felt that the bold statement would help draw the reader into the book. Most are not likely to sit down and read this book from cover to cover, though it would be a very rewarding experience. However, as readers come to a topic or doctrine, the titles for the quotations help them know what the longer quotation contains as its main emphasis and will often draw them in to learn more about what the quotation says. Each quotation in the book is followed by a four-digit number in parentheses. This enabled us to avoid cluttering the text of the quotes with long and repeated source references. The first number is the year in which the talk was given, and the second number is the order in which that talk was given during that year. I saw this method used years ago in *The Teachings of Spencer W. Kimball* and felt it was the best way to reference the talks. At the end of the book these numbers refer you to a complete bibliography of the talks cited and lists multiple sources for the talks where applicable.

RE: *Were you the only one who read all the talks and did the selecting of quotes?*

Williams: I did have my research assistants help, as we had time, to read some of the talks that I felt would benefit from a second reader, and one of them read through the book *Teach Ye Diligently*. However, to get the viewpoint of others who had read President Packer's talks we used the search engines available and checked every Church teaching manual, all Church magazines, all CES student and teacher manuals, and Gospelink for any quotations by President Packer. Once our initial draft was completed, my assistants compared all of these quotations with what we had in the book manuscript to see if we had missed anything. Those quotes that they could not find in the book were turned over to me, and I searched again. Then if we did not have the quote, I made the decision whether to use it. We added another forty or so quotes to the book in this way.

RE: *Is there much new material in this book that is not already in his other books?*

Williams: The simple answer is yes. *Mine Errand from the Lord* differs from the other books in at least two ways. The first is that all of the other books were a collection of complete talks or a book written on a single theme. In this book we have tried to select out some of the most concise and profound teachings on virtually every topic that President Packer had addressed over his forty-seven years as a General Authority. Secondly, there were many talks and addresses which we had access to that have never been published before. While some of these required minor editing because they were sometimes transcriptions from recordings, nevertheless many important statements found in the book have come from these unpublished manuscripts.

RE: *Could you share some of the most inspiring messages from this book? What are a few of the significant themes in his ministry?*

Williams: President Packer has focused very well on a wide range of gospel and doctrinal themes. This is part of what has made the research for this book so meaningful and worthwhile for me personally. He has profound insights about the plan of happiness, the use of our agency, and the power there is in ordinances and covenants. He has given significant insight to our understanding of revelation and what leads to effective gospel teaching. His love of the scriptures resonates clearly in his addresses as does his understanding of the supreme importance of marriage and the family. Temple and missionary work are also significant themes that President Packer has provided us with important perspectives. There is not time in an interview such as this to go into

extensive detail on these and other themes. However, a few examples here may give our readers a feel for some of the powerful messages in the book; in the challenges that we are facing in the world today these two statements regarding our need for inspiration are certainly pertinent to us: “During unsettled times . . . the most important thing we can teach to members of the Church worldwide is how to receive revealed instruction, prompting, guidance, direction, warning, and to learn to trust it” (*Mine Errand from the Lord*, 125). Then related to this statement, he said, “One thing I have said more times than a few, is that we live far below our privileges. Members of the Church live far below their privileges as far as inspiration is concerned” (*Mine Errand from the Lord*, 133). Certainly, this is the day when the need for personal revelation is as great as it has ever been.

On another occasion, President Packer spoke about a serious concern for those who suffer the tragedy of divorce. His counsel is sobering and yet very profound and insightful.

To the young divorcee, with perhaps three little children, whose husband has gone away, a reprobate, I say: Careful, careful.

You may have been used and abused; all the criticism and evil that you might say about your husband might well be true. At least you might feel it is true. But I say to you, don't ever say those things to your little ones.

When that poignant moment comes when they say, “Mamma, why doesn't daddy come home anymore? Doesn't daddy love us anymore?” Bite your tongue, dear sister. Don't say, “Your daddy is a liar,” (or a cheat, or an adulterer, or an evil man). Just say, “Sweetheart, we don't understand everything and maybe one day we'll learn. There are lots of things in life that we must wait to know.” Just pass it off. Careful dear girl lest you unwittingly teach your children that they are the offspring of a reprobate. That gets fixed into their minds and when the teenage challenges come they let down the bars and say, “I can't help myself, it was born into me.” Be the perfect Christian. (*Mine Errand from the Lord*, 268)

Another great insight that President Packer gave on more than one occasion was to emphasize the most important purpose for which the Word of Wisdom was given. He said, “Living this way is essential to keep members of the Church open to spiritual communication. It is defined as ‘*a principle with promise*, adapted to the capacity of the weak and the weakest of all saints, who are or can be called saints’ (D&C 89:3; emphasis added). Keeping the Word of Wisdom (and we must keep it) will protect us from the destructive addictions which shackle

us and interrupt our communication with our Heavenly Father” (*Mine Errand from the Lord*, 206).

Perhaps one more example in this area will have to suffice. The world in which we live is growing increasingly noisy. It is hard sometimes to find a quiet place to reflect. Speaking of this challenge, President Packer counseled: “You have to learn to be alone in a crowd. You have to have such control. That is so important. We spend so much time in airports and in other noisy places. But I do not go there. I might be standing there physically, but I am not there spiritually, because I am thinking things and doing things in my mind. If you will learn to do that, then the Spirit will teach you” (*Mine Errand from the Lord*, 132).

RE: *Besides the many great stories and classic statements on doctrine that President Packer is known for, are there any others things you have added to the book?*

Williams: At the head of each chapter and then scattered throughout are some very interesting and significant one- or two-line statements that can carry a punch and can cause you to stop and think. These little gems are well worth watching for. Here are four examples that have a lot of depth in their message.

“Never make the same mistake once” (*Mine Errand from the Lord*, 65).

“The doctrines of the gospel are revealed through the Spirit to prophets, not through the intellect to scholars” (*Mine Errand from the Lord*, 309).

“If all you know is what you see with your natural eyes and hear with your natural ears, then you will not know very much” (*Mine Errand from the Lord*, 339).

“We are floating along on a quiet stream and all is calm. But if you listen closely, you can hear the sound of rapids ahead” (*Mine Errand from the Lord*, 402).

RE: *Could you tell us how the title was selected?*

Williams: I had realized that President Packer would make the decision as to what the title would be. However, I felt that I should make a few suggestions. I felt because President Packer was not the President of the Church that we could not simply title the book *The Teachings of Boyd K. Packer*. I felt if we had a different main title we might be able to subtitle it with the above. After we had been working on the book for several months, I began to think of potential titles. The first one that came to my mind was from Jacob 1:17. President Packer had used this verse often in his teaching, and I felt that he

may have some personal affinity for its message. In this verse, Jacob makes it very clear that before he went to teach and warn his people, he “obtained mine errand from the Lord.” It seemed to me that this was exactly what President Packer and all of the Brethren endeavor to do so as they prepare to teach the Saints. I continued to think of other potential titles and asked my research assistants to do the same. We came up with a short list of titles that I took with me when I presented the manuscript to President Packer. I assumed he would take the matter under consideration and then maybe even come up with a title on his own. Much to my surprise, when President Packer looked over the list for about thirty seconds he said, “This is the title,” pointing to “Mine Errand from the Lord.” He had his secretary call Cory Maxwell right away and reserve the title while I was there. I was overwhelmed at how decisive he was at that moment. It was for me a very humbling moment as I felt confirmation that this was what the book should be titled. We were later instructed that the subtitle needed to be other than the “teachings of” as this title was reserved for the teachings of the Presidents of the Church, so the subtitle became “Selections from the Sermons and Writings of Boyd K. Packer.”

RE: Could you give us a feel for the impact his teachings have had on your life and your chosen profession?

Williams: President Packer’s teachings have impacted my teaching in so many ways. I have been enlightened, inspired, and motivated by his words. My love and appreciation for the scriptures has increased. I might just share a couple of statements that I have come to use often in my teaching. On one occasion as he spoke to religious educators, he said, “Teach your students to see with the eyes they possessed before they had a mortal body; teach them to hear with ears they possessed before they were born; teach them to push back the curtains of mortality and see into the eternities” (*Mine Errand from the Lord*, 313).

I try to use this statement each fall semester as my students come to class the first day. I want them to look at the scriptures and the gospel with a different perspective, a divine or eternal perspective. If they will do this, I know they will make wiser choices.

Another statement I often use has such relevance as we see wickedness around us on every side and at times wonder where can we find security or safety. This statement to me is so very profound: “There are dangers all around. Some of you may say, ‘If things get really tough, we will move here, or we will move back there, and then we will be safe; everything will be all right there.’ If you do not fix it so that you are safe and in good company when you are alone, or when you are

with your own husband or your own wife and your own children, you will not be safe or find happiness anywhere. There is no such thing as geographical security” (*Mine Errand from the Lord*, 402).

RE: *What advice would you offer gospel students to get the most from his teachings? What advice would you offer teachers?*

Williams: The best way to get the most out of these teachings, I believe, is to study them and then do all in our power to live them and teach them. It was President Harold B. Lee who taught, “If you want to be an effective teacher of the gospel, you have to live the principles that you propose to teach. The more perfectly you live the gospel, the more perfectly you will be able to teach the gospel” (*Teachings of Harold B. Lee*, 459). When I teach and then live a principle, it becomes a part of me. I am, in a sense, converted to that principle. This above process will then lead one to desire, in the words of President David O. McKay, to help students to see what I see, to know what I know, and to feel what I feel (see *Improvement Era*, August 1956, 557).

RE: *Are there any additional thoughts you would like to share about this book?*

Williams: On one occasion speaking at BYU–Hawaii, he made this most profound observation about those of us who teach at Church schools:

Brigham Young University is unique among universities. It is a private school established for a special spiritual purpose.

One time I heard the president of a great eastern university describe his school in these words, “We can best serve as a neutral territory—a kind of arbiter where people can come to reason.”

This could not be said of this school. This school is not neutral; it is committed; it is one-sided; it is prejudiced, if you will, in favor of good, of decency, of integrity, of virtue, and of reverence; in a word, in favor of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

This school is not a playing field where good and evil are invited to joust with one another to see which one may win. Evil will find no invitation to contest here. This is a training ground for a single team.

Here the students are coached and given signals preparatory for the game of life. The scouts and the coaches of the opposing team are not welcome here. (*Mine Errand from the Lord*, 357–58)

This is so important for us to remember regardless of what college we teach in or what courses we are teaching.

One additional point that comes to mind was President Packer’s feelings about the scriptures. He said: “I love the revelations. I love the scriptures. They are always new. You would think now that after all these years in the leadership of the Church being dependent upon

the scriptures, there would come a time when one would grow weary of them. Oh, no! They are so fresh and so wonderful and so powerful. What a privilege it is to go back to them when challenges arise. Challenges will come to all of us, because that is what life is about” (*Mine Errand from the Lord*, 152).

Then, just recently, he added this powerful confirmation of his love for the Book of Mormon: “I love the Book of Mormon. It is a part of my being. Over the years, as I have grown from a young man to what I call ‘upper middle age,’ I find in the Book of Mormon an ever new and refreshing fountain of information and blessings. If you were to ask me what parts of the Book of Mormon were my favorite or what parts impressed me most, I can answer that very quickly: All of it” (*Mine Errand from the Lord*, 157).

As one who has had his entire professional career in Church education, I can add my own witness to what President Packer has said about the scriptures. I have come to love them and find the answers to life’s questions in them. They have become such an integral part of my life.

RE: *If you were to summarize President Packer’s desire concerning his teachings, what would you say?*

Williams: Of course, I would never presume to speak for President Packer, but after reading and studying in depth so much of what he has taught, perhaps this statement is a good summary: “In the course of my efforts to teach His gospel, I have come to know Him, Jesus Christ, the Son of God, the Only Begotten of the Father. I stand in reverence before Him with deep regard for what He taught, and with deep regard for how He taught. It is not untoward for any of us to aspire to teach as He taught. It is not untoward for any of us to aspire to be like Him. He was not just a teacher, He was the master teacher” (*Mine Errand from the Lord*, 337).

From my personal experience, President Packer’s teachings have increased my capacity to discern pure doctrine and my ability to teach and influence others has been enhanced. I would personally affirm that from my witness of the Spirit on so many occasions, I know he has obtained his “errand from the Lord.” **RE**