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A Teacher of God's Children

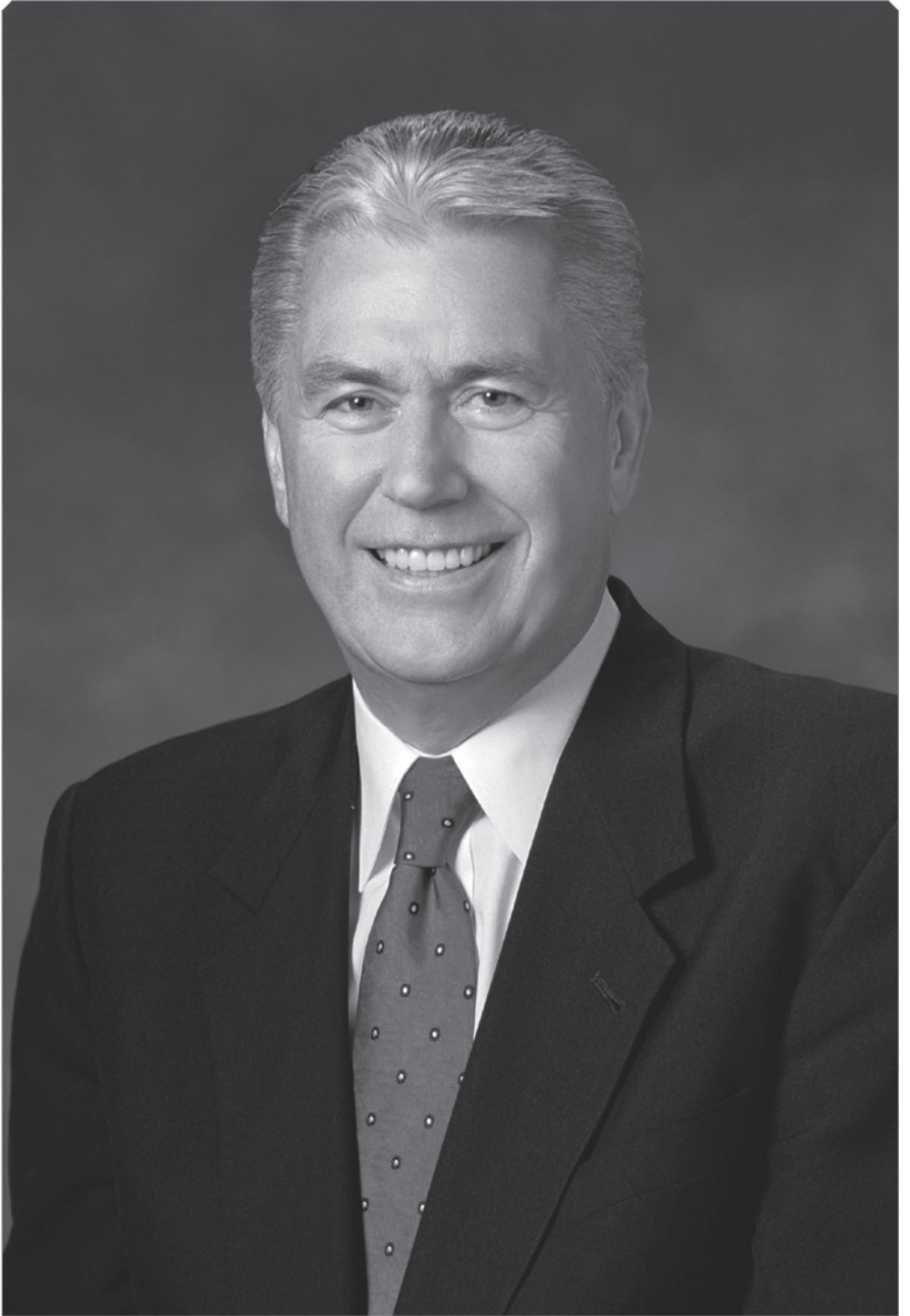
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President Dieter F. Uchtdorf

A Teacher of God's Children

PRESIDENT DIETER F. UCHTDORF

President Dieter F. Uchtdorf is Second Counselor in the First Presidency.

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*Address to Church Educational System Religious Educators, January 28, 2011,
Salt Lake Tabernacle.*

What a pleasure it is to be with you today. I love and honor you. I am most grateful to President Monson for this assignment. I express the love and gratitude of the First Presidency and the Twelve Apostles for your righteous influence on the youth of the Church throughout the world. I pray that the Holy Ghost will bless and edify us as we share this special time together.

In addition to those who are here in this beautiful, historic Tabernacle, we are joined by more than 42,000 seminary and institute teachers in more than 150 countries, with translation in twenty-three languages. Many of you are seeing this broadcast live; some will watch it on DVD at a later time. All this is a modern miracle. But above all, it is our faith in the Lord our God and the miracle of His restored gospel that draw us together across all kinds of boundaries to be edified, uplifted, and united by the power of the Spirit.

My heart reaches out in gratitude to you who have chosen teaching as your profession and to all who teach in response to a call from your priesthood

leaders. President David O. McKay once said, “No greater responsibility can rest upon any man [or woman], than to be a teacher of God’s children.”¹

Some years ago I was privileged to accompany President Boyd K. Packer on a trip through Europe. As we checked in at our hotel and filled out the usual forms, I was curious to see what President Packer would choose to list as his occupation. At the time he was the Acting President of the Twelve, he had a doctorate degree, he had served as a board member in multiple corporations, and he had been a pilot. There were so many occupations he could have listed. I was deeply touched, but not surprised, when President Packer signed in as “Teacher”!

Each of us, at some time during our membership in the Church, will be a teacher. That is one of the beauties of this Church. The call to teach is an opportunity to follow Jesus Christ, the Master Teacher.

Brothers and sisters, as teachers in seminary or institute, you are privileged to help the rising generation walk toward eternity in the footsteps of the Savior. I wish to congratulate you on the tremendously effective work you are doing. Perhaps you do not always realize how far your influence reaches into the lives of those you teach. The positive impact of seminary and institute might not be readily apparent to those involved in the day-to-day work. Nevertheless, don’t ever underestimate what the Lord is doing through you. When one stands back and looks across a longer period of time, it is obvious that much has been accomplished, and that alone is very gratifying.

I had to grow up in the Church without seminary or institute, and I remember very well the gradual process of implementing these programs in my native country. There is no doubt in my mind that young members today who have the privilege to participate in seminary and institute are far better educated in the history, doctrine, and practices of the Church than any other generation in Church history.

I am confident that the seminary and institute programs have been among the most significant contributors to the stability and strength of the growing worldwide Church. I commend and thank you warmly for what you are doing to establish the Church among every nation, tongue, and people.

I know that it has taken great faith and prayers and tremendous effort, but I know also that you receive sweet satisfaction as those who have been under your guidance flourish. Many become effective missionaries and then go on to become faithful and active members of the Church and strong and able citizens who carry responsibilities of leadership in many parts of the earth.

Your continued guidance will help many young people to get the best education and vocational training possible and excel in their chosen fields in life.

Unto the Ends of the Earth

Isn't it interesting that from the very beginning of this dispensation—even when the Church was still small and obscure—the Prophet Joseph Smith and his successors have spoken of this work in universal terms? For example, the modern revelations contain this grand, global declaration: “Hearken ye people from afar; and ye that are upon the islands of the sea, listen together. For verily the voice of the Lord is unto *all men*, and there is none to escape; and there is no eye that shall not see, neither ear that shall not hear, neither heart that shall not be penetrated. . . . Wherefore the voice of the Lord is unto the ends of the earth, that *all* [who want to] hear may hear” (D&C 1:1–2, 11; emphasis added).

Let me quote another prophecy that seems remarkable considering the humble circumstances of the Church at that time: “The arm of the Lord shall be revealed in power in convincing the nations . . . of the gospel of their salvation. For it shall come to pass in that day, that *every man* shall hear the fulness of the gospel in his own tongue, and in his own language, through those who are ordained unto this power, by the administration of the Comforter, shed forth upon them for the revelation of Jesus Christ” (D&C 90:10–11; emphasis added).

When this revelation was given, the Church was just over three years old. Missionary work outside the United States had not even begun yet, and the fastest way to travel back then was by horse and buggy. I can only imagine how the members must have felt when they heard prophecies about the islands of the sea and the ends of the earth and every man hearing the gospel in his own tongue. They definitely had faith, and they added plenty of courage and hard work. Today we see that their faith was not in vain. Now we can easily communicate across continents and oceans by phone, satellite, or videoconference; we travel by plane, high-speed train, or by car. Recently I learned that some seminary classes are even held by means of Skype or iChat.

All these developments could easily seem like a dream. But they are not a dream; they are part of the fulfillment of prophecy! I give thanks for the miracles of modern communication and transportation that have helped make it possible for the voice of the Lord to reach the ends of the earth.

Penetrating Hearts

As miraculous as these new technologies may seem, they are only a small part of the fulfillment of the Lord's prophecies. Modern modes of transportation can bring Church leaders and missionaries to distant lands. Modern modes of communication can bring the scriptures and the words of the prophets before the eyes and ears of God's children everywhere. But they cannot accomplish what I consider an even greater miracle: bringing the gospel into their hearts. To accomplish this, we need something even more miraculous than modern technology. We need effective, loving teachers.

Brothers and sisters, this is your role in the Lord's work. Because of your dedicated service, this miracle occurs in thousands of seminary and institute classes every day. You are helping bring to pass the Lord's promise that "there is no . . . heart that shall not be penetrated" (D&C 1:2).

Today I would like to share with you a few plain and simple guidelines that will help you work such a wonderful miracle. I sincerely pray for the direction of the Holy Spirit that the following five selected topics of counsel may be of some help to you in your most significant responsibilities.

1. Follow the Master Teacher

Our purpose and our efforts as teachers, leaders, and administrators must be centered on the Master Teacher—His gospel, His teachings, His example, and His love. For this reason, "we labor diligently to write, to persuade our children . . . to believe in Christ, and to be reconciled to God; for we know that it is by grace that we are saved, after all we can do. . . . And we talk of Christ, we rejoice in Christ, we preach of Christ, we prophesy of Christ, and we write according to our prophecies, that our children may know to what source they may look for a remission of their sins" (2 Nephi 25:23, 26).

Let us help the youth of the Church learn to love the Lord, for what we love determines what we seek. What we seek determines what we think and do. What we think and do determines who we are—and who we will become.

As we teach our young people to love the Savior Jesus Christ, they will become true disciples of the Master. This process will prepare them to become loyal, loving husbands and fathers, wives and mothers—leaders of eternal families. The temples will become a natural and important part of their lives. They will become missionaries, serving the Lord on missions as young adults and later as mature couples. These will be joyful and highly

anticipated waypoints on their charted course. As we strengthen our youth by pointing them to Christ, we also strengthen families and the Church.

Your students will love, admire, and be most grateful to you. Brothers and sisters, be thankful for this. But don't you ever inhale it. When you begin to inhale it—when you become obsessed with your own greatness and importance as teachers, when you begin to dwell on your influence or reputation—that's when pride will begin to corrupt your motives and behavior. Remember that it is the Savior, not you, who must be the focus of your service.

For the word of the Lord to penetrate the hearts of our young people, we need teachers who are bold enough to teach the doctrine of the restored gospel and at the same time humble enough to teach only the doctrine of the restored gospel. Teachers who do not have their own agenda or hobbyhorses are the teachers we're looking for. Seminary and institute teachers should never seek to create their own followers. Rather, they should seek to follow the Master Teacher and His anointed servants and to inspire their students to do the same.

I like the message in the finale of Stephen Sondheim's musical *Into the Woods*. The company sings:

Careful the things you say
Children will listen
Careful the things you do
Children will see and learn. . . .
Children will look to you for which way to turn
To learn what to be
Careful before you say "Listen to me"
Children will listen

We all know that this work will go forward with or without us. Let us live up to our privileges and opportunities and commit to be effective tools in the hand of the Lord. As you lose yourselves in His service, you will discover your own happiness and purpose in life.

2. Teach the Truth with Courage and Clarity

The Apostle Paul very accurately described our time when he wrote of people who are "ever learning, and never able to come to the knowledge of the truth" (2 Timothy 3:7), "having a form of godliness, but denying the power thereof." And he warned: "From such turn away" (2 Timothy 3:5). "For the time will

come when they will not endure sound doctrine. . . . And they shall turn away their ears from the truth, and shall be turned unto fables” (2 Timothy 4:3–4).

It is no secret that we are living in a morally confused world. The same technologies that facilitate access to the words of the prophets also make it easier for Satan to spread his lies. Today many people believe that there is no divine, absolute truth. They believe that God is not real, that He is a creation of a less-enlightened generation, and that moral truth is always relative to culture, circumstances, or the time in which we live. Some use clever names like new morality or situational ethics or moral relativism or being politically correct to camouflage the fact that the world is lacking moral direction and commitment to God’s laws.

Where do we stand as teachers of seminary and institute on this crucial issue of values and doctrine? Where do we stand as The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints?

We stand committed to a living and loving Heavenly Father, whose laws are absolute truths. Gospel doctrine and principles are eternal; they never change. They are the same yesterday, today, and forever, in all cultures, in all nations, and in all times. Traditions, languages, cultural expectations, and even programs of the Church may differ and change over time. However, the commandments of God and the doctrines of the restored gospel will stand firm and cannot be changed by man.

As a Church, as seminary and institute teachers, our course is charted. In 1938 President J. Reuben Clark Jr. gave a landmark address on education in the Church. Though he gave this message before I was born, it is still fresh, powerful, and profound today. We should regularly recheck our position on that charted course and make sure that we are not slowly drifting off course. The more we treasure the scriptures and the words of the prophets and apply them, the better we will be able to recognize when we are drifting—even if by only a few degrees.

I quote from President Clark’s timeless message:

We have passed the place where we . . . talk in ambiguous words and veiled phrases. We must say plainly what we mean, because the future of our youth, both here on earth and in the hereafter, as also the welfare of the whole Church, are at stake. . . .

The youth of the Church are hungry for things of the Spirit; they are eager to learn the gospel, and they want it straight, undiluted. They want to know about the fundamentals . . . ; they want to gain testimonies of their truth. They are not . . . doubters but inquirers, [they are] seekers after truth. . . .

They want it in its simplicity and purity. . . .

You do not have to sneak up behind [our] youth and whisper religion in [their] ears; you can come right out, face to face, and talk with [them]. You do not need to disguise religious truths with a cloak of worldly things; you can bring these truths to [them] openly.²

What a quote! This eagerness to learn that President Clark described is also expressed beautifully in one of our favorite hymns:

I am a child of God,
 And he has sent me here. . . .
 Lead me, guide me, walk beside me,
 Help me find the way.
 Teach me all that I must do
 To live with him someday.

The second verse of this wonderful hymn adds a sense of urgency to this plea:

I am a child of God,
 And so my needs are great;
 Help me to understand his words
 Before it grows too late.³

Our young people want to believe; they yearn to know more about the Savior. Our responsibility is to teach them the truth with such clarity that they will not be confused by the philosophies of the world.

This is how faith is developed, as the Apostle Paul taught: “Faith [comes] by hearing, and hearing by the word of God” (Romans 10:17). For “how shall they believe in him of whom they have not heard? and how shall they hear without a [teacher]?” (Romans 10:14). Brothers and sisters, the eternal truths of the gospel of Jesus Christ have the power to cut through the moral confusion of our day and penetrate the hearts of our youth.

Paul also said, “For if the trumpet give an uncertain sound, who shall prepare . . . to the battle? . . . Except ye utter . . . words easy to be understood, how shall it be known what is spoken?” (1 Corinthians 14:8–9). We must teach gospel truths with courage and clarity.

We cannot afford to “give an uncertain sound.” There is an old saying: “A man with one watch knows what time it is; a man with two watches is never quite sure.”⁴ We need to help our youth to know and to recognize the right “signs of the times” (see D&C 68:11). It is then the responsibility and the privilege of our young people to listen, to hearken, and to decide for themselves how to live their lives.

Clarity and plainness in teaching have always been a hallmark of our prophets. Our beloved President Gordon B. Hinckley was masterful at teaching with understandable words and in logical lines of thought. He said: “Effective teaching is the very essence of leadership in the Church. Eternal life will come only as men and women are taught with such effectiveness that they change and discipline their lives. They cannot be coerced into righteousness or into heaven. They must be led, and that means [effective] teaching.”⁵

3. Teach by the Spirit

When I was a stake president in Frankfurt, Germany, one of the bishops in our stake was a Church Educational System employee overseeing the development of seminary in Germany. He was a great teacher and motivator. In his ward he had a group of young men who were extremely difficult. There were times when I, as their stake president, had little faith or hope that they would stay active or ever become temple worthy or serve missions. This bishop, however, had a way of teaching and motivating these young men that I can only call pure inspiration. He even motivated me, as his stake president, to continue to believe in these young men. They continued to look quite rough around the edges, and their behavior was not always exemplary, but they caught the fire of his testimony. And I knew that this good bishop was continuously seeking for the gifts of the Spirit to touch their hearts.

Let me tell you the rest of the story by quoting a letter I received from one of these young men in November 2010.

Dear President Uchtdorf,

Let's see if your memory serves you as well as your conference talk on pride served me. My name is [so-and-so], and you ordained me an elder in 1986, when you were our stake president.

What has happened to me since then? Well, I served a mission, got married to a wonderful girl 15 years ago, had four beautiful children born in the covenant, serve in my callings faithfully, work in the temple, and most of all I hold fast to the iron rod.

Why am I writing you all of this? Because, as you know, I did not always hold fast onto the iron rod, and when others looked at me with doubt, you saw me the way I am today. I felt your love and confidence.

I have tried to live a kind of life you exemplify. I have tried to look at others the way you looked at me because we are all children of a Heavenly Father, and sooner or later we will turn to His love and arms of mercy.

Thank you for your confidence in me.

Brothers and sisters, many of your students will be blessed in their process of conversion by the strength of your testimony, your faith, your confidence and love for them. Because of your charity toward our young people and the virtue of your example, their confidence will eventually become “strong in the presence of God.” Your testimonies, your teachings will “distil upon [their] soul as the dews from heaven.” This will be possible only if “the Holy Ghost [is your] constant companion” (D&C 121:45–46).

In your role as teachers in this great work, you need to have the Spirit. No eternal learning can take place without that quickening of the Spirit from heaven. “When a man speaketh by the power of the Holy Ghost the power of the Holy Ghost carrieth it unto the hearts of the children of men” (2 Nephi 33:1). For this reason, you are to teach the gospel “by the Spirit, even the Comforter which was sent forth to teach the truth.” You must continually ask yourselves, Do I teach the gospel “by the Spirit of truth”? Or do I teach it “some other way”? I hope it will never be “some other way,” because then, the Lord has warned, “it is not of God” (D&C 50:14, 17–18).

4. Teach from the Heart

To bring the word of the Lord to the hearts of our youth, we need excellent teachers. And our teachers have to come from our local membership, no matter how small the pool or how inexperienced our members may be. In this we follow the pattern described in the Book of Mormon: “The Lord doth grant unto all nations, of their own nation and tongue, to teach his word, yea, in wisdom, all that he [sees] fit that they should have” (Alma 29:8).

Many of you listening to this broadcast are not professional teachers and have no technical training in the field of education. To you the assignment to teach seminary or institute may seem overwhelming or beyond your abilities. In fact, considering the eternal significance of this work, even those of you who are professionally trained probably ought to feel overwhelmed every now and then.

Let me share an experience from my youth about the help we may receive through the power of a right motive and attitude.

After the turmoil of the Second World War, my family ended up in Russian-occupied East Germany. When I attended fourth grade, I had to learn Russian as my first foreign language. I found this quite difficult because of the Cyrillic alphabet, but as time went on, I seemed to do all right.

When I turned eleven, we had to leave East Germany overnight because of the political orientation of my father. I was going to school in West Germany, which was American-occupied at the time. There, schoolchildren were required to learn English and not Russian. To learn Russian had been difficult, but English was impossible for me. I thought my mouth was not made for speaking English. My teachers struggled. My parents suffered. And I knew English was definitely not my language.

But then something changed in my young life. Almost daily I rode my bicycle to the airport and watched airplanes take off and land. I read, studied, and learned everything I could find about aviation. It was my greatest desire to become a pilot. I could already picture myself in the cockpit of an airliner or in a military jet fighter. I felt deep in my heart this was my thing!

Then I learned that to become a pilot, I needed to speak English. Overnight, to the total surprise of everybody, including myself, it appeared as if my mouth had changed. I was able to learn English. It still took a lot of work, persistence, and patience, but I was able to learn English! Why? Because of a righteous and strong motive!

Your motives, attitudes, and thoughts to help and bless the rising generation will ultimately influence your actions. Your testimony of the truthfulness of the restored gospel of Jesus Christ is the most powerful motivating force in this process. My dear brothers and sisters, you are on the Lord's errand, and the Lord will qualify you for this work. Jesus repeatedly said to those who desire to serve Him, "Look unto me in every thought; doubt not, fear not" (D&C 6:36).

And always remember: "The best teachers teach from the heart, not from the book."⁶ And "Education is not so much the filling of a bucket as the lighting of a fire."⁷

The greatest teachers I have known were not necessarily the most proficient in techniques of teaching. Rather, they were able to speak spirit to spirit, heart to heart. Their great influence had less to do with mechanically following prescribed lesson plans or educational theories and more to do with sincerity, passion, and conviction.

Teachers who can craft elegant, polished sentences are impressive and pleasant to listen to. But teachers with compelling ideas, who speak heart to heart, inspire us to action. These teachers may not be as polished; they may speak with a soft voice. But when we listen to them, they open up new and fascinating vistas; they open the eyes of our understanding; they plant a

desire in our heart and mind that will reach out for eternity. I like the saying “If you want to build a ship, don’t give people orders to gather wood. Rather, teach them to long for the endless immensity of the sea.”⁸

Our daughter and son went through home-study seminary in Germany. The class met with a teacher only once a week. At first they had a very experienced and well-versed Church-employed teacher. They respected him very much. During this time they learned great things about the scriptures.

Then a volunteer teacher was called, Sister Dora Dieter, an elderly lady with modest teaching experience. She did not have a deep scholarly approach to the scriptures. However, with all her soul and heart this sister loved the Lord, the scriptures, and these young people. Each week she prepared for class by study and fasting. She taught with all the love in her heart. After the class, she shared homemade rolls with her students to break her fast. Our children still believe that her rolls were the best ever.

Whenever this sweet sister found that the students had failed to read the week’s study assignments, it was not uncommon for her to shed some tears of sorrow. When the students participated with cheerful eagerness in class, she cried tears of joy. She bore testimony of the Savior and the Restoration continually. She planted in the hearts and minds of the youth the conviction that seminary and gospel living were key to their successful future. These young people could not escape the divine influence of the love this teacher had for them. There were times when they did their homework just because they did not want to disappoint their angel teacher.

Not all teachers are the same, nor should they be. We each have different talents, skills, and abilities. We need to celebrate and take advantage of these differences rather than force everyone into the same pattern. But there are some things we all should have in common: we should live righteous lives, love our students, love the gospel, love the Lord, and teach by the Spirit. We should guide our youth to set their priorities right so they will excel in their education, in school and vocational efforts, and follow the Savior. If you follow the Spirit, you will be an effective tool in the hand of the Lord to help the precious youth of the Church qualify for eternal life with our Heavenly Father. If, on the other hand, we overcomplicate the educational approach or slip into a businesslike attitude, we could easily lose track of what religious education is all about—helping our young people understand and rely on the teachings and Atonement of Jesus Christ.

5. Testify

Brothers and sisters, we are a testimony-bearing people, and this should be especially true for us as teachers. The Lord gave a charge to His disciples to teach the gospel of the kingdom “in *all* the world for a witness unto *all* nations” (Matthew 24:14; emphasis added). “And with great power gave the apostles witness of the resurrection of the Lord Jesus: and great grace was upon them *all*” (Acts 4:33; emphasis added).

This has been the divine pattern throughout the ages, and this pattern will continue until the Lord returns in glory. The teacher who bears testimony by the power of the Spirit will be able to touch the hearts and minds of the students.

Brigham Young found this to be true of his own conversion to the gospel. He said:

If all the talent, tact, wisdom, and refinement of the world had been combined in one individual, and that person had been sent to me with the Book of Mormon, and had declared in the most exalted of earthly eloquence, the truth of it, undertaking to prove it by his learning and worldly wisdom, it would have been to me like the smoke which arises only to vanish. But when I saw a man without eloquence, or talents for public speaking, who could only just say, ‘I know by the power of the Holy Ghost that the Book of Mormon is true, that Joseph Smith is a prophet of the Lord.’ The Holy Ghost proceeding from that individual [illuminated] my understanding, and light, glory, and immortality [were] before me; I [was] encircled by it, filled with it, and [I knew] for myself that the testimony of the man [was] true.⁹

My dear brothers and sisters, my dear friends, let me conclude in this spirit of testimony. With all my heart and soul, I bear witness that God lives. He lives and He loves us. He knows you and He loves you; He has great confidence and trust in you. He trusts you in your great responsibility as a teacher of the youth—the rising generation—of the Church. You are entitled to heaven’s help. The Spirit will lead you and these precious young people unto new and brighter horizons. I have a personal witness that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God, the Savior, the Redeemer of the world. I know this is true. I know that this is His Church; He presides over it, and He is close to His servants.

I bear witness to you that President Thomas S. Monson is the prophet for our day. I love and sustain him with all my soul. May God bless each of you and your families. May there be love and peace in your homes. I bless you with a peaceful heart and the knowledge that your sacrifices, your service, and your love for this great cause have been accepted by the Lord. I bless you as

an Apostle of the Lord and express my deep gratitude and love for you in the sacred name of Jesus Christ, amen. **RE**

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Notes

1. David O. McKay, in Conference Report, October 1916, 57.
2. J. Reuben Clark Jr., "The Charted Course of the Church in Education" (address to seminary and institute of religion leaders, August 8, 1938), 2–3, 6; <http://si.lds.org/teacherresources>.
3. Naomi W. Randall, "I Am a Child of God," *Hymns* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1985), no. 301.
4. Lee Segall.
5. Gordon B. Hinckley, "How to Be a Teacher When Your Role as a Leader Requires You to Teach," General Authority Priesthood Board Meeting, February 5, 1969.
6. Author unknown.
7. William Butler Yeats.
8. Antoine de Saint-Exupéry.
9. Brigham Young, in *Deseret News*, February 9, 1854, 4.