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The proper sequence for teaching is to obtain the word through diligent study and then to declare it. We cannot teach what we do not know.

Learn to Teach, Teach to Learn

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As a Gospel Doctrine teacher, I was more than a little concerned when I came to the lesson on the law of consecration.¹ Many ward members still remembered how it had been presented some years before by a teacher who believed the law of consecration was a failed “experiment” in communal living, an embarrassing folly, a socialist dream. I read the lesson, including all of the scriptures and quotations, a week early, but I struggled to know how to present it. I was stumped. I had lots of questions, and each question I answered seemed to lead to two more. I pondered the scriptures again and again. Not until the following Saturday night did my studies click, becoming clear in my mind, and I finally got an idea of how to present this subject. I used mint patties to represent stewardships—one patty represented one person’s needs, wants, and circumstances. At the beginning of the lesson, I used class members to create a minisociety with different types of families or individuals represented. I turned to the scriptures to show how people would consecrate their belongings and then receive a stewardship (a mint patty) by a deed and a covenant.

The exercise led to a most stimulating discussion. Class members raised interesting questions that I had not anticipated, and each time the Spirit led me to a scriptural passage that not only answered the question but opened new vistas of understanding. For example, one class member asked, “What about those who don’t carry their share of the load?” This question was easily answered by discussing Doctrine and Covenants 42:42: “Thou shalt not be idle; for he that is idle shall not eat the bread nor wear the garments of the laborer.” Another class member half-jokingly challenged me with this question: “Under the law of consecration, will I be able to own a boat?” He was referring to his very expensive ski boat with twin V-8 engines, a luxury that symbolized other luxuries such as campers, home theaters, ATVs, and so forth. I answered, “I don’t know, but let’s consider this passage.” We turned to Doctrine and Covenants 82:19—a verse I had not included in my lesson outline. I asked, “What role will a speedboat have in a righteous society in which ‘every man [is] seeking the interest of his neighbor, and doing all things with an eye single to the glory of God?’” This scripture and question, prompted by the Spirit, turned a mildly tense situation into a moment of profound self-reflection. Toward the end of the lesson, one sister expressed the feelings of many in the class, “This is the first time I have ever wanted to live the law of consecration.” She had been taught by the Spirit. That was probably the most memorable lesson I have ever taught, and I attribute its success to the guidance of the Spirit. Since then, what I learned by the Spirit has formed a framework for any additional study of this marvelous doctrine, and it has been confirmed repeatedly by prophetic teachings.

This experience, and others like it, showed me that learning and teaching interact dynamically. When we prepare and then teach a subject, we learn twice over. It is almost proverbial to state that the teacher benefits most from a well-prepared lesson. President Boyd K. Packer said, “As you give that which you have, there is a replacement, with increase!”² This article explores the beneficial relationship between learning and teaching.

Owning the Word

We are commanded to obtain the word before we declare it (see D&C 11:21–22). The proper sequence for teaching is to obtain the word through diligent study and then to declare it. We cannot teach what we do not know. Conversely, we can teach only that which we *do* know. As Nels Nelson said to an agrarian nineteenth-century audience, “Out of the fulness of the heart the

mouth speaketh. . . . If a man knows only how to raise potatoes, potatoes will be his sermon, let the Spirit strive as it will.”³

Obtain means to attain by planned action or effort. It comes from a Latin word meaning to “hold on to,” which recalls those in Lehi’s vision who were “clinging” or “holding fast” to the rod of iron (1 Nephi 8:24, 30). It also means to possess, attain, or acquire, suggesting rightful ownership through successful goal-directed effort. To teach the scriptures, then, we must plan to study and exert the effort to carry out our plan. President Marion G. Romney described this kind of spiritual effort: “For those of us who desire to effectively share the gospel, there are some very important lessons taught in this message [D&C 11:15–18, 21]. We must put our lives in order so the Lord’s Spirit can influence our thoughts and actions—so we can be taught from on high. We must work and study his word with full desire until his teachings become our teachings. Then we will be able to speak with power and conviction.”⁴

Such study and preparation to teach is inherently rewarding: “His teachings become our teachings.” We have indeed obtained the word. Holy words become burned into our souls by the Spirit through prayer and through experience in living them and explaining them to others. We come to own them, as Elder Bruce R. McConkie exemplified in his concluding testimony: “I shall use my own words, though you may think they are the words of scripture, words spoken by other apostles and prophets. True it is they were first proclaimed by others, but they are now mine, for the Holy Spirit of God has borne witness to me that they are true, and it is now as though the Lord had revealed them to me in the first instance.”⁵

Remembering the Word

Again, the Lord has promised that if we “treasure up” the word, we will be given in the very moment that portion that shall be meted, or measured, to the circumstances (see D&C 84:85). To *treasure* means, of course, “to store for future use,” but it also means “to cherish.” Storing and cherishing truth are interdependent. Brigham Young said, “If you love the truth you can remember it.”⁶ We remember more easily those things we value. President Henry B. Eyring said, “You may have noticed, as have I, that with the words that you recall came feelings, as if they were retrieved from your heart as much as from your mind. . . . If the words touched your heart when you heard them, they are easier to memorize and to recall. You can more easily treasure up what you hear or read today if it touches your heart.”⁷

Many of our most profound learning experiences come when we have a burning question, a paradox or apparent contradiction that needs to be resolved before we can rest. Such questions often arise in a teaching setting, when a student raises a question that we are not prepared to answer and we are compelled to search until we are satisfied. These experiences add to our storehouse of knowledge, which the Spirit can call upon in the very moment, according to the need (see D&C 84:85). Teaching a subject, with all of the preparation and searching and mental effort that implies, rivets what we learn in our memory.

Believing the Word

Knowledge is essential but not sufficient; we must also be convinced. We “know” many things that we do not believe. We “know” many things that we do not value or cherish. Spiritual conviction is critical. We must not only know doctrine cognitively; we must also feel it, and feel it deeply. Concerning our duty to teach, President David O. McKay said: “Do you believe it? Do you feel it? Does that testimony radiate from your being? . . . If so, that radiation will give life to the people whom you go to teach. If not, there will be a dearth, a drought, a lack of that spiritual environment in which the Saints grow. . . . You can teach effectively only that which you yourselves feel.”⁸

Teachers are told, “Declare the things which ye have heard, and verily believe, and know to be true” (D&C 80:4). The teacher is to “bear record . . . of that which he knows and most assuredly believes” (D&C 58:59). A teacher must, like Alma, speak in “the energy of [his] soul” because he knows the gospel with a surety born of the Spirit (see Alma 5:43–48).

The Prophet Joseph Smith said, “When a man is reined up continually by excitement, he becomes strong and gains power and knowledge; but when he relaxes for a season, he loses much of his power and knowledge.”⁹ We attain and retain such excitement by continually refreshing and expanding our knowledge. Elder Neal A. Maxwell said, “Part of what may be lacking, at times, in the decent teacher is a freshening personal excitement over the gospel which could prove highly contagious.”¹⁰

I once observed a missionary in training at the Provo Missionary Training Center. This was at a time when the missionary discussions were learned almost word for word. This young man struggled mightily. By the end of his three-week training period, he had not learned, in any real way, a single line from the discussions. His presentations were painfully dependent

on his printed script, and his speech was halting and unconvincing. One day I entered the classroom and saw the other ten missionaries in his district huddled around him, in rapt attention. The missionary, it seems, was something of an expert on Harry Potter, and he was talking with passion about many details of that fictional story. His speech was lively, articulate, and engaging. As I watched, I had a little epiphany. I thought, “When he knows and enjoys the gospel like he knows Harry Potter, no one will be able to constrain him from teaching.”

A scriptural scholar described the experience of searching the scriptures in preparation to preach: “The preacher leans over the text wanting to say what the lesson says: not merely to repeat an order of words, but to speak the text into life for a particular place and time, to speak the *fullness* of the text.”¹¹

One of the most satisfying experiences in teaching is to “speak the text into life for a particular place and time.” The Savior said that his words “are spirit, and they are life” (John 6:63). We treasure up “the words of life” (D&C 84:85) so that we can speak and teach and testify of the “Word of life” (1 John 1:1), having lived in and with his words until they become part of us, until we can bring them to life for our students. President Hugh B. Brown said, “There must be contagion if your teaching is to be effective. If your students are going to receive inspiration and if the subjects which you teach are to have meaning to them, those subjects must continue to have meaning to you. Only as you keep growing and stretching your own minds will the subjects you teach retain their interest and challenge and not grow old by repetition.”¹²

This “obtaining” the word, this ownership of scriptural meaning, this holding fast to the rod of iron is both essential for teaching and personally enriching for the teacher. Thus, President Gordon B. Hinckley said, “we must strengthen ourselves and our people to get our teachers to speak out of their hearts rather than out of their books, to communicate their love for the Lord and this precious work, and somehow it will catch fire in the hearts of those they teach.”¹³

Expounding the Word

We are commanded to “expound” the gospel from the scriptures (see D&C 68:1–4; 71:1), as exemplified by Jesus Christ (see Luke 24:27; 3 Nephi 23:6, 14; 24:1; 26:1–3). *Expound* means to explain systematically. A *system* is a set of things that work together as an interconnecting network; orderliness; an organized scheme or method. This provides a clue concerning the nature of

teaching and also our preparation to teach. We can't explain to others what we can't explain to ourselves. To explain something to ourselves we need to see how things work together; we need to see the order and logic of the doctrine. When Peter was questioned by the Jewish members about the conversion of the Gentiles, "Peter rehearsed the matter from the beginning, and expounded it by order unto them" (Acts 11:4). Peter's rehearsal was a narrative of events, but the same thing applies to doctrine. We should expound doctrines by order. We should strive to combat complexity with simplicity, a primary virtue in a teacher. We should strive to clearly state the unity and organization of a scriptural passage or book. It was said of Joseph Smith that "he would unravel the scriptures and explain doctrine as no other man could. What had been mystery he made so plain it was no longer mystery" or that "he could hand out to all mankind God's divine law and make it so plain to the understanding of the people, that on reflection one would think he had always known it, whereas you had only just been taught it."¹⁴ Nephi delighted in "plainness" so that his people could learn (2 Nephi 25:4). He said, "I have spoken plainly unto you, that ye cannot misunderstand" (2 Nephi 25:28).

Teachers derive great benefit from teaching the basic principles of the gospel, always striving to expound them more clearly. The Spirit "unfolds" them, or reveals them gradually to our view with increasing clarity. We see new connections and patterns. Hyrum Smith said, "Preach the first principles of the Gospel—preach them over again: you will find that day after day new ideas and additional light concerning them will be revealed to you. You can enlarge upon them so as to comprehend them clearly. You will then be able to make them more plainly understood by those who teach."¹⁵ Hyrum Smith here describes the depth of doctrinal understanding. The simple first principles never grow old, and we never quite plumb their depth. Continually receiving new ideas and additional light is a highly satisfying experience, one we should desire earnestly. It is an important way of refreshing our knowledge and conviction. Commenting on Hyrum's sermon, Heber C. Kimball said, "Suppose you had only one seed to plant, and that seed was an acorn, and you spend your time in cultivating it till it comes forth a great and mighty tree, branching forth with many branches and bearing fruit abundantly after its own kind. So it is with the first principles of the Gospel, they branch out in all directions, unfolding new light continually."¹⁶ President Spencer W. Kimball explained how this happens: "We learn to do by doing. If we study the gospel to teach it we have acquired knowledge, for where we carry the lantern to

light the path of others we light our own way. As we analyze and arrange the scriptures to present an acceptable lesson to others, we have clarified our own minds. As we explain that which we already know there seems to come to us an unfolding of additional truths, and enlargement of our understandings, new connections and applications.”¹⁷

Taught from on High

When we teach from the scriptures, we learn new things from the Comforter, who will “teach you all things” (John 14:26). We are taught from on high (see D&C 43:16; 1 John 2:27). President Romney said, “I always know when I am speaking under the inspiration of the Holy Ghost because I always learn something from what I’ve said.”¹⁸

Lehi was carried away in vision and received a book from “One descending out of the midst of heaven.” He read the book, and as he read, “he was filled with the Spirit of the Lord” (1 Nephi 1:12). When Lehi searched the records that Nephi had obtained from Laban’s treasury, he was “filled with the Spirit” (1 Nephi 5:17). The scriptures are a springboard to personal revelation. Elder McConkie said, “Those who preach by the power of the Holy Ghost use the scriptures as their basic source of knowledge and doctrine. . . . Many great doctrinal revelations come to those who preach from the scriptures. When they are in tune with the Infinite, the Lord lets them know, first, the full and complete meaning of the scriptures they are expounding, and then he oftentimes expands their views so that new truths flood in upon them, and they learn added things that those who do not follow such a course can never know.”¹⁹

The teacher who teaches the word of truth by the Comforter, and the student who receives the word of truth by the Spirit “understand one another, and both are edified and rejoice together” (D&C 50:17–22). Teaching by the Spirit is mutually beneficial. The CES Teaching Emphasis encourages seminary and institute teachers to “help students learn how to explain, share, and testify of the doctrines and principles of the restored gospel. We are to give them opportunities to do so with each other in class.” This practice helps students learn by the Spirit. The same thing is true of teachers who explain, share, and testify. When we publicly declare that which we know and most assuredly believe, we commit ourselves more firmly; our convictions grow deeper. “A testimony is to be *found* in the *bearing* of it!”²⁰

Applying the Word

Both study and teaching should end in the same place—action, application, experience, and character. We have not learned a principle until we apply it. “Apply yourself wholly to the text; apply the text wholly to yourself.”²¹ Paul wrote to the Jews, citing their expertise in the law and their presumed prerogative to stand as teachers to all mankind. He noted that they “restand in the law, and makest thy boast of God,” that they are confident that they “art a guide of the blind, a light of them which are in darkness, an instructor of the foolish, a teacher of babes.” But then he castigated them for the incongruity between their teachings and their actions: “Thou therefore which teachest another, teachest thou not thyself? thou that preachest a man should not steal, dost thou steal? Thou that sayest a man should not commit adultery, dost thou commit adultery?” (Romans 2:17–22).

The message? How can you claim to instruct others when you do not apply what you teach in your own lives? Abinadi said much the same thing to the wicked priests of King Noah, condemning them for teaching but not keeping the Ten Commandments. Abinadi read the commandments of God and said, “I perceive that they are not written in your hearts; I perceive that ye have studied and taught iniquity the most part of your lives” (Mosiah 13:11).

Long before Paul was converted, the Savior likewise condemned the hypocrisy of teaching principles that one does not observe: “All therefore whatsoever they bid you observe, that observe and do; but do not ye after their works: for they say, and do not” (Matthew 23:3). We are told, “Trust no one to be your teacher nor your minister, except he be a man of God, walking in his ways and keeping his commandments” (Mosiah 23:14; compare Mosiah 2:4). President Harold B. Lee taught, “Do you think you could teach any of the . . . principles of the gospel if you do not believe it sufficiently to implant it in your own lives?”²²

Obedience precedes effective teaching, for the instructor must teach by precept and example. But it is more than obedience; it is a process of becoming like the Savior. The philosopher Søren Kierkegaard wrote:

The person who is going to preach ought to live in the Christian thoughts and ideas; they ought to be his daily life. If so—this is the view of Christianity—then you, too, will have eloquence enough and precisely that which is needed when you speak extemporaneously without specific preparation. However, it is a fallacious eloquence if someone, without otherwise occupying himself with, without living in these thoughts, once in a while sits down and laboriously collects such thoughts . . . and then works them into a well-composed discourse, which is then committed to

memory and delivered superbly, with respect both to voice and diction and to gestures. No, just as in well-equipped houses one need not go downstairs to fetch water but has it up there on tap, under pressure—one merely turns on the faucet—so also is that person an authentic Christian speaker who, because the essentially Christian is his life, at every moment has eloquence present, immediately available, precisely the true eloquence.²³

The teacher enters into a symbiotic relationship with the students: teachers and students interact in a cooperative association that is advantageous to both. When we instruct one another, we are to “bind” ourselves to act in holiness (D&C 43:8–10). *Bind* has a number of relevant meanings. First, it means to put under an obligation, to make a firm commitment. It also means to “hold fast,” firmly, deeply, securely. It also means to tie or fasten tightly together, to hold in a united or cohesive group, as when the Saints are knit together in unity in love (see Mosiah 18:21). It can also mean restraint, as when we willingly abstain from sin. “Bind” suggests covenant language (see D&C 82:11; Ezekiel 20:37). Finally, to bind means to wrap or encircle tightly, as when the Lord encircles us in the arms of his love (see 2 Nephi 1:15; D&C 6:20). Once we have learned the truth from an instructor and felt the edifying influence of the Spirit, we should apply what we have learned. The instructor is the guide who leads the way, having previously committed to holy actions, and whose behavior reflects a character molded by righteousness. We should hold fast to these instructions, change our thoughts and beliefs, and act upon what we have learned. *We act in holiness* when we faithfully discharge our duties with a pure heart and pure motives. As we do so, the Lord promises that his grace—his enabling power—will attend us.

When both teachers and students study with real intent—when they intend to act upon what they learn—their Spirit-directed application becomes their own, and personal ownership of the action deepens their commitment. By continuing in the word, they become the Lord’s “disciples indeed”; they “know the truth” (John 8:31), and they “know of the doctrine” (John 7:17). Teachers thus incorporate scriptural teachings into their lives, become genuine examples, and experience the blessings of obedience. They hold up their light—that which they have seen the Savior do (see 3 Nephi 18:24).

Learning from One Another

The Lord said, “Appoint among yourselves a teacher, and let not all be spokesmen at once; but let one speak at a time and let all listen unto his sayings, that when all have spoken that all may be edified of all, and that every man may

have an equal privilege” (D&C 88:122). This direction implies reciprocal teaching and learning, as does the command to “teach one another” (D&C 88:77). Many teachers have marveled at how much they have learned from their students. Elder David A. Bednar emphasized that the blessings promised in Doctrine and Covenants 88:77–78 “are intended specifically for the teacher.”²⁴ When we teach diligently, grace does indeed attend us, and we ourselves are instructed more perfectly in doctrine and principles.

President Eyring admonished all of us, including teachers, to learn from one another. “I would be more eager to be taught. I would listen to others, as if I believed the Spirit could teach me through their words.”²⁵ Can a veteran seminary teacher learn gospel truths from a new high school freshman? President Eyring told this story:

When I was the president of Ricks College years ago, I remember having a man who was my priesthood leader come to my house each month to interview me about my home teaching. He brought with him a notebook in which he wrote notes. He recorded not only my report as a home teacher, but my observations about the gospel and life as well.

I remember at first being very flattered. Then one Sunday he and I were visiting what was then called junior Sunday School. He was a few rows in front of me. The speaker was a little girl, no more than six or seven, probably not yet old enough to have the gift of the Holy Ghost. I glanced over at the man and noticed with surprise that he had that same notebook open. As the little girl spoke, he was writing with as much speed and intensity as he had in the study of my home. I learned a lesson from him that I haven’t forgotten. He had faith that God could speak to him as clearly through a child as through the president of a college.²⁶

The story of Philip and the Ethiopian (see Acts 8:26–39) illustrates our need to learn from one another. While Philip is traveling, he meets the Ethiopian, who is sitting in his chariot reading Isaiah 53. Philip asks the Ethiopian if he understands what he is reading, and the Ethiopian replies, “How can I, except some man should guide me?” Elder Holland comments on this passage: “We are . . . all somewhat like the man of Ethiopia to whom Philip was sent. Like him, we may know enough to reach out for religion. We may invest ourselves in the scriptures. We may even give up our earthly treasures, but without sufficient instruction we may miss the meaning of all this and the requirements that still lie before us. So we cry with this man of great authority, ‘How can [we understand], except some [teacher] should guide [us]?’”²⁷

Matthew O. Richardson noted that the Ethiopian was a religious man who had just come from worshipping at Jerusalem, that he was a student of the scriptures and that it would be absurd to think that he lacked any capacity

to understand the scriptures on his own. “The Ethiopian was wise enough to seek further insight, clarification, and understanding to add to his own discoveries.” He “sought after a guide—someone with the background, experience, understanding, and necessary knowledge of the road—to point out things in his journey that were beyond his own perspective, skills to understand, or powers to grasp. Thus Philip, as a guide, was able to add substance, understanding, clarity, purpose, and even motivation to a journey that had already begun.”²⁸

Learning the gospel is a community affair including the interpretive community. It takes a village—a congregation—to raise a scriptural scholar. No man is sufficient unto himself; no man is an island.

Confirming the Word

Concerning truths that we discover in our personal studies, Elder Richard G. Scott said, “As each element of truth is encountered, you must carefully examine it in the light of prior knowledge to determine where it fits. Ponder it; inspect it inside out. Study it from every vantage point to discover hidden meaning. View it in perspective to confirm you have not jumped to false conclusions. Prayerful reflection yields further understanding. Such evaluation is particularly important when the truth comes as an impression of the Spirit.”²⁹

One of the best ways to validate what we learn is to teach it to others. By doing so, we expose ourselves in a sense. Our conclusions may be challenged. Our ideas will be tested as we counsel together. Teaching in a Church setting provides checks and balances. This is one reason why “there is safety in learning doctrine in gatherings which are sponsored by proper authority.”³⁰

I have often had to revise my thinking and beliefs, sometimes with a measure of pain. But pain can bring humility. When I first encountered the word *eisegesis* as it relates to scriptural study, I was curious. The word is rarely used in Latter-day Saint literature. My search led me to conclude that eisegesis—reading meaning *into* the text—was almost always bad interpretation. But then I read an article by a Latter-day Saint scholar who said, “There are two ways to read a text, through exegesis and through eisegesis. The first means, approximately, ‘reading out of the text,’ while the second means, approximately, ‘reading into the text.’ Both are legitimate ways of approaching a text.”³¹ My ideas were challenged, which caused considerable cognitive dissonance for me, but I gained greater understanding as I wrestled with and found a satisfactory solution to this problem.

President Eyring said, “I know a few of the reasons why the Lord requires us to listen to mortal servants. One of the reasons is that you and I need a check on our own inspiration occasionally. We can be mistaken. At times, even with real intent and with faith and with careful prayer, we may come to wrong conclusions. Listening to others can provide correction.”³²

Conclusion

We are to teach one another the doctrine of the kingdom. Sometimes we are teachers; sometimes we are students. At all times, we are learners, and often teachers learn more than pupils.

When Lehi tasted the fruit of the tree of life, he exclaimed that it was “most sweet, above all that I ever before tasted,” and he immediately desired that his “family should partake of it also” (1 Nephi 8:11–12). The tasting of the fruit and the sharing of it were equally desirable. Joseph Smith said, “Those who have tasted the benefit derived from a study of those works, will undoubtedly vie with each other in their zeal for sending them abroad throughout the world, that every son of Adam may enjoy the same privileges, and rejoice in the same truths.”³³ Truly, learning and teaching are flip sides of a coin—they are the medium of exchange in the kingdom of God. **RE**

Notes

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