



Religious Educator: Perspectives on the Restored Gospel

Volume 15 | Number 1

Article 3

1-2014

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BYU ScholarsArchive Citation

Johnson, Elder Paul V. "What More Might the Lord Give Us?." *Religious Educator: Perspectives on the Restored Gospel* 15, no. 1 (2014): 12-21. <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/re/vol15/iss1/3>

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Elder Paul V. Johnson

What More Might the Lord Be Willing to Give Us?

ELDER PAUL V. JOHNSON

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From a *Seminaries and Institutes of Religion* satellite broadcast on August 6, 2013.

Less than two weeks before the Evening with a General Authority broadcast, the announcement had been made that a high school run by the Church in Mexico City was to become a missionary training center, and I was so touched by the response of our employees and the students to the announcement that I decided to address the topic of responding appropriately to change.

Now that campus is a fully functioning MTC, and the smooth transition was facilitated by Seminaries and Institutes of Religion employees and students who not only accepted the decision but helped to bring this transition about. The students even created a booklet with a welcome and some encouraging words, as well as phrases in both English and Spanish, to help the missionaries through their first few days. They left the booklets in the dorm rooms as gifts to those who would be coming.

After that broadcast I had several people tell me they thought I was preparing the audience for a major announcement. That was not the case, but

there is always some type of change happening in the kingdom, in seminaries and institutes, and in our personal lives. For example, the announcement of the missionary age change less than a year ago has had a tremendous impact on many different fronts, including the Church Educational System, both in our seminaries and institutes and our institutions of higher education. It affected our family profoundly, since we now have a daughter serving a mission, who left as a nineteen-year-old.

We all face change, and how we respond will affect our personal happiness and our ability to follow the will of the Lord and contribute as the kingdom rolls forth. So today I would like to delve a little deeper into the topic of responding to change.

One of the great examples that contrasts different ways of dealing with change is found in the transition after the law of Moses was fulfilled among the people of the Book of Mormon and that same transition among the people of the New Testament.

Abinadi explained some background of the law of Moses:

It is expedient that ye should keep the law of Moses as yet; but I say unto you, that the time shall come when it shall no more be expedient to keep the law of Moses. . .

It was expedient that there should be a law given to the children of Israel, yea, even a very strict law; for they were a stiffnecked people, quick to do iniquity, and slow to remember the Lord their God;

Therefore there was a law given them, . . . a law which they were to observe strictly from day to day, to keep them in remembrance of God and their duty towards him. (Mosiah 13:27, 29–30)

Nephi explained the place of the law of Moses in the context of the doctrine of Christ:

For we labor diligently to write, to persuade our children, and also our brethren, 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, notwithstanding we believe in Christ, we keep the law of Moses, and look forward with steadfastness unto Christ, until the law shall be fulfilled. . . .

And after the law is fulfilled in Christ, . . . they need not harden their hearts against him when the law ought to be done away. (2 Nephi 25:23–24, 27)

The people in the Book of Mormon clearly knew the law would be fulfilled, and the time would come when the law would be done away. In fact, the one challenge they had in the transition from the law of Moses was that some of them thought they should cease observing the law before it was completely fulfilled (see 3 Nephi 1:24–25).

The Book of Mormon people's understanding of the proper place of the law and the smooth transition from the law after it was fulfilled is in stark contrast to what happened in the New Testament. Among the Jews of the New Testament, there didn't seem to be a general understanding that the law would ever be superseded. In addition, the law was meant to bring focus on the Savior—the Lawgiver—and that focus was lost to many, partly because of oral traditions and unauthorized additions to the requirements of the law. Many looked beyond the mark (see Jacob 4:14–15) and missed the Savior of the world. Ironically, a corrupted interpretation of the law was used to condemn the very lawgiver Himself.

With the completion of the atoning sacrifice and the Resurrection, the law of Moses was fulfilled, and members of the Church were not under obligation to follow it. However, the law was so ingrained in the members and leaders of the Church that the question of what to require of Gentile converts to Christianity became a contentious and difficult issue. Could they come directly into the Church, or were they expected to adhere to the requirements of the ceremonial law?

A council of Apostles and elders was convened to determine how to consider this matter (see Acts 15:6). After some disputing, Peter reminded the group that “the Gentiles . . . should hear the word of the gospel” (Acts 15:7) and that God “put no difference between us and them” (Acts 15:9). This was in reference to the revelation he received in the case of Cornelius (see Acts 10).

The decision was made to send letters to the Gentiles explaining a few things they should do but also explaining that they were not required to keep the law of Moses (see Acts 15:22–29). The decision of this council was, in effect, a half step. They could have sent a letter to all members of the Church, whether they were Jewish members or gentile members, explaining that the law had been fulfilled and no one was under obligation to keep the ceremonial law any longer. Why didn't they do that? Why a half step instead of a full stride?

I wasn't in that council and don't know every particular, but it seems one reason was because the members of the Church and other Jews around them were not ready and would not accept that drastic a change. Sometime later, when Paul returned to Jerusalem, he met with James and the elders. They explained to Paul that “many thousands of Jews . . . believe; and they are all zealous of the law” (Acts 21:20). So, even members of the Church were still keeping the law after it was fulfilled.

James and the others asked Paul to follow some ceremonial rituals with some others before entering the temple so that the people would see that he was still willing to observe the law. Again, why would they do this if the law was fulfilled and observing it was no longer required? Well, they were not ready to handle the full truth at the time.

Elder Bruce R. McConkie explained, “The Lord was giving gospel truths to them line upon line, precept upon precept. It was better to have them in the Church, seeking the Spirit, striving to keep the commandments, and trying to work out their salvation, than to leave them without the fold until they gained a full knowledge of all things.”¹

In this particular instance, just the accusation that Paul had taught against the law and brought Gentiles into the temple caused such an uproar that a mob of the Jews took Paul from the temple and were beating him and would have killed him had the Roman soldiers not intervened (see Acts 21:22–33). The Jews at the time were so steeped in the law they couldn’t get over the stumbling block that really was the chief cornerstone. In fact, the truth seemed like apostasy to them. Even some members of the Church were still zealous of the law after it had been fulfilled, and they expected others should be the same. This caused dissention and was a central issue for the early Church.

Do we want to be the ones the Brethren have to make concessions to because we are so steeped in tradition? Because of the misunderstanding and weakness of some Saints in those days, half-step decisions had to be made. In fact, the leaders were inspired to make them in order to bring the Church along line upon line, precept upon precept. What more might the Lord be willing to give us if we are humble and willing to change rather than resistant?

An example from medical history illustrates the danger of resisting change because of being steeped in tradition. In the nineteenth century, before germ theory was understood, there were different ideas about how infectious diseases were spread. A Hungarian doctor, Ignaz Semmelweis, observed a different rate of death by childbed fever between two clinics in the hospital where he worked. He noted that the only major difference between the two clinics was the people who worked at each. The clinic that had a higher mortality rate was used as a teaching setting for doctors, and those doctors also performed autopsies on cadavers as part of their training. The other clinic was for training midwives and did not include contact with cadavers.

Dr. Semmelweis concluded that the doctors’ hands were transmitting something from the cadavers to the mothers as the doctors went from one



Photo by Stefano Lunardi

Before germ theory was fully understood, doctors did not accept the early evidences or the recommendations that they should properly wash their hands. As more evidence was brought to light, the medical profession began making changes in procedures.

activity to the other without washing their hands. He recommended that doctors wash their hands in a chlorinated lime solution before attending to a birth. After he implemented this procedure in his hospital, death from child-bed fever dropped dramatically.

But the medical profession, in general, did not accept the recommendations from Dr. Semmelweis. In fact, some of the doctors were offended to think that they could actually be spreading disease. It wasn't until Louis Pasteur and others conducted more formal experiments and offered more concrete proof that the medical profession began making changes in procedures. There are now thorough washing and scrubbing techniques for operating rooms, along with very sanitary conditions to prevent infection, but these changes were not easily made because of the stubbornness of many in the medical profession at the time.

Besides actively resisting change, we can affect others' experiences by the way we approach things. Sometimes when we are trying to implement or emphasize something, we may oversell it and put it in a more central position than it should be and even confuse means and ends. Some believe this was a factor in the misunderstandings about the law of Moses in biblical times.

When the Jews were taken into captivity by the Babylonians, there may have been additions to and shifts in focus about the law. This was probably done in an effort to help the people keep themselves from the sins of the nations around them, but the long-term effect detracted from a true understanding of the purpose of the law. The focus became the law itself rather than “[keeping] them in remembrance of God and their duty towards him” (Mosiah 13:30).

My hope is that we in the Church Educational System don’t become stumbling blocks to the progress of the kingdom in any way. Is it possible to inadvertently contribute to resistance to needed change? How can we avoid doing this?

There has been an exciting change this past year with teaching the youth of the Church with the new *Come, Follow Me* resources for teaching. When we were working with the Young Women, the Young Men, and the Sunday School presidencies on this change in approach, we discussed what each organization could do to best help the youth. Now, what if the decision had been made that we in Seminaries and Institutes would teach conceptually rather than using sequential scripture teaching? Could we have made the transition smoothly? In our discussions it was felt that our best contribution would be to continue to teach the scriptures sequentially, but what if a different decision had been made? How would we have reacted?

I have been thinking about the use of scriptures in our classes. We don’t have a policy about the use of electronic versions of scriptures on phones or tablets in our classes, and we leave that decision to the teachers or faculties. There may be good reasons for the decision one way or the other. For example, someone may decide it is too disruptive to have students use phones or tablets in class. This may be a fully justified decision, but it could be harmful to try to sell the decision by implying in some way that studying the scriptures with a physical book is the only true way to do it. The medium on which we find the word is less important than the impact of the word on our souls. Would we be better off if students were studying the scriptures from plates of gold or brass or from parchment or papyrus? Each medium has its advantages and disadvantages. For example, it can be tough to mark and transport metal plates, but they sure last a long time, and you never need to recharge them!

The central issue is the word of God and not the medium on which it is found. What if some teacher has left the impression that one cannot truly study and use the scriptures if they are in an electronic form, and then the students become missionaries and begin using a tablet for their scripture study

and teaching? We wouldn't want them to think they could only experience a lower level of scripture study because they are using the electronic version.

There may also be teachers, in an attempt to utilize technology they find advantageous, that send the message to students or colleagues that unless they are studying the scriptures in a digital format, they are not doing it correctly. As far as the effect of the word on lives is concerned, one source for the scriptures is not inherently better than another. Each has advantages and disadvantages, but we shouldn't put the idea in a young mind that one medium is inferior for study to another. The advantage all have is that they make available the sacred word and can help change lives.

In the New Testament, many had lost sight of the purpose and intent of the law of Moses. In fact, the Savior pointed out that the scribes and Pharisees sometimes used the law or the additions to the law to sidestep the purpose or intent of the law (see Matthew 15:1-9; 23:13-33; Mark 2:23-28). We should be careful we don't do the same with employment and other policies in Seminaries and Institutes of Religion. They are meant to help us focus on our objective and to function properly. If personnel lose sight of the intent of the policies and instead look at them for how they can benefit themselves, they can end up looking for loopholes or using the policies in some legalistic way to get what they want. They would be trying to use the letter of the law to violate its spirit. We avoid this when we keep our hearts focused on our objective.

Sometimes we assume that an inspired idea or policy can never be changed. Well, there are numerous examples of inspired ideas that were right for a certain time and place but were later changed. The law of Moses was given by the Lord and was the right thing while it was in force. For years in this dispensation, there were regional representatives and Assistants to the Twelve. These positions were important for that time period in the Church, but the change from regional representatives and Assistants to the Twelve to the current use of the Seventy was also inspired. Sometimes we feel that a change somehow casts a bad light on things that have gone before, but that isn't the case.

When a new policy comes, I invite you to respond with a spirit of seeking to understand rather than to criticize. Decisions are made with the intent to bless our students, their families, and priesthood leaders, as well as helping those who work and serve in Seminaries and Institutes of Religion. Please ask questions when you don't understand a decision but do so assuming good

intent and with a desire to understand rather than to find something to murmur about. As we do this, we invite the Spirit to teach us.

When something new comes along in our lives, we should try to be open and view the possibilities in a good light. Many times, changes in assignments or callings fall into this category. Many teachers have accepted changes in their assignments or locations, including moving from institute to seminary, and others have remained in their assignments when they desired a change. I wish to thank them! While personal desires are considered in making assignments, it is so nice to be able to do what is right for this work without worrying that our employees will react poorly when given their assignments.

When we are familiar with one set of circumstances, it can be difficult for many of us to sense the potential good a change can bring when we can't see clearly down the road. Think of comparing the automobile with the horse and buggy in the very early 1900s. The horse and buggy had been developed and improved for hundreds of years and was at the pinnacle of its development. The automobile was in its infancy, and there were problems with breakdowns, finding fuel, and a poorly developed highway system. But there were visionaries at the time that could sense the potential of the automobile in the future, after it had had some time to develop.

Many things can and will change in the future. How can we be ready to move forward with needed changes and not get so entrenched that proper change seems like apostasy to us? We face change in the Church, in Seminaries and Institutes, and sometimes, most challengingly, in our families and personal lives.

The real test comes when there is a change to something that is near to our hearts—something about which we feel strongly. It isn't much of a test if it doesn't tug at our heartstrings or raise anxiety in our souls. Each of us will face these types of challenges in our personal lives. How will we respond? Our willingness to accept and embrace those personal changes the Lord would have us make is an important key to our individual development.

In the end, we all want our hearts, our countenances, and even our very natures changed. Our willingness to accept and even embrace difficult things triggers the Lord's power to make these fundamental changes within us. He knows each of us and loves us perfectly. He also knows what things we most need to change, and as we submit our will to His, He is able to change us (see Alma 5:7, 12, 14).

I know the Lord lives. I pray He will bless those who are teachers as they continue their tremendous service that is blessing so many lives, and I especially pray for God's blessings as they face the difficult individual challenges they encounter. In the name of Jesus Christ, amen. **RE**

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Note

1. Bruce R. McConkie, *Doctrinal New Testament Commentary* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1966–73), 2:184.