



# Religious Educator: Perspectives on the Restored Gospel

---

Volume 10 | Number 1

Article 8

---

4-1-2009

## Raising the Bar: Preparing Future Missionaries

Brent L. Top  
brent\_top@byu.edu

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

---

### BYU ScholarsArchive Citation

Top, Brent L. "Raising the Bar: Preparing Future Missionaries." *Religious Educator: Perspectives on the Restored Gospel* 10, no. 1 (2009). <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/re/vol10/iss1/8>

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](mailto:scholarsarchive@byu.edu), [ellen\\_amatangelo@byu.edu](mailto:ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu).



Missionary preparation is more important than ever.

© Intellectual Reserve, Inc.

# Raising the Bar: Preparing Future Missionaries

*Brent L. Top*

*Brent L. Top (brent\_top@byu.edu) is a professor of Church history and doctrine at BYU.*

---

On December 11, 2002, the First Presidency and the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles issued a remarkable statement on missionary work. At the time, most Church members did not realize how that statement and the subsequent changes in missionary efforts that resulted from it would revolutionize the latter-day work of proclaiming the gospel. The phrase *raising the bar* soon became common among members of the Church in describing the increased expectations for missionaries. Upon hearing the phrase, I, like most members of the Church, thought primarily of higher standards of moral worthiness to serve as a full-time missionary. Qualifications were certainly a significant part of the statement on missionary work. Moral worthiness and physical, mental, and emotional stability are certainly part of raising the bar. However, there are other aspects that are just as vital but are often overlooked and underemphasized. I came to view raising the bar much differently than I previously had and in a much more comprehensive manner when I was called to serve as a mission president. That responsibility and the total immersion in missionary matters—from the constant need for teaching, training, and motivating missionaries to assisting Church leaders and members in fulfilling their gospel-sharing responsibilities—caused me to look upon missionary preparation with new eyes.

For over thirty years I have been a religious educator—ten years with seminaries and institutes as a released-time seminary teacher and institute instructor and twenty years on the Religious Education faculty

at Brigham Young University. I have always felt it an incredible privilege and sacred responsibility to teach the young men and women in my classes. Like you, I want my students to be stretched intellectually and strengthened spiritually. I want their knowledge of the scriptures and doctrines of the gospel expanded, their devotion to the Lord and His Church intensified, their testimonies fortified, and their lives, love, and service empowered. I must admit, however, that I have not always thought as deeply and specifically as I should have concerning the impact of my teaching in preparing them to be effective missionaries—both as full-time missionaries and as lifelong member missionaries.

With the new eyes acquired through my mission experience, I now see more clearly that *all* of my students are not only prospective full-time missionaries but are already missionaries and will be throughout their lives. And knowing that, I now see that each class I am teaching—whether it be Book of Mormon, New Testament, Doctrine and Covenants, teachings of the living prophets, Church history, LDS marriage and family, or any of our wide array of courses—must be more directed to preparing what Elder M. Russell Ballard called “the greatest generation of missionaries in the history of the Church.”<sup>1</sup> After discussing what is required of young men and women today to become that greatest generation of missionaries, Elder Ballard spoke specifically to fathers: “If we are ‘raising the bar’ for your sons [and daughters] to serve as missionaries, that means we are also ‘raising the bar’ for you. *If we expect more of them, that means we expect more of you.*”<sup>2</sup> I believe this principle applies not only to parents and Church leaders but also to us as religious educators. “This isn’t a time for spiritual weaklings,” Elder Ballard declared.<sup>3</sup> That applies to us as well. This isn’t a time for “weak sauce” religious educators (a term my missionaries often used to describe something tentative, feeble, or lacking boldness and power). The bar has been raised for all of us.

### “I Wish I Would Have”

Hundreds of times in my interviews with the missionaries, I heard sentiments expressed that began with the phrase “I wish I would have.” Perhaps the most common expression was, “I wish I would have known how difficult a mission is.” But there were many other similar expressions—“I wish I had studied the Book of Mormon more,” “I wish I had paid more attention in seminary,” “I wish I knew the scriptures better,” “I wish I had formed better study habits,” “I wish I understood the gospel more,” “I wish my testimony was stronger.” Upon arriving in the mission field, I observed some missionaries

who struggled mightily with the transition from being a teenager to a full-time missionary. Yet others hit the ground running and almost immediately became confident, competent, and powerful teachers of the gospel. What is the difference? Why are some so well prepared and others not? Of course, there are a myriad of factors—almost as many as missionaries themselves. Yet there are some specific things I observed and experienced as a mission president that have caused me to rethink my teaching philosophy and retool my teaching methods.

Most of the several hundred young men and women who served in our mission had attended seminary. Fewer, but still a substantial number, had participated in institute classes. Even fewer had been enrolled in religion classes at the respective BYU campuses. I mention that fact to demonstrate that the primary religious educational experience of full-time missionaries in the Church today is found in seminary classes throughout the world—whether it be released-time, early-morning, or home-study. When I came to that realization, it gave me pause. I found myself expressing the “I wish I would have” sentiments I had so often heard from my missionaries. I wish I would have taught my seminary students more specifically and effectively those things that would have enabled them to become effective missionaries. I wish I would have seen more clearly that every student in my class is not just a prospective full-time missionary but *is* already a missionary and *will be* a missionary all his or her life.

With my release as mission president, I returned to my teaching responsibilities at BYU. Although the courses I teach are the same as those I taught before my mission, I am different. With the new eyes acquired from the mission experience, I saw many things differently. For example, the standard works are the same, but what I see in them is different. Likewise, the students sitting in my classes look much the same today as four years ago (except they seem younger than they used to), but now I see them in a new light. As I envision them wearing black name badges and white shirts and ties or being confronted with missionary opportunities in the form of questions or challenges (as they all will inevitably be) two questions come into my mind now: (1) If this young man or young woman sitting before me were called to serve in my mission, what would I want him or her to know? (2) How can my teaching help them to “stand as witnesses of God at all times and in all things, and in all places” with more confidence, competence, and conviction? (Mosiah 18:9). My mind races when I think of all the things I would want them to know and attributes I would desire them to possess. Yet, for me, it seems to boil down to three main things I

want my students—all my students, whether they are preparing to serve full-time missions or just striving to be good member missionaries—to know. Now, more fervently and urgently than ever before in my religious education career, I want my students to *know*: (1) the truthfulness of the gospel, (2) the doctrines of the gospel, and (3) how to share the gospel.

### ***Know* the Gospel Is True**

“Your own personal testimony,” President James E. Faust counseled missionaries, “is the strongest arrow in your quiver.”<sup>4</sup> Because of that, all of our teaching must be to that end. “Begin with the end in mind,” is a familiar saying that is particularly relevant, even vital, for religious educators. One of the missionary skills that we continually stressed to our missionaries was what we called “teaching to the commitment.” That means that all we teach—every doctrine and every principle—must lead to extending a commitment to the investigators to become “doers of the word and not hearers only” (James 1:22). Every principle taught has a desired outcome or action that we desire those whom we teach to do and experience in their lives. It is not enough for missionaries to merely teach *about* the truths of the gospel. In fact, if that is all they do, they have lost (or never had) sight of what the Lord called them to do. Effective missionaries want those they teach to *know* and *live* those truths and *experience* the blessings that always come when they do so. In teaching about the Apostasy and Restoration, missionaries will invite investigators to read Joseph Smith’s account of the First Vision or the introduction to the Book of Mormon and selected passages, ponder on that, and pray specifically to gain a testimony of the truthfulness of those events. They teach them specifically *what* it means to gain a testimony, *how* they can obtain one, and *why* that testimony will change their lives forever. It should be the same for religious educators. While we need not teach to the commitment exactly like a missionary does by extending invitations to action with every concept taught, we can, nonetheless, “teach for conversion” with every lesson, every discussion, and every assignment. How can we more effectively teach for conversion? I don’t have all the answers, but here are a few things I learned as a mission president that I have tried to transfer to my teaching as a religious educator.

## Important versus Interesting

If you are like me, you have far more lesson material than you have class time to adequately cover. As a result, we all have to make hard decisions—hopefully with good judgment and inspiration—as to what would be most important to spend valuable class time teaching and discussing. My desire to teach for conversion now causes me to regularly ask, “Will this strengthen testimony?” and “Does this contribute to conversion?”

Sometimes my missionaries would complain that a member with whom they were teaching investigators would teach peripheral things like polygamy, a mother in heaven, archaeological evidences for the Book of Mormon, becoming like God, “eternal increase,” or any number of other things that the member personally found fascinating. It may have been interesting (and that is not always a good description) but rarely, if ever, was it helpful. Never once did I hear of someone being converted by such discussions. Instead of conviction, the investigator was usually left with confusion.

As irritating as that was to me as mission president, I must sadly admit that perhaps I have been guilty of much the same thing in my own teaching. Sometimes I may have focused more attention in my teaching on facts than faith—demonstrating how much I know—than on ensuring that my students *know* the right things—the salvationally significant things. “All knowledge is not of equal significance,” Elder Neal A. Maxwell declared. “There is no democracy of facts! They are not of equal importance. Something might be factual but unimportant. . . . For instance, today I wear a dark blue suit. That is true, but it is unimportant. . . . As we brush against truth, we sense that it has a hierarchy of importance. . . . Some truths are salvationally significant, and others are not.”<sup>5</sup> Perhaps at times in my seminary or institute classes or my religion classes at BYU, I have placed more emphasis on student interest than student conversion. I think I understand better now what Elder William R. Bradford meant when he said, “Some things are interesting while other things are important.”<sup>6</sup> None of us has time to teach everything that we know, that we personally find fascinating, or that would keep the sleepy, back-row early-morning seminary students on the edge of their seat. What we can do, however, is strive a little harder to ensure that the interesting never crowds out or confuses the important, even the imperative.

## Don't Assume They Know

Assumptions often get us into trouble. We probably have all had an experience where what we assumed to be so was not. As a mission president, I quickly realized that I could not assume that all arriving missionaries were worthy to be there. Once in a while there were some sad surprises. It was essential that I carefully interview every missionary, not only when they arrived but regularly thereafter. Likewise, I learned that I could not assume that all of my missionaries had burning testimonies of the gospel, either at their arrival or at the conclusion of their missions. Sometimes I was surprised to learn that an elder or sister who bore powerful testimony that first night in the mission home later doubted their testimony when encountering difficult questions, challenges, or persecution. I learned that, as with investigators, you cannot assume that missionaries know what a testimony is, what you must do to gain (and retain) one, or how you know when you really know. These concepts are basic but are often taken for granted. They need to be taught, retaught, and retaught because missionaries, like investigators, need to gain and retain their testimonies every day as they encounter new challenges, new questions, and new circumstances.

In a similar manner, we cannot assume that our students—whether they are fourteen or forty—have testimonies of the gospel. And we certainly must not assume that they *all* know how to acquire a testimony or that they know how they will know when they have one. Likewise, we cannot assume that having a general testimony (an “I love the gospel” testimony) is the same as a specific testimony—an unmistakable witness by the power of the Holy Ghost of the truthfulness of a specific doctrine like the cleansing and transforming power of the Atonement of Jesus Christ, Joseph Smith’s First Vision, the restoration of the priesthood, the truthfulness of the Book of Mormon, the Church as “the only true and living church upon the face of the whole earth” (D&C 1:30), and the fact that we are indeed led today by living prophets and apostles. The investigators that best progressed toward baptism and the new converts that were retained and progressed toward the temple were those who prayed for and received *specific* testimonies. In this way, they are continually “nourished by the good word of God” and empowered to continue as disciples of Christ (Moroni 6:4; see also John 8:31). And so it will be with our students—and each of us. Specific testimonies, repeatedly acquired by the power of the Holy Ghost, lead to staying power. President Harold B. Lee taught: “Testimony isn’t something you have today, and you are going to have always.

A testimony is fragile. It is as hard to hold as a moonbeam. It is something you have to recapture every day of your life.”<sup>7</sup>

Just as missionaries always invite investigators to come to know for themselves the truth concerning the *specific* things they learn and study, we must not neglect to do the same with our students. We cannot merely assume that they will do so. In the April 2008 general conference, Elder Dallin H. Oaks provided us powerful instruction concerning testimonies. He not only taught us what a testimony is and how it is obtained, but he also taught us how we can share our testimonies with others. As I listened to his words, I felt impressed that I, as a religious educator, need to review his instruction each semester with my students and discuss how it applies to the very doctrines and principles that we will study in the course. This is one way whereby I can ensure that I don’t simply assume things that may not be so. It is also a means whereby I help future missionaries to fill their spiritual quivers with their strongest arrows.

### ***Know the Doctrines of the Gospel***

As teachers of the gospel, we are very familiar with President Boyd K. Packer’s statement concerning the power of pure doctrine. “True doctrine, understood, changes attitudes and behavior,” he taught. “The study of the doctrines of the gospel will improve behavior quicker than a study of behavior will improve behavior.”<sup>8</sup> I have personally read and used that statement in my teaching scores of times. I thought I knew it and believed it. It was as a mission president, however, that I observed and experienced, in dramatic ways, the transforming power of doctrine. Knowing, teaching, and living the foundational doctrines of the restored gospel transformed the mission, the missionaries, the members, and the investigators. We experienced in our mission something akin to what Alma described regarding his missionary and reactivation efforts among the Zoramites. “And now, as the preaching of the word [that is, teaching doctrine] had a great tendency to lead the people to do that which was just—yea, it had had a more powerful effect upon the minds of the people than the sword, or anything else, which had happened to them—therefore Alma thought it was expedient that they should try the virtue of the word of God” (Alma 31:5). Truly, doctrine changed behaviors and attitudes within our mission. The virtue of the word of God powerfully led our missionaries “to do that which was just,” resulting in strengthened spirituality, improved obedience, increased work ethic, and more persuasive gospel teaching.

One of the most significant changes that came as a result of the statement on missionary work and the subsequent release of *Preach My Gospel* was the elimination of memorized lesson presentations. “Our purpose is to teach the message of the restored gospel in such a way as to allow the Spirit to direct both the missionaries and those being taught,” the First Presidency and Quorum of the Twelve Apostles declared. Missionaries were instructed to “not give a memorized recitation, but speak from the heart . . . out of [their] own conviction and in [their] own words.”<sup>9</sup> To teach in one’s own words, out of one’s heart of conviction, and by the power of the Spirit, missionaries are specifically instructed in *Preach My Gospel* to seek “a deep knowledge of the doctrine.”<sup>10</sup> To assist them in that objective, *Preach My Gospel* provides invaluable instruction for missionaries and members alike in the “essential doctrines, principles, and commandments that you are to study, believe, love, live, and teach.”<sup>11</sup>

Knowing the doctrine—inside and out, broad and deep—is imperative in becoming “the greatest generation of missionaries.” Raising the bar requires increased gospel knowledge on the part of all prospective missionaries. The Lord promised that the Spirit will give us “in the very hour” what we should teach, but only *if* we “treasure up in [our] minds continually the words of life” (D&C 84:85). Missionaries effectively teach by the Spirit only after they have treasured up knowledge of the doctrines of the kingdom. That places a greater responsibility upon the shoulders of all religious educators to likewise raise the bar in our teaching of doctrine. Each of us can probably think of many ways in which we can do that. I know there are many areas in which I need to improve, but my experience with using *Preach My Gospel* to train full-time missionaries and member missionaries has caused me to focus on two specific ways that I can better help my students treasure up the doctrines.

### **Connect the Dots**

Within the first few days after arriving in the mission field, I attended a series of district meetings where I observed our missionaries teaching one another the lessons. There were things that I heard that were encouraging and impressive, but there were also many things that discouraged me. One of the most common deficiencies that I observed was that the elders and sisters could recite the basic principles of the missionary lessons but lacked the depth of understanding to be able to adequately explain those principles or answer questions about them. It was almost like they were giving the investigators a thousand

pieces of a puzzle but little help in showing how they fit together to form a beautiful picture. I realized that these missionaries were not all that different from our students (and perhaps a large segment of the general Church membership). It is common for us to pack in our bags of doctrinal knowledge lots of snippets of information—facts, scripture references, inspirational stories, quotes, basic teachings, things we have heard in classes and quorums through the years. What is far less common (at least among the missionaries with whom I served) is the ability to connect the dots. Do you remember drawing a picture as a child by connecting the numbered dots? The dots by themselves didn't reveal much. When connected, however, a delightful picture emerged. It works the same way with the doctrines of the gospel. Missionaries do disservice to their investigators if they only teach dots—isolated, unconnected, independent teachings. Real understanding and ultimate conversion comes when they connect the dots and see the big picture—the panoramic view of the great plan of happiness. *Preach My Gospel* helps the missionaries see those connections—the relationships between the principles and ordinances of the gospel and how each fits in the overall gospel plan. In addition to teaching *what* we believe, it gives us the reason *why* we believe it. For example, we can teach *what* the Restoration was, but understanding *why* it was necessary requires a connection to the Great Apostasy.

Another illustrative example would be teaching the first principles and ordinances of the gospel. Much can be taught about the *whats* of faith, repentance, baptism, and the gift of the Holy Ghost. But the real power—the converting power—of these doctrines is found in their relationship to each other and their absolute connection to the Atonement of Jesus Christ. You can't truly understand repentance without connecting it to faith. Interestingly, Amulek demonstrated this teaching method when he taught us about “faith *unto* repentance” not merely faith *and* repentance as separate doctrines (Alma 34:15; see also vv. 16–17). The *Preach My Gospel* pattern of gospel teaching by missionaries to investigators (and others) can, likewise, enhance our teaching as religious educators and help our students connect the doctrinal dots.

Doctrinal instruction comprised a significant portion of every zone conference in our mission. Using the doctrines taught in the missionary lessons (found in chapter 3 of *Preach My Gospel*), my wife and I sought to help the missionaries better understand not only all of the different dimensions of a specific doctrine but also how that doctrine is interconnected with and logically leads to the other doctrines we teach.

It was exciting and gratifying to see the reactions of our missionaries. The lights were turned on—almost as if it was the first time that they really got it. When missionaries connect the dots, their testimonies are strengthened, their gospel knowledge deepens, and their ability to teach others with clarity and conviction improves. Because of these experiences, I realize more than ever that helping prospective missionaries see the big picture of the plan of salvation and connect the dots of the doctrines of the gospel will enable them to hit the ground running as full-time missionaries and will bless their lives forever.

### Teach Them How to Study the Gospel

Virtually all of the missionaries we served with had read the Book of Mormon prior to their mission—most of them had read it more than once. They hardly ever missed reading their scriptures, a habit often started in seminary. That is great news, but the flip side is not so good. One of the most common deficiencies I recognized among our missionaries was the lack of gospel and scripture study skills. To most, gospel study meant merely reading scriptures and approved Church books. In the years preceding their missions, there had been considerable emphasis on daily scripture reading and getting through a volume of scripture, but very little instruction on ways to effectively and deeply *study* the doctrines of the gospel. Many, if not most, of our missionaries were familiar with scripture mastery passages, often having at least some of those passages memorized. Yet they could not adequately explain the very passages they had committed to memory and rarely understood the scriptural context for them.

Since most of our missionaries had never done a topical or doctrinal study of any of the standard works, I introduced to them a project that proved extraordinarily successful. It not only helped them learn how to study the scriptures by looking for specific doctrines, but also increased their knowledge of gospel principles (particularly those doctrines taught in the missionary lessons) and strengthened their personal testimonies and spirituality. I gave each of them a new missionary copy of the Book of Mormon and four different colored pencils. Each color represented one of the missionary lessons. Their assignment was to carefully study chapter three in *Preach My Gospel* and make a list of the main doctrines taught in each lesson. From that list of doctrines they then studied the Book of Mormon each day in their personal study, looking for specific principles taught in the missionary lessons and marking those passages with the appropriate color. They were amazed at what they found and how clearly the Book of Mormon taught those

principles. Their pool of scriptures that could be used in teaching the lessons grew dramatically. Soon they were cross-referencing, writing notes in the margins, and sharing insights and applications with each other. It was exciting and gratifying to me to see their enthusiasm for scripture study. That enthusiasm, as well as what they were learning, became evident in their teaching. Their love for gospel study likewise affected their love for the work.

At an area mission presidents seminar, I found myself sitting at the lunch table with Elder Ballard and many other far more experienced mission presidents. Knowing that I was a religious educator by profession, Elder Ballard asked me how I had obtained my knowledge of the scriptures and doctrines of the gospel. I explained that virtually all I knew had come as I had prepared for teaching and prepared my lesson outlines. That, fortunately, was the point Elder Ballard wanted to make. Deep doctrinal knowledge—the kind of knowledge that is required to effectively teach others—rarely, if ever, comes just from reading. “Now, you need to get your missionaries to do the same thing,” Elder Ballard stated. He was teaching us that missionaries increase their gospel knowledge when they prepare teaching outlines for the individuals they are teaching. I realized then that missionaries (in fact, all of us) need to study in preparation to teach, not just read, the scriptures. Fortunately, I didn’t have to come up with ideas or programs to facilitate that. *Preach My Gospel* has the best ideas and is a missionary’s best gospel study program.

*Preach My Gospel* contains arguably the best instruction on effective gospel study ever published by the Church. While directed primarily to missionaries, the suggestions found in chapter 2 will bless any student of the scriptures, including religious educators. As we raise the bar in our teaching efforts, we can use the principles taught, the scripture references to be studied, and the learning activities included in *Preach My Gospel* (particularly the study ideas and suggestions on pages 22–24) with our own students.

Modeling effective study skills in our teaching will enable our students to learn by observation and personal practice, not merely by hearing us talk about these principles. Each day in my classes, I try to utilize suggestions from *Preach My Gospel* and expect my students to do the same. Some of the more pertinent practices that we can more frequently model for our students in our classroom discussions could include:

- Ask yourself, “What is the author saying? What is the central message? How does this apply to me?”
- Write in your study journal questions you have, and use the scriptures, words of latter-day prophets, and other study resources to find answers.
- In the margins write scripture references that clarify the passages you are studying.
- Try writing the main idea of a passage in your words in a sentence or short paragraph.
- Look for key words and make sure you understand what they mean. Use the footnotes, Bible Dictionary, or another dictionary for definitions of unfamiliar words or phrases. Examine the surrounding words or phrases for clues to what the key words mean.
- Look for connecting words and relationships between key words and phrases. Circle key words and then draw lines to link closely related words.
- Avoid excessive marking. The benefit is lost if you cannot understand your markings because you have too many notes, lines, and colors. Underline only a few key words to highlight the verse, section, or chapter.
- Use *True to the Faith*, the Bible Dictionary, and Topical Guide as you study specific topics and doctrines.
- Use the missionary lessons, supporting scriptures, *Preach My Gospel*, and the accompanying personal study activities to guide your study.<sup>12</sup>

Raising the bar of knowledge of the doctrines of the gospel is vital for missionaries today as they teach by the Spirit in their own words. The more they know the gospel, the more confident and powerful will they be as teachers. So it is with our students. The more we try the virtue of the word of God by teaching doctrine—by helping them connect the dots and know how to study more effectively—the greater will be their confidence in sharing the gospel with friends, family, and others they encounter throughout their lives. Learning, loving, and living Christ’s doctrine makes us better missionaries, but more important, as President Packer declared, it changes our attitudes and behaviors and thus deepens our discipleship. Because of that, we cannot be satisfied with merely getting our students *through the scriptures*. We must get the scriptures and doctrines of the gospel through *them*—deep within their minds and hearts and ever ready on the tips of their tongues. “We

possess these precious truths,” Elder Maxwell insightfully observed. “Now they must come to possess us!”<sup>13</sup>

### Know *How* to Share the Gospel

During an interview with a missionary that was struggling and wanted to go home, I heard an interesting yet disturbing comment. The elder said, “I have always wanted to go on a mission. I just didn’t know that I would have to talk to so many people about the gospel.” I was perplexed. What did he think he would be doing as missionary? Unfortunately, this wasn’t the only missionary who expressed those sentiments. There were more than a few. Another said, “I think I could be a good missionary if I didn’t have to talk to people.” Huh? As I scratched my head in bewilderment with this line of reasoning, it dawned on me why they would say such a thing. They had desired to serve as missionaries. They had prepared by saving money, keeping themselves worthy, and studying the scriptures. What they had not done, however, was actually talk to people (particularly those not of our faith) about the gospel. They had *prepared* but hadn’t really taken the opportunity to *practice* by actually doing what missionaries do. Talking about and desiring to do missionary work is the easy part. Doing it, however, is the hard part. If you don’t think so, ask almost any member about their personal member-missionary efforts. Part of the all-too-common condition I call “member-missionary paralysis” comes from not knowing *how* to share the gospel with others and an inability to recognize the abundant opportunities all around us to do so.

“The single most important thing you can do to prepare for a call to serve [as a full-time missionary] is to *become* a missionary long before you *go* on a mission,” Elder David A. Bednar taught. “You will not suddenly or magically be transformed into a prepared and obedient missionary on the day you walk through the front door of the Missionary Training Center. . . . Thus, a key element of raising the bar includes working to become a missionary before going on a mission.”<sup>14</sup> It was not surprising to me as a mission president that those young men and women who had experiences in talking about the gospel with non-member friends or family members were much more confident in the mission field. Many came from areas where there were few Latter-day Saints in their schools and neighborhoods. Yet others came from predominantly Latter-day Saint communities. It was apparent from them that *being* a missionary—having experiences in sharing the gospel with others—was not so much a matter of geography as it was a deep love for the gospel, a recognition of its fruits in their lives, and a willingness

to share personal feelings about those things. These things can and should exist in the lives of our students wherever they reside—whether they are the only Latter-day Saint in their school or whether there are no Latter-day Saints. What can we, as religious educators, do to foster those feelings and give prospective missionaries greater skills in teaching about their beliefs and sharing their testimonies of the gospel?

### **“Teach One Another the Doctrine of the Kingdom”**

Zone conferences, district meetings, and companionship study in the mission field are filled with settings whereby missionaries teach each other and then practice important skills. While I am not equating our seminary, institute, and religion classes with zone conference, I do see a parallel. Since coming home from my mission, I have realized that I can involve my students more in teaching each other the doctrines of the kingdom as the Lord commanded in D&C 88:77. There are many ways whereby we can do that. It could take the form of having our students teach a substantial portion of a lesson, small discussion groups, role plays, and individual responses to the simple question, How would you explain that to someone not of our faith? There is a temptation to be the dispenser of information rather than a director of learning. Undoubtedly, we learn more when we have to teach others. As a result, our students—prospective full-time missionaries and future moms and dads in “gospel-sharing homes”<sup>15</sup>—will be better prepared to share their testimonies and discuss their beliefs if they don’t just sit in our classes and soak it up but rather share with others what they have soaked up.

All too often, I think that there is good participation in my classes if I have students read a few scriptures or answer some shallow question that requires a no-brainer response. Now as I more conscientiously seek to afford my students opportunities to teach one another, I try to envision real-life situations that missionaries and members constantly encounter necessitating clear, concise, and convincing explanations. For example, I could pose this challenge to my students: “Tell me about the Book of Mormon—what it is, how we got it, and how you feel about it—in two minutes.” There are numerous ways whereby we can get our students to teach one another and address real-life missionary challenges. My students usually have more relevant situations, including questions they have been asked or challenges to our beliefs they have encountered. Those are often great teaching and missionary-preparing moments. Likewise, now when teaching a scripture block, instead of just calling on a student to read, I ask my students to look at

the context of the passage and then explain in their own words what is being taught. Similarly, when we have discussed doctrinal concepts, I invite students to summarize (usually in a minute or less) what we discussed in such a way that one who had not been involved in the entire class would understand the doctrine. Being able to synthesize and summarize, both verbally and in writing, is vital to acquiring greater doctrinal knowledge and valuable in sharing the gospel with others.

Several years ago when I served in a stake presidency, the stake president gave an assignment to the stake council and bishoprics. We were to write a summary of the entire plan of salvation that could be read in less than two minutes. At each meeting thereafter for many months we read to each other our short summaries of the plan. It was difficult to do, but enlightening. I learned a great deal from the insights of others. Perhaps you should try it. Such a doctrinal synthesis paper could be done on any variety of gospel principles. A colleague once said, “You don’t really know what you believe until you have to write it so clearly that no one could misunderstand.” That is why missionaries are instructed to write lesson plans or outlines each time they teach. As religious educators, we do the same thing. Perhaps we should give our students an opportunity to do the same. The more opportunities we can provide for our students to learn how to teach and talk about the gospel in a clear and concise manner, the more prepared and confident they will be to share the gospel with others.

### **“Stand as Witnesses of God at All Times”**

As much as I love missionary work and preparing future missionaries, I am personally uncomfortable giving my students assignments to share the gospel with their friends of other faiths. To me, missionary work is not a project. I hope my students are praying for and having missionary experiences. I hope those preparing to serve full-time missions go with the missionaries to teaching appointments as directed and approved by local leaders. As a religious educator, I can’t control that. What I can do, however, is keep in the forefront of my teaching the tremendous blessings we have by reason of the restored gospel, the privilege of being members of the Church, and the covenantal responsibilities we took with baptism. I can teach that in every volume of scripture we are reminded that through our efforts as the seed of Abraham “shall all the families of the earth be blessed, even with the blessings of the Gospel, which are the blessing of salvation, even of life eternal” (Abraham 2:11). I can teach and testify that missionary work is directly linked to the Atonement of Christ. The more I feel the love

of the Savior in my life, the greater is my desire to stand as a witness of the Lord and share what He has done for me with others around me. In fact, sharing the gospel with others is a manifestation of our love for the Savior and our gratitude for His sacrifice in our behalf. President Howard W. Hunter declared, “Any time we experience the blessings of the Atonement in our lives, we cannot help but have a concern for the welfare of others. . . . A great indicator of one’s personal conversion is the desire to share the gospel with others.”<sup>16</sup> The more we can help our students understand *who* they are, *what* the Atonement has done for them, and *why* the Lord expects them to share the gospel with others, the *how* of missionary work becomes clearer. As President Henry B. Eyring taught:

I’ve studied carefully and prayerfully some who are remarkably faithful and effective witnesses of the Savior and His Church. Their stories are inspiring. . . .

There is no single pattern in what they do. There is no common technique. . . . They each seem to get a different answer, suited especially to them and to the people they meet.

But in one way they are all alike. It is this: they have a common way of seeing who they are. They can do what they have been inspired to do because of who they are. To do what we are to do, we will have to become like them in at least two ways. First, they feel they are the beloved children of a loving Heavenly Father. Because of that, they turn to Him easily and often in prayer. They expect to receive His personal direction. They obey in meekness and humility, like the children of a perfect parent. He is close to them.

Second, they are the grateful disciples of the resurrected Jesus Christ. They know for themselves that the Atonement is real and necessary for all. They have felt cleansed through baptism by those in authority and the receipt of the Holy Ghost for themselves. . . .

Those who speak easily and often of the restored gospel prize what it has meant to them. They think of that great blessing often. It is the memory of the gift they have received which makes them eager for others to receive it. They have felt the love of the Savior.<sup>17</sup>

## Conclusion

Being a mission president was for me the most intense, most busy, most demanding, most difficult, most tiring—both physically and emotionally—and most rewarding thing, outside of my family, I have ever done in my life. What a privilege it was to serve! I don’t know whether I did any good for others, but I know the mission did good for me. I am different because of it, and I will be forever grateful for that transformation. I am often asked, “What do you miss the most from

your mission?” Like any returning missionary, young or old, there are many things that will be deeply missed. (There are also many things that I won’t miss!) I already miss the constant involvement with the full-time missionaries—the teaching, training, encouraging, and lifting. I miss seeing the miracles that occurred within them and the miracles they wrought around them.

Upon returning to my faculty position at BYU, I must admit that I was disappointed that I was not assigned to teach Religion 130, Sharing the Gospel. But now I realize that all that I teach—whatever the course, whatever the concept—is truly missionary preparation and sharing the gospel. All of our students—and all of us, as well—are part of the prophetically envisioned “greatest generation of missionaries in the history of the Church.” For that vision to be realized, we must be the greatest generation of religious educators—missionary preparers, testimony strengtheners, gospel scholar developers, doctrinal dot-connectors, and, by all means, faith builders. That is a lot to do. That is a serious and sacred responsibility. So as my missionaries would often say, “Let’s step up. There’s a bar that needs raising.” **RE**

---

## Notes

1. M. Russell Ballard, in Conference Report, October 2002, 50.
2. Ballard, in Conference Report, October 2002, 52; emphasis added.
3. Ballard, in Conference Report, October 2002, 57.
4. James E. Faust, in Conference Report, April 1996, 59.
5. Neal A. Maxwell, “The Inexhaustible Gospel,” in *1991–92 Speeches* (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University), 141.
6. William R. Bradford, in Conference Report, October 1987, 90.
7. Harold B. Lee, “President Harold B. Lee Directs Church; Led by the Spirit,” *Church News*, July 15, 1972, 4.
8. Boyd K. Packer, in Conference Report, October 1986, 20.
9. “Statement on Missionary Work,” First Presidency letter, December 11, 2002.
10. *Preach My Gospel* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2004), 21.
11. *Preach My Gospel*, 29.
12. These study suggestions are adapted from *Preach My Gospel*, 22–24.
13. Neal A. Maxwell, in Conference Report, April 1986, 45.
14. David A. Bednar, in Conference Report, October 2005, 47–48.
15. See M. Russell Ballard, in Conference Report, April 2006, 88.
16. Howard W. Hunter, “The Atonement and Missionary Work,” seminar for new mission presidents, June 1994, quoted in *Preach My Gospel*, 13.
17. Henry B. Eyring, in Conference Report, April 2003, 30–31.