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Elder Dale E. Miller

Reaching the One: A Conversation with Elder Dale E. Miller

Elder Dale E. Miller and Eric D. Gustafson

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Gustafson: *Elder Miller, during your final years as a General Authority, you served as the Executive Director of the Priesthood Department. Will you give us some macro perspective on current issues?*

Miller: As your readers may not know, the ecclesiastical departments at Church headquarters, along with the Church Educational System, are focused on the Church purposes to bring all to Christ. As such, we, as the Executive Directors of those departments, interact continually to monitor and help improve the teaching and learning process of the Church.

That coordination gave rise to an informal interdepartmental committee being formed with representation from each department, including CES. We raised questions about how to improve the teaching manuals, teacher development, and classroom participation. The primary focus was on how to improve learning, testimony, and the prevailing sense by members that the spirit of truth is being taught. Early on, we invited Elder David A. Bednar to provide his perspective. He gave us some wonderful ideas that we had not thought of before. President Packer was also very helpful on this theme of teaching and learning.

An interesting perspective on learning is how it takes place in the temple. Without becoming too specific, the process is instructive. There is cognitive presentation, then demonstration, then practice. In effect, it is understanding doctrine, changing perspectives and instilling patterns of an eternal nature, and, importantly, the making and keeping

of covenants. This, in my mind, gets into the depths of the gospel in the sense that it becomes a seamless combination of intellect, spirit, and behavior all put together. Learning is enhanced through participation.

Our committee began to address the question of how to promote better classroom participation in the teaching and learning process. When President Packer spent two weeks in Chile during my assignment as Area President, we talked about this very topic. He had an interesting citation in Romans: “Thou therefore which teachest another, teachest thou not thyself? Thou that preachest a man should not steal, doest thou steal?” (Romans 2:21). I think the point President Packer was making from that scripture was that if you’ve got your eyes open as you’re teaching, the Spirit personalizes truth to you. So the teacher is a learner, and the learner becomes a teacher.

Gustafson: Placing members in a teaching role can be challenging, particularly in an area composed primarily of converts.

Miller: You are correct, particularly when so many are first-generation members of the Church. The sixth-generation members are primarily from the Wasatch Front and the western United States. In the rest of the United States and around the world, a majority of the Saints are first-generation members. In fact, when I was the Area President over the United States East Area, I would ask in the adult session of Saturday night sessions at stake conferences, “How many of you are transplants from the West?” On average, 50 percent of the hands would go up. So if you were to take the western U.S. members out of the East, you have more of an international environment in terms of maturity in the Church and in study of the doctrines. Add to that the fact that much of our missionary work is among immigrants from around the world you have a wide mix of members in the average Church classroom setting. This holds true all over Europe, Africa, the Middle East, and increasingly in the United States.

So the issue is that our first-generation members need special attention as to how to learn the gospel. In some respects, many sixth-generation members could also be better taught how to learn. As I thought about it, much of our standard teaching to well-established members is more the reviewing, remembering, and recommitting type of teaching. That is, we cycle through the scriptures and cycle through the history of the Church. However, with first-generation members, it is different. Initially, they became accustomed to being taught one-on-one by the missionaries. Taking personal responsibility to attend class regularly—to learn by study and by faith and to build testimony—was not

in their background. Teachers need to help them along in this process. Many do not have strong learning habits or strong testimonies as yet.

New converts are thrown into a new environment in the classroom setting. With the missionaries they had one-on-one tutoring, mentoring, and learning help. Soon thereafter, they are grouped with other members, usually with those who have more maturity in gospel learning.

Reaching everyone in this “maturity mix” requires the teacher to go well beyond the “stand and deliver” concept of teaching. Part of teaching by the Spirit is to know the spiritual needs of various members, both before and during class time. It means knowing the hearts and minds of class members, both collectively and individually. I’m impressed by the way in which Book of Mormon prophets often would qualify what they say by the words “some of you.” The Spirit helped them to know the various states of understanding and righteousness of their audience. It is instructive to go back through the Book of Mormon and learn how to teach by reading how the prophets taught, how they came to understand their audience so thoroughly. They knew their people, which was one factor. Receiving inspiration was the other.

Gustafson: How do teachers work to that end? How do they know when they are teaching as the prophets taught?

Miller: I think the answer is found in Doctrine and Covenants section 50. I’m particularly fond of verses 21 and 22 of that section, where it tells us that when we teach by the Spirit of Truth, the learner and teacher come together and feel the Spirit; they rejoice together. To some degree, that’s a measure of a good class, when there is rejoicing. I interpret rejoicing in a number of ways. One is the intellectual experience where our minds are opened to see that which we could not see before. The Spirit has opened the eyes of our understanding, so to speak. In this case it is not necessarily an emotional experience, but it can be. In other cases, the rejoicing will be a more emotional experience. It is the Spirit of the Lord confirming that what is being said is of eternal truth. The rejoicing is often an internal feeling, not necessarily outwardly expressed. It may come from what is being said by the teacher, what is being read, or by the statements of truth and testimony from other class participants. A teacher would do well to encourage this exchange and acknowledge the presence of the Spirit.

That said, experiencing this rejoicing in the class doesn’t necessarily indicate that members are going to change after they leave the parking lot. Maybe the teacher’s epilogue for a good class is to pray that what was experienced in class will carry a lasting impact on the participants.



A conversation with Elder Miller and Eric Gustafson

Gustafson: How can instructors know if they are being effective?

Miller: I don't know if you knew this, but in 2002, I was assigned to help develop and produce the series of worldwide leadership training satellite broadcasts that replaced the area training meetings. As we were taping Elder Holland's demonstration on how to teach a class in 2006, it occurred to me that despite great teaching, the teacher doesn't have very good measures of his or her teaching effectiveness other than an attentive and participative audience. He or she can, if in tune with the Spirit, sense if the Spirit is there but not know what people will eventually do as a result. Even the prophets were not often given to know the outcome of their teaching. A teacher must be satisfied that the Spirit did testify and confirm that truth was taught and received, maybe not by all, but by some. Sometimes class participants will come forward afterwards and confirm that they were touched by the Spirit and were touched to change their thinking and their conduct. But that is not always the case and not a full measure of full class impact. Often, class members will be affected much later in ways that the teacher will never know. A good measure of how to know if you, as teacher, have been effective is by the measure the Lord will give you, through the Spirit; not by what class members say or do not say.

Measuring whether good learning is taking place in the Church is an important issue. To my knowledge, there is nothing yet formulated Churchwide to address this issue. We constantly review how to create better manuals, how to train leaders in the calling of good teachers, and how to improve teacher development, but not so much on the learning side of the equation. That is measured more by the Quarterly Member Progress Report. How someone is doing in their own salvation and eternal growth is an intensely personal matter.

Richard Anderson's comment in *Understanding Paul* might be appropriate here. If heaven were truly like the Protestants say it is—paraphrasing—then all you have to do is just be good enough to become a spectator to God's glory. But if you really believe in a progressive salvation, that means you have to constantly work at it. It is not saying you are "saved" and then going on maintenance mode. Becoming a Christian as Christ was requires a lifetime of progress. You stay on the path of purifying, sanctifying, and perfecting yourself. That is what is so different about our faith compared to other Christian doctrines. It is the issue of personal responsibility for eternal progression. Teachers are called to help this process by teaching and testifying by the Spirit of Truth as taught by the apostles and the prophets. We as teachers would do well to not only teach those truths but also to learn *how* to teach as the prophets taught.

Gustafson: *Is it correct to say that if you want to become a more powerful, effective gospel teacher, you have to measure what you are doing, and you measure that by the level of spirituality you feel or closeness to the Spirit? Where would you go with that?*

Miller: Somehow it has to get down to the teacher spiritually discerning what is happening, that calls for a heightened level of spirituality of teachers. The teachers who seem to be connecting with their students are able to discern both the Spirit and student needs. To pose your question differently, How does the Lord measure it? How does He measure the success of the interchange between teacher and student? Is the best test found in Doctrine and Covenants section 50?

One of the experiences that have broadened my thinking a bit about teaching by the Spirit was when we, as General Authorities, would give talks in general conference. When first preparing for a general conference talk, I asked myself, "Well, how do you gain the Spirit while you are reading off the teleprompter?" The answer for me was that the Spirit comes by praying and pondering over the topic, praying and pondering over how to put it together, and praying and pondering over the final draft until it truly is the final draft. Some have

wondered if the topics are assigned; they are not. Many times, we have all witnessed how general conference speakers will reawaken that same Spirit during delivery, despite the challenge of the teleprompter. I think members of the Church would be surprised at how many drafts General Authorities go through before they feel that they have it right. It is by study and by faith over a length of time. To some degree, that happens with good classroom preparation.

I have found that I could not go out on assignment to stake conferences and “wing it.” That is not the way to invite the Spirit. I remember once taking a long walk early on a Sunday morning in Kirtland, Ohio. I was there with President Hinckley, Elder Maxwell, and Elder Christofferson for the rededication of Kirtland. Each of us was to speak at the morning meeting. Not knowing what to speak on, I walked and pondered for an hour or so. Suddenly, the thought came to me, *What if the Restoration had never occurred? What would the world be like without it?* I went back to the motel and started a list of all the doctrines and other evidences of the Restoration that would not be with us today had the Restoration not happened; that was my talk. I know that it came from the Spirit. It was a thought that I never had considered beforehand. My recommendation to teachers is to prepare early and thoroughly but leave sufficient time to ponder and wait on the Spirit.

Here is another idea that is probably not well understood; the Holy Spirit teaches you things *not to say* as well as things *to say*. And I think for some reason that is why some teachers get off on tangents, talk too long, cannot seem to get into a discussion format—they don’t know when to let go. They don’t know when to stop, allowing students to ponder and participate. President Packer is a master at presenting short questions, letting his audience do some pondering before expounding on a point of doctrine. He will drop a one-line question or statement and then wait for reactions.

So, back to your question, I think we could probably define some of the variables that lead towards good learning. But in terms of measuring the effects of them, I think that really has to be something teachers have to find out on their own. Some will be happy when people come to them afterward and say, “That was a great class.” Some will make a phone call, saying, “That changed my life” or “That resolved a big issue that I had.”

For me, teaching by the Spirit is much like giving a blessing. It is teaching by extensive study and, by faith. Elder Bednar gave a CES broadcast called *Seek Learning by Faith*, in which he emphasized taking a step forward and believing the Holy Ghost will help you. The best

example I can give of that is giving a blessing. The process of giving a blessing and teaching should be similar. You discern the spirit of those to whom you bless (and teach). When you give a blessing, you lay your hands on somebody's head and often wait for the Spirit to guide you. You may start to say something and then decide not to. In interviews with patriarchs, some tell me that they have had things revealed to them (about the person to whom a blessing is being given) but are instructed by the Spirit not to mention. It gives them context around which to give the blessing.

It's also true that a teacher has to become tuned with the Spirit to know basically what to trim out and what not to say. It is a discipline that comes with practice. I think teaching by the Spirit is a developed ability. It takes time and spiritual energy. The Spirit can tell you what path to follow and what path not to follow. So you do all the preparation work, but then you are prepared to follow when the Spirit directs you.

Gustafson: *It seems that, as teachers, oftentimes we get focused on our end of the equation, whether we are prepared, whether we know our stuff, but we aren't as concerned or focused on the recipients and their progress or understanding.*

Miller: Sometimes when you are speaking in a stake conference or a ward meeting, for whatever reason, a thought will enter your mind: *There is someone in this audience who needs something different than everybody else here.* The question is, do I then address that problem or concern? General Authorities have that experience many times in the course of stake conferences. Somebody will come in who is going through a real problem or going through a testimony challenge. Is it worth saving the one and reframing what you are saying? It's back to reaching the one.

Many years ago, after being released as a bishop, I had the wonderful experience of teaching the priests in our ward. We began by posing the question, "What questions or concerns do you have about the gospel?" We made a list of about thirty questions. Many were minor points, but were important to one or more of the priests. We worked these questions into the coming lessons. Each priest was asked to select a question and prepare the answers for a later class. The attention span went up significantly. We were discussing their questions and concerns. That is just one way of knowing your audience and how to address their needs.

On another occasion, while at a Washington DC district conference, we gathered the youth together. We asked them to comment on the type of questions they were being asked about the Church by other

students in their schools. We then suggested ways of handling those questions. They were most attentive because we were dealing with real, day-to-day issues in trying to stay strong in the gospel and to defend the doctrines.

This gets us to another point about teaching the gospel in class, not becoming trapped trying to teach all that has been prepared or that is in the manual. It is more important that the class members are really with you. Assignments of the remaining material can be given, letting students teach themselves on personal time. Currently, I am assigned as one of the teachers in our ward Gospel Doctrine class. I know from experience that a teacher cannot possibly cover in depth all the material in a given lesson. The manuals were created to provide options. You have to select, hopefully by the Spirit, what is needed for that Sunday. On one occasion, I felt that the class members needed to understand the importance of using the Bible Dictionary. The Bible Dictionary in the LDS version is of major help to understanding the scriptures. It is not used sufficiently. There are important explanations that are not in the footnotes, nor in the scriptures, nor in the Topical Guide. You'll find it nowhere else but in the Bible Dictionary.

By the way, Elder Bednar introduced me to one of the best definitions on grace, which comes from the Bible Dictionary. He and I sat in his office and read together. That was a great help toward a more complete understanding of what grace is all about.

The idea is to teach the students how to teach themselves in personal study, how to ponder, how to gather information, how to get their spiritual eyes open so they understand things more deeply. So along with teaching content, we need to teach the learning process in a way that people can build better learning habits. We would like to bring about an awakening of the teacher to see that the process of both teaching and learning go along with the importance of the lessons' content.

***Gustafson:** How do you define the responsibilities of a teacher to students, whether it is a seminary teacher or a Gospel Doctrine teacher? Is it just strictly those thirty-five minutes they are together? Or is there some kind of a bond that exists between, in a mentor-student relationship, as you do in science or other disciplines, where it is a mentoring role, not just a teaching role?*

Miller: Oh, I think definitely there is a mentoring role to play. Teaching how to learn and learning how to teach are both mentoring roles. What great mentors we have in the scriptures and the living prophets!

Gustafson: Where have you learned about what you need to teach? That's a broader question, but you seem to be very pensive, always churning ideas over in your mind. Where have you learned the answers to these questions? Has it been through the Spirit? Has it been through your own efforts? Has it been through professional training? Just experience?

Miller: I think all of the above, really. A lot of it has been pondering until the insight comes. Pondering is about asking yourself and the Lord questions that promote further study and prayer. There are questions that I've had for years that haven't had a good answer until much later in life. Obviously, better answers have come after being exposed more to the counsels of the First Presidency, the Twelve, especially while traveling together on assignment. As teachers, we can all learn much from the teaching examples of our leaders, particularly those with years of experience.

I think extensive reading over the years has helped a great deal. President Thomas S. Monson has set a great example in his talks by continually referring to quotes from the classics as well as scripture and personal experience. That "mental library" is a rich reservoir from which the Spirit can draw, as the occasion requires. Teachers should be voracious learners.

Gustafson: But that really does bring it full circle. To be a good teacher, we must recognize we are not the source of all wisdom. To tap into that source of wisdom, we need to be willing to be taught.

Miller: You know, I think the Spirit often is giving teachers messages as to both the process and the content prior to and during a teaching situation. How is a teacher to really know the condition of each student in the class? Much knowledge can be gained during the teaching experience if we are sensitive. However, the real power of that discernment comes through the Spirit, particularly by study and by faith (that the inspiration and insight will come). That is the promise of the Lord. So, we return to the admonition of the Lord about teaching "by the Spirit of truth" (D&C 50:17) and create an atmosphere where the Spirit carries it into the heart of the hearer. Then "he that preacheth and he that receiveth, understand one another, and both are edified and rejoice together" (D&C 50:22). **RE**