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Teachers need to be careful and vigilant with comments made about gospel doctrine and doctrinal interpretation in classroom settings. Definitive statements made in classroom settings can form deep impressions in the minds and hearts of students

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Understanding and Teaching Correct Doctrine Correctly

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Teachers need to be judicious with comments made on gospel doctrine and doctrinal interpretation in classroom settings. Among the membership of the Church, there are many opinions about doctrinal interpretations to be found in published works, on blogs, and, of course, in the classroom. Doctrinal comprehension can be influenced by both authoritative and less-than-authoritative ideas. Teachers may have extensive notes about specific doctrines that seem to support their comprehension even though, unknown to them, some of the notes may not be in harmony with what is the established Church teaching as taught by current prophets and apostles. The word *doctrine*, as used in this paper, refers not only to general gospel teachings but to multiple concepts associated with these teachings. For example, doctrines and principles associated with the spirit world address many concepts such as spirit prison, paradise, outer darkness, location of individual spirits, and social structure. They also include such ideas as the exact requirements to enter paradise; the duration each person will spend in hell; the number of people who will embrace the gospel; the success rate of missionary work in spirit prison; and the nature of the spirit world during the Millennium. Personal doctrinal

understanding and comments about such concepts may not always accurately reflect established Church teachings.

While serving as President of the Church, Spencer W. Kimball taught that “it is a common thing to have a few passages of scripture at our disposal, floating in our minds, as it were, and thus to have the illusion that we know a great deal about the gospel. In this sense, having a little knowledge can be a problem indeed.”¹ In addition to scriptural knowledge, the same principle applies to general doctrinal knowledge and interpretation.

This paper examines the risks of misunderstanding what is established Church doctrinal interpretation. It also considers the possibility of otherwise good teachers inadvertently misleading students in classroom settings. It offers suggestions to assist in distinguishing between well-established and less-established Church doctrines and doctrinal interpretations. In a previous article in the *Religious Educator*, Robert L. Millet commented, “Before beginning this discussion, let me affirm that I understand implicitly that the authority to declare, interpret, and clarify doctrine rests with living apostles and prophets. This paper will thus speak only *about* doctrine and in no way attempt to reach beyond my own stewardship.”² His comment reflects the approach of this paper.

Responsibility of Teachers to Identify and Teach the Truth

There are varying degrees of definitiveness associated with doctrinal interpretations. Some interpretations are inaccurate, while others, though accurate, may not be as well established and documented. It is important to know that there can be varying degrees of accuracy or exactness with regard to doctrinal learning and teaching. In this paper, *correct* usually refers to a teaching that is inherently true regardless of personal interpretation, while *accurate* refers to a description of the truth that is approved and authorized by the Church. In the Doctrine and Covenants, truth is defined as “knowledge of things as they are, and as they were, and as they are to come. . . . All truth is independent in that sphere in which God has placed it, to act for itself, as all intelligence also; otherwise there is no existence” (D&C 93:24, 30). A current Seminaries and Institutes manual defines doctrine as “a fundamental, unchanging truth of the gospel of Jesus Christ.”³ The Book of Mormon states that “the Spirit speaketh the truth and lieth not. Wherefore, it speaketh of things as they really are, and of things as they really will be” (Jacob 4:13). The adverb *really* emphasizes the absolute and eternal nature of truth regardless of opinions, whether they

be close to or far from the truth. Teachers need to be cognizant of their own understanding of gospel doctrines, gain insight into how the understanding was formed, and make appropriate adjustments when needed.

In Seminaries and Institutes, the pattern established by the “Fundamentals of Gospel Teaching and Learning” includes the following: understanding context and content; identifying and understanding the meaning of doctrines and principles; feeling the truth and importance of those principles and doctrines through the influence of the Spirit; and applying such principles and doctrines practically.⁴ This pattern underlines the need for a more comprehensive and accurate understanding of correct doctrinal truth, as opposed to a rudimentary awareness. Simply being able to locate and expound on passages of scripture does not constitute adequate knowledge of gospel doctrine. Teachers must stand steadfast on the rock of sound, accurate, up-to-date, and approved doctrinal teaching and interpretation. Joseph F. McConkie, while serving as an LDS chaplain, noted, “Meaningful attention will be accorded the teacher who establishes the reputation of being orthodox and sound in doctrine.”⁵

The Doctrine and Covenants outlines the importance of teaching only what is found in the standard works and what is taught by prophets and apostles: “And again, the elders, priests and teachers of this church shall teach the principles of my gospel, which are in the Bible and the Book of Mormon, in the which is the fulness of the gospel” (D&C 42:12). It also states: “And let them journey from thence preaching the word by the way, saying none other things than that which the prophets and apostles have written, and that which is taught them by the Comforter through the prayer of faith. . . . Let them labor with their families, declaring none other things than the prophets and apostles, that which they have seen and heard and most assuredly believe, that the prophecies may be fulfilled” (D&C 52:9, 36).

The pleading in one of our hymns is to “fill my mind with understanding; Tune my voice to echo thine.”⁶ It is important that teachers are striving to be in harmony with the First Presidency and the Quorum of the Twelve. The mandate to teach includes teaching correct doctrine accurately while being attuned to what is authoritative and approved by those fifteen men who are sustained as prophets, seers, and revelators. The formal objective of Seminaries and Institutes of Religion emphasizes that teachers should “teach students the doctrines and principles of the gospel *as found in the scriptures and the words of the prophets.*”⁷ Doctrine and Covenants counsels, “And I give

unto you a commandment that you shall teach one another the doctrine of the kingdom. Teach ye diligently and my grace shall attend you, that you may be instructed more perfectly in theory, in principle, in doctrine, in the law of the gospel, in all things that pertain unto the kingdom of God, that are expedient for you to understand” (D&C 88:77–78). The phrase “doctrine of the Kingdom” refers to the *revealed* truths of the gospel⁸, not personal opinion and interpretation.

Students are to be taught substantive, revealed truth, as opposed to perceived or unorthodox doctrine. Teachers should avoid teaching doctrinal interpretations that are not representative of official Church teachings. President Boyd K. Packer, former President of the Quorum of the Twelve, once said, “It is not the belief in a false notion that is the problem, it is the teaching of it to others.”⁹ Teachers who assume that false doctrine only emanates from peripheral exponents rather than respected teachers can develop a false sense of doctrinal security. All teachers should be vigilant at all times. The Church manual *Teaching, No Greater Call* states, “We should ensure that we teach correct doctrine.”¹⁰ Great care should be taken before making definitive and interpretative statements on doctrine unless it is known to what extent the statements are established and accepted in the Church as taught by the First Presidency and Quorum of the Twelve. President Henry B. Eyring has stated that “we must pray in faith that the Spirit will warn us away from teaching false doctrine, from giving personal interpretation, and from all speculation as we teach the gospel. That restraint may become more difficult as we read more books and hear more talks with what seem to us to be novel or more profound expositions of the gospel.”¹¹

The teaching of doctrine needs to be aligned with the prophets and apostles while reducing the possibility of teaching less-than-accurate doctrinal interpretation. *Gospel Teaching and Learning* states, “Teachers should consistently look for opportunities to use the scriptures and words of the prophets to clarify and illustrate the doctrines and principles taught in these courses.”¹² The doctrines and principles of the gospel taught in classroom settings should be established teachings of the Church and not simply personal opinions that have the appearance of legitimacy no matter how authoritative they may appear. Elder Jeffrey R. Holland counseled teachers to “use caution and limit . . . classroom instruction to what the Brethren prescribe. Listen carefully and see what they choose to teach at general conference.”¹³ Teachers have a divine mandate to teach correct doctrine, and to do so in an accurate manner.

Responsibility of Teachers to Document Accurate and Reliable Sources

It is imperative that teachers do not develop the habit of expounding on interpretations of doctrinal principles without appraising and documenting their sources. If principles being taught are not authenticated as accurate representations of established Church teachings, they ought not to be taught. Moreover, supporting statements should only be used after meticulous and conscientious deliberation. This does not mean that supporting statements are required for every single comment made during classes. However, general classroom discourse can be greatly improved as teachers and students cultivate environments of correctness and accuracy in gospel teaching and learning.

President Spencer W. Kimball taught that “no one has the right to give his own private interpretations when he has been invited to teach in the organizations of the Church; he is a guest, . . . and those whom he teaches are justified in assuming that, having been chosen and sustained in the proper order, he represents the Church and the things which he teaches are approved by the Church.”¹⁴

President J. Reuben Clark, former First Counselor in the First Presidency, made the following comment:

You are to teach this gospel, using as your sources and authorities the standard works of the Church and the words of those whom God has called to lead His people in these last days. You are not, whether high or low, to intrude into your work your own peculiar philosophy, no matter what its source or how pleasing or rational it seems to you to be. To do so would be to have as many different churches as we have seminaries—and that is chaos.

You are not, whether high or low, to change the doctrines of the Church or to modify them as they are declared by and in the standard works of the Church *and* by those whose authority it is to declare the mind and will of the Lord to the Church.¹⁵

Consider the various interpretations that might be taught in classroom settings on such ideas as eternal progression from one kingdom of glory to another (see discussion below about the James E. Talmage book *Articles of Faith*), the lifting of the veil in the next life and when this will occur, or the practice of plural marriage in the celestial kingdom. Before making definitive statements on such subjects, it is important to weigh doctrinal opinions, even from well-respected resources, against what the Church actually teaches. One criterion for assessing doctrinal interpretations is that established and reliable doctrines of the Church are not only taught by one Church authority but by all prophets, seers, and revelators. Elder Neil L.

Andersen of the Quorum of the Twelve taught, “There is an important principle that governs the doctrine of the Church. The doctrine is taught by all 15 members of the First Presidency and Quorum of the Twelve. It is not hidden in an obscure paragraph of one talk. True principles are taught frequently and by many. Our doctrine is not difficult to find.”¹⁶ President Boyd K. Packer, while serving as a member of the Quorum of the Twelve, taught that “essential truths are repeated over and over again.”¹⁷ Proof-texting, the practice of using isolated quotations from documents and texts to establish propositions, can lead to unsound doctrinal interpretation.¹⁸ This is true of both the standard works and supporting statements.

On the use of scripture quotations, a Seminars and Institutes manual states the following: “When we quote scriptures, we should ensure that our use of them is consistent with their context.”¹⁹ Teachers need to be careful and accurate in their use of isolated passages of scripture to support doctrinal instruction. The standard works comprise the essential texts for all gospel doctrinal teaching. In *Gospel Teaching and Learning*, we read that “the primary source for determining what to teach in these courses is the scriptures themselves.”²⁰ Elder D. Todd Christofferson of the Quorum of the Twelve commented, “The scriptures are the touchstone for measuring correctness and truth.”²¹ In addition to the standard works, there is a vast repository of well-established Church material that includes First Presidency and Quorum of the Twelve statements, curriculum manuals, general conference reports, and other official Church publications. Elder M. Russell Ballard of the Quorum of the Twelve stated, “Teachers can stay on safe ground when they use the standard works, the approved manuals, and the writings of the General Authorities.”²²

To ensure accuracy, definitiveness, and the use of up-to-date and authoritative supporting statements, religious educators need to carefully select and document their sources. The policy of Seminars and Institutes is that “the safest sources for lesson materials are found in official Church publications, including S&I curriculum materials.”²³ One manual states, “To help us teach from the scriptures and the words of latter-day prophets, the Church has produced lesson manuals and other materials. There is little need for commentaries or other reference material. We should study the scriptures, teachings of latter-day prophets, and lesson materials thoroughly *to be sure we correctly understand the doctrine before we teach it.*”²⁴

Seminary and institute manuals are written under the direction of the Church Board of Education and are extensively reviewed by the Correlation Executive Committee. This process is carried out under the direction of the First Presidency, which imparts to current manuals a far higher level of authority than non-correlated works. President Henry B. Eyring taught, “Those called by the prophet to assure the correctness of doctrine taught in the Church review every word, every picture, every diagram in that curriculum which you receive. We can unlock the power of the curriculum simply by acting on our faith that it is inspired of God. . . . Sticking with the content of the curriculum as well as its sequence will unlock our unique teaching gifts, not stifle them.”²⁵ Russell M. Nelson, President of the Quorum of the Twelve, has said, “We are to keep current with the teachings of the prophets, and we harmonize those teachings with our current curriculum.”²⁶

Current curriculum manuals take precedence over out-of-date manuals. Although older manuals may be considered, these should be weighed against the current curriculum material. For example, the current New Testament institute student manual²⁷ takes precedence over the earlier manual.²⁸ If teachers are not acquainted with the new manual, they may not be aware of current Church teachings on various doctrines and principles, especially where there may be variations from previous teachings. Elder Paul V. Johnson, Commissioner of the Church Educational System, said that a “challenge we face, especially if we have taught for some time, is a tendency to hold on to old files and old explanations. We would be much better off keeping up with the current stance of the Church.”²⁹ The manual *Gospel Teaching and Learning* states, “Seminary and institute curriculum materials have been provided as the main resource to help teachers prepare and teach effective lessons. The curriculum provides background information about the scriptures and their context, explanations of difficult words and phrases, General Authority comments on the doctrines and principles taught in the scriptures, and suggestions for what content, doctrines, and principles to teach.”³⁰ Teachers are to teach the prescribed subject matter. Referring to curriculum manuals, Elder Dallin H. Oaks of the Quorum of the Twelve has stated that “A gospel teacher is not called to choose the subject of the lesson but to teach and discuss what has been specified.”³¹ *Gospel Teaching and Learning* states that, along with curriculum material, “teachers may use additional resources such as Church magazines, especially teachings from general conference, as they contribute to a clearer understanding of the scripture block. Other resources

should not be used to speculate, sensationalize, or *teach ideas that have not been clearly established by the Church*.³²

Whereas non-correlated gospel commentaries can be very useful for background information, context, and other teaching approaches, they do not constitute a high level of doctrinal authority and cannot be used to establish official Church teachings. However, they can assist with gaining insight into doctrinal interpretation as used judiciously. Non-correlated interpretations can be considered in the light of current, correlated, supporting statements and evaluated accordingly. Elder Oaks noted that “commentaries are not a substitute for the scriptures any more than a good cookbook is a substitute for food. . . . One trouble with commentaries is that their authors sometimes focus on only one meaning, to the exclusion of others. As a result, commentaries, if not used with great care, may illuminate the author’s chosen and *correct* meaning but close our eyes and restrict our horizons to *other possible meanings*. Sometimes those other, less obvious meanings can be the ones most valuable and useful to us.”³³ Commentaries contained on private blogs, other websites, and general publications must be evaluated in the light of their levels of accuracy and authority.³⁴ No matter how authoritative or plausible a commentary may appear, it may or may not be in line with current, established interpretations of gospel doctrine as taught by modern prophets and apostles. For example, current official doctrinal interpretation on race and the priesthood is far removed from many comments that have been made by those ranging from senior Church leaders to general Church members.³⁵

Caution is also advised in the use of selected quotations from non-correlated, published compilations of statements made by senior Church leaders. It is worth noting that the *Religious Studies Center Style Guide* asks authors to “replace citations of *History of the Church* or *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith* with more carefully documented sources.”³⁶ This request pertains to only two specific works, but the principle is interesting nonetheless. Quotations from compilation works that are used in Church curriculum material are given an authoritative status because they have been documented and correlated, as with one compilation quotation used in this paper (see note 14). However, other compilations may or may not be well documented and are certainly not correlated. In *Teaching, No Greater Call*, we read, “We should not attribute statements to Church leaders without confirming the source of the statements.”³⁷ For example, concerning the book *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith* referred to above, selections are no longer to be used in

Church publications “because the scholarship is no longer current . . . [and] . . . some of the statements attributed to Joseph Smith in the book were not actually made by him.”³⁸ Many compilations do not authenticate the original sources of their quotations, leaving the teacher to use the compilations as the main sources. In other words, some compilations are well documented while others are not, which is why caution is advised.

Teachers need to ensure that the supporting statements they use are taken from well-documented sources while being aware, where possible, of the original sources. They have a responsibility to develop effective patterns of identifying and authenticating reliable and accurate sources to ensure sound doctrinal teaching. One Church manual includes Joseph F. McConkie’s comment that “the disciplined teacher will be sure of his sources and will also make every effort to determine whether a statement properly represents the doctrine of the Church or is merely the opinion of the author.”³⁹

Church curriculum material does not replace the standard works as the primary source of gospel teaching and learning. However, it can be used as a sound resource on the path of accurate doctrinal interpretation.

Responsibility to Distinguish Between Official and Unofficial Comments

The scriptures make it clear that prophets and apostles are divinely called and hold a mandate to teach and instruct members of the Church. In the Doctrine and Covenants the Lord describes this mandate, declaring, “Wherefore, meaning the church, thou shalt give heed unto all his words and commandments which he shall give unto you as he receiveth them, walking in all holiness before me; for his word ye shall receive, *as if from mine own mouth*, in all patience and faith” (D&C 21:4–5; emphasis added). And, “What I the Lord have spoken, I have spoken, and I excuse not myself; and though the heavens and the earth pass away, my word shall not pass away, but shall all be fulfilled, whether by mine own voice or by the voice of my servants, *it is the same*” (D&C 1:38; emphasis added).

The Doctrine and Covenants also teaches, “No one shall be appointed to receive commandments and revelations in this church excepting my servant Joseph Smith, Jun., *for he receiveth them even as Moses*” (D&C 28:2; emphasis added). And, further, “There is none other appointed unto you to receive commandments and revelations until he be taken, if he abide in me” (D&C 43:3). The following is also taught: “They shall speak as they are moved upon by the Holy Ghost. And whatsoever they shall speak *when moved upon by the*

Holy Ghost shall be scripture, shall be the will of the Lord, shall be the mind of the Lord, shall be the word of the Lord, shall be the voice of the Lord, and the power of God unto salvation” (D&C 68:3–4; emphasis added).

The same principles apply to each President of the Church, including the current President and, by implication, according to stewardship, other leaders of the Church. They speak for and represent the Lord. Whereas the doctrinal comments made by prophets, seers, and revelators are highly valued in the Church, teachers need to recognize the distinction between official and unofficial comments. Not every comment made by members of the First Presidency and Quorum of the Twelve is considered official Church doctrine. There are times when such leaders speak and write of their own accord while making well-thought-out comments. While serving as a member of the Quorum of the Twelve, President Harold B. Lee commented:

It is not to be thought that every word spoken by the General Authorities is inspired, or that they are moved upon by the Holy Ghost in everything they read and write. Now you keep that in mind. I don't care what his position is, if he writes something or speaks something that goes beyond anything that you can find in the standard church works, unless that one be the prophet, seer, and revelator—*please note that one exception*—you may immediately say, “Well, that is his own idea.” And if he says something that contradicts what is found in the standard church works (I think that is why we call them “standard”—it is the standard measure of all that men teach), you may know by that same token that it is false, regardless of the position of the man who says it.⁴⁰

A statement in *LDS Newsroom* also clarifies teachings by Church leaders:

Not every statement made by a Church leader, past or present, necessarily constitutes doctrine. A single statement made by a single leader on a single occasion often represents a personal, though well-considered, opinion, but is not meant to be officially binding for the whole Church. With divine inspiration, the First Presidency (the prophet and his two counselors) and the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles (the second-highest governing body of the Church) counsel together to establish doctrine that is consistently proclaimed in official Church publications. This doctrine resides in the four “standard works” of scripture (the Holy Bible, the Book of Mormon, the Doctrine and Covenants and the Pearl of Great Price), official declarations and proclamations, and the Articles of Faith. Isolated statements are often taken out of context, leaving their original meaning distorted.⁴¹

Echoing this statement, Elder Christofferson taught, “It is commonly understood in the Church that a statement made by one leader on a single occasion often represents a personal, though well-considered, opinion, not meant to be official or binding for the whole Church.”⁴² For example, private

books authored by members of the Quorum of the Twelve carry the disclaimer that the opinions and writings are theirs alone and should not be taken as approved by the Church and accepted as doctrine.⁴³ This does not mean that what they write cannot be considered by teachers, only that such works do not carry the same level of authority as official Church curriculum material. Isolated statements from senior Church leaders should not be used to support private doctrinal interpretations unless it can be verified that the interpretations represent established Church teachings, especially as found in the standard works and the current curriculum. For example, it is inappropriate for teachers to teach doctrinal interpretation using comments made by members of the Quorum of the Twelve during stake conference addresses. This is because personal notes about such comments have not been correlated and carefully documented. It is against Church policy to “record the talks or addresses that General Authorities and Area Seventies [give] at stake conferences, missionary meetings, or other meetings.”⁴⁴ Church policy also states that “any notes made when General Authorities, Area Seventies, or other general Church officers speak at stake conferences or other meetings should not be distributed without the consent of the speaker. Personal notes are for individual use only.”⁴⁵

Doctrinal comments made by senior Church leaders should be considered either official or unofficial, depending on the circumstances and settings. Unofficial comments may not constitute an appropriate resource for classroom teaching, especially those that are anecdotal.

Responsibility of Teachers to Recognize Various Levels of Doctrinal Authority

There are different levels of definitiveness or authority associated with comments about gospel doctrines. This is so because of the nature of continuing revelation, the positions held by speakers when they make comments, and under what circumstances comments are made. Commencing with the living President of the Church, there is a line of doctrinal authority that it is important to recognize. A keen awareness that all statements do not carry the same doctrinal weight leads to more effective and accurate classroom discourse.

A Seminaries and Institutes manual teaches the following: “Speaking under the direction of the Holy Ghost, *the living prophet's words take precedence over other statements on the same issue.* His inspired counsel is in harmony with the eternal truths in the standard works and is focused upon

the needs and conditions of his day.⁴⁶ Not only do doctrinal comments made by the President of the Church take precedence over comments made by others, but, according to the *Teachings of the Living Prophets Teacher Manual*, “The teachings and directions of the living prophet take precedence over what former prophets have said.”⁴⁷

From this may be extrapolated the idea that the authority and definiteness of doctrinal comments vary throughout the Church according to circumstances. It is generally accepted in the Church that an official statement about Church doctrine from the First Presidency and the Quorum of the Twelve carries considerably more weight than a comment made by one member of the Quorum of the Twelve. It is equally accepted that a comment made by a member of the Quorum of the Twelve made in an official capacity, such as during general conference, carries more weight than comments made by members of the Seventy and so on down to the average member of the Church. It is reasonable to assume that this is part of an authoritative continuum in which some statements and comments carry more weight than others depending on who the speakers are, when they spoke, and what positions and authority they held within the Church at the time of speaking.⁴⁸ In other words, some doctrinal comments are more compelling and significant than others. For example, regarding the selection process of supporting comments for the current New Testament institute student manual, “statements made by prophets and apostles were given priority over statements made by other General Authorities and leaders of the Church.”⁴⁹ President J. Reuben Clark, while serving as Second Counselor in the First Presidency, commented:

Some of the General Authorities have had assigned to them a special calling; they possess a special gift; they are sustained as prophets, seers, and revelators, which gives them a special spiritual endowment in connection with their teaching of the people. They have the right, the power, and authority to declare the mind and will of God to his people, subject to the over-all power and authority of the President of the Church. Others of the General Authorities are not given this special spiritual endowment and authority covering their teaching; they have a resulting limitation, and the resulting limitation upon their power and authority in teaching applies to every other officer and member of the Church, for none of them is spiritually endowed as a prophet, seer, and revelator. Furthermore, as just indicated, the President of the Church has a further and special spiritual endowment in this respect, for he is the Prophet, Seer, and Revelator for the whole Church.⁵⁰

Consider the following examples of varying levels and types of doctrinal authority. Various comments from President Charles W. Penrose, former First Counselor in the First Presidency, are used to clarify Church teachings

in the current Doctrine and Covenants institute student manual. President Penrose is quoted nine times in the manual⁵¹ and three times further as part of First Presidency statements.⁵² These quotations are taken from times in his life that range from when he was twenty-seven years old⁵³ (forty-five years *before* becoming a member of the Quorum of the Twelve) to when he served as First Counselor in the First Presidency,⁵⁴ representing a sixty-year period.

There is significant authority attached to all nine of the quotations because of their inclusion in the current Church curriculum. However, in general, statements made by members of the Quorum of the Twelve *before* becoming members of the Twelve do not carry the same level of authority as later statements. Such statements may be retroactively attributed a higher level of authority by being included in approved Church manuals or other official Church publications. It is useful to know the positions of authority held at the time comments were made so that wise choices can be made when selecting supporting statements from outside Church curriculum. Such is the case with regard to the quotation from President Penrose when he was twenty-seven years old. A teacher might choose to use a selected quotation from the original article by President Penrose that has not been included in a Church manual. In this case, discretion is advised because, although a particular section of the original source article has been correlated, this may not be true of the entire article. This does not mean such quotations cannot be used—just that care is always advised in the selection of supporting statements.

In one citation, the Doctrine and Covenants manual incorrectly lists President Penrose as First Counselor to President Joseph F. Smith when he was, in fact, Second Counselor.⁵⁵ In this case, the error is not significant but, in general, it is important that teachers are aware of the position held by the person at the time the person is being quoted. For example, if the quotation from when President Penrose was twenty-seven had been mistakenly attributed to him while serving in the First Presidency, this would be significant.

Church manuals reflect best practice with regards to the use of titles for General Authorities. The current Church style guide policy states, “When introducing a quotation from a living General Authority, usually give the title of his current position rather than the title he held at the time he made the statement. . . . When introducing a quotation from a deceased General Authority, usually give the title of the highest position he held while serving as a General Authority.”⁵⁶

Another example of levels of authority is the book *The Articles of Faith: A Series of Lectures on the Principal Doctrines of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*⁵⁷ (commonly known as Articles of Faith) by Elder James E. Talmage of the Quorum of the Twelve. The book was published in 1899 after the First Presidency invited Talmage to produce a work that could be used in Church schools. The first edition of the book was published when Talmage was a professor of geology at the University of Utah, twelve years before he became a member of the Quorum of the Twelve. However, it was prepared under the authority of the First Presidency and published by the Church, which made it an official and authoritative Church publication. The book made a significant contribution to Latter-day Saint theology and is a highly respected work in the Church.⁵⁸ Elder Talmage made revisions after becoming a member of the Quorum of the Twelve. The book is not currently part of the Church curriculum and is no longer published by the Church, although selections are used in current Church curriculum publications such as the New Testament institute student manual, where the 1924 edition is referenced once.⁵⁹

Revisions have been made to some doctrinal interpretations among the various editions of Elder Talmage's book. One example is the concept of eternal progression and advancement from one kingdom of glory to another:

1899 edition

It is reasonable to believe, in the absence of direct revelation by which alone absolute knowledge of the matter could be acquired, that, in accordance with God's plan of eternal progression, advancement from grade to grade within any kingdom, *and from kingdom to kingdom, will be provided for*. But if the recipients of a lower glory be enabled to advance, surely the intelligences of higher rank will not be stopped in their progress; and thus we may conclude, that degrees and grades will ever characterize the kingdoms of our God. Eternity is progressive; perfection is relative; the essential feature of God's living purpose is its associated power of eternal increase.⁶⁰

1990 edition

It is reasonable to believe, in the absence of direct revelation, by which alone absolute knowledge of the matter could be acquired, that, in accordance with God's plan of eternal progression, advancement within each of the three specified kingdoms will be provided for; though *as to possible progress from one kingdom to another the scriptures make no positive affirmation*. Eternal advancement along different lines is conceivable. We may conclude that degrees and grades will ever characterize the

kingdoms of our God. Eternity is progressive; perfection is relative; the essential feature of God's living purpose is its associated power of eternal increase.⁶¹

In this example, a doctrinal interpretation has been significantly changed from one edition to another. Selected quotations from various editions of the book may or may not represent current Church teaching concerning the doctrine of eternal progression. One Church manual states: "Even if something has been verified or published before, it still may not be appropriate for use in the classroom."⁶² This is not to say that the book *Articles of Faith* may not be used in classroom settings. However, teachers ought to be aware of the possibility of different levels of authority associated with statements within the book. Selections from the book that are used in current Church curriculum manuals represent a higher level of authority than other selections.

The above examples are not meant to undermine respected comments and works in the Church. However, if teachers simply use quotations from outside current Church curriculum or official, up-to-date publications as supporting statements without identifying the level of authority, they run the risk of teaching principles that are considered doctrinally unclear or unsound. Teachers should make students aware when material from outside the current curriculum is being used.

Quotations from another well-known work, the *Journal of Discourses*, are sometimes used in Church classroom settings. The official Church view ought to be considered before using selections from the journal. *Gospel Topics* states, "The *Journal of Discourses* is not an official publication of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. . . . It included some doctrinal instruction but also practical teaching, some of which is speculative in nature and some of which is only of historical interest."⁶³ Reading and studying the articles within the twenty-six volumes is quite different from using selections from these articles as supporting, authoritative statements in classroom settings. Discretion is advised. To use a selection from the journal that is contained in a current, official curriculum publication raises the level of authority above a selection that is not. There are many correlated quotations available in current Church curriculum from which teachers may choose. For example, the current Doctrine and Covenants institute student manual contains seventy-three⁶⁴ references to the *Journal of Discourses*.

A third example is the book *Mormon Doctrine*.⁶⁵ This was once widely used by Church members as an authoritative resource for establishing gospel doctrine. It was originally published in 1958 when its author, Elder Bruce R.

McConkie, was a member of what was then the First Council of the Seventy. The third and final edition of the book was published in 1978 while Elder McConkie was serving as a member of the Quorum of the Twelve. The book was published privately and was never published by the Church. Selections from the book that are included in the current Church curriculum publications carry a higher level of authority than those that are not. This does not mean that other quotations from the book cannot be used, but that the *level* of authority for each selection should be considered. In other words, it cannot be assumed that every principle taught in *Mormon Doctrine* represents current Church teaching; nevertheless, we may assume that any quotation from the book used in an approved Church manual does. This does not undermine Elder McConkie or his published works but simply clarifies how selections can be used with greater accuracy and authority in classroom settings.

Elder McConkie made numerous revisions to his book in the second and third editions because, as he himself stated, “As is common with major encyclopedic-type works, experience has shown the wisdom of making some changes, clarifications, and additions.”⁶⁶ This means that, by his own acknowledgment, at least the first two editions contained statements that needed correcting. Therefore, if a quotation is used by a teacher from an earlier edition of the book, a principle that Elder McConkie revised later may be taught inaccurately. In this case, it would be much safer to work within the curriculum. Selections from the book are still used in Church curriculum publications, including the latest New Testament institute student manual, where fourteen selections are used—mostly from the 1966 edition.⁶⁷ It is referenced once in the New Testament teacher manual.⁶⁸

Teachers can use the current curriculum to appraise selections from unofficial Church material. Quotations from many works are used in Church curriculum. The selection of one quotation does not necessarily mean that another, unselected quotation from the same source is unreliable. There is simply not enough space in curriculum manuals to use every sound quotation. Nevertheless, selections used in up-to-date curriculum material are *guaranteed* to be in line with established and current Church teaching.

A final example in relation to varying levels of doctrinal authority is the teaching of lesser-known, though well-established, Church doctrines. In such cases, it is particularly important to use carefully documented and accurate statements so as to avoid confusion and inappropriate speculation. For example, the concept of all people, including children, having adult spirits rather

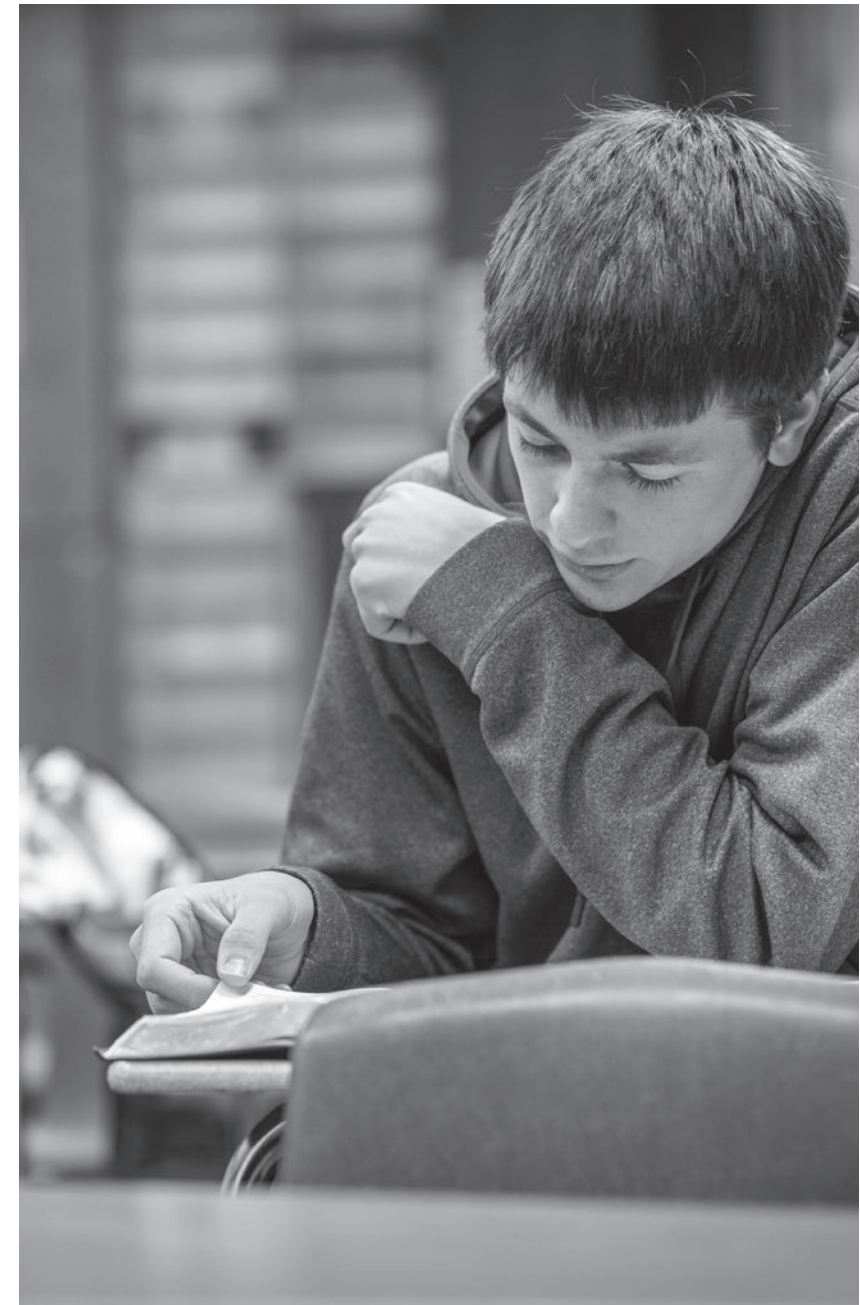


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“The elders, priests and teachers of this church shall teach the principles of my gospel, which are in the Bible and the Book of Mormon, in the which is the fulness of the gospel” (D&C 42:12).

than being born with child spirits is perfectly consistent with other gospel doctrines and, in the standard works, is considered an *implied* principle of the gospel rather than a *stated* principle.⁶⁹ It is also taught in curriculum material and other official Church publications. *Gospel Principles* states, “All spirits are in adult form. They were adults before their mortal existence, and they are in adult form after death, even if they die as infants or children.”⁷⁰ Under the heading “What Do Spirits Look Like?” on lds.org, we read that “people’s spirits had an adult form in premortal life and will have that same form in the spirit world, even if they die as infants or children.”⁷¹ These selections are examples of authoritative statements that clearly establish this doctrine as being an official Church teaching. There are authoritative quotations about the doctrine from senior Church leaders as well, but the number is small.⁷² The doctrine is taught far less in the Church than other doctrines such as the Atonement. With lesser-known doctrines, particular care must be taken in the use of authoritative and supporting statements so that students are taught correct doctrine with accuracy. In this way, they will be less inclined to speculate on, or misinterpret, what is being taught.

Teachers have the responsibility to recognize that every comment made, and every work authored, by senior Church leaders and others does not carry the same level of doctrinal authority. It is important to know the level of authority of supporting statements that are intended for use in classroom settings or for personal doctrinal understanding. This does not mean that extensive research must be undertaken each time a quotation is used in the classroom. Nevertheless, an awareness of the principle of differing levels of doctrinal authority, even from the same Church leader, can effectively and positively influence teaching practice in the classroom by drawing attention to both authoritative and unauthoritative statements. Consequently, teachers will be more assiduous in making comments about doctrine.

Responsibility of Teachers to Be Hesitant to Teach Doctrinal Application

The Spirit may give personal insight into doctrinal application. The Book of Mormon makes it clear that “he that diligently seeketh shall find; and the mysteries of God shall be unfolded unto them, by the power of the Holy Ghost” (1 Nephi 10:19). However, personal insights, no matter how profound, should not be taught in classroom settings unless they are verifiably in tune with current, established Church teaching. It is also true that teachers can receive inspiration for their own stewardship, meaning their students, and will

be inspired to say things that their students need to hear. Nevertheless, they need to be vigilant about what they teach with regard to doctrinal practice. Elder L. Tom Perry, while serving as a member of the Quorum of the Twelve, taught: “There is order in the way the Lord reveals His will to mankind. We all have the right to petition the Lord and receive inspiration through His Spirit within the realm of our own stewardship. Parents can receive revelation for their own family, a bishop for his assigned congregation, and on up to the First Presidency for the entire Church. However, we cannot receive revelation for someone in another person’s stewardship.”⁷³ Teachers need to note the line of demarcation between personal revelation and revelation that can be appropriately shared within their broader stewardship. All inspiration is not necessarily intended for classroom use.

In one Seminars and Institutes manual we read, “There may be times when the teacher or students in the classroom offer suggestions as to how gospel principles could be applied. Such examples can give students helpful ideas of ways to apply principles of the gospel in their everyday lives. However, teachers should be careful not to be too prescriptive in assigning specific applications for students. Remember that the most meaningful direction for personal application comes individually through inspiration or revelation from the Lord through the Holy Ghost.”⁷⁴ Elder Oaks commented, “Teachers who are commanded to teach ‘the principles of [the] gospel’ and ‘the doctrine of the kingdom’ (D&C 88:77) should generally forgo teaching specific rules or applications. . . . Once a teacher has taught the doctrine and the associated principles from the scriptures and the living prophets, such specific applications or rules are generally the responsibility of individuals and families.”⁷⁵

One example is the law of tithing. How should the 10 percent principle be applied in practice? For example, is it calculated on gross or net income? Should tithing be paid on bank interest? What about birthday and Christmas gifts? Since such questions are about doctrinal application, the approach of the teacher should be circumspect. Careful and accurate use of the standard works and authoritative supporting statements is essential. The Doctrine and Covenants states: “And after that, those who have thus been tithed shall pay one-tenth of all their interest annually; and this shall be a standing law unto them forever, for my holy priesthood, saith the Lord” (D&C 119:4). The current general handbook, drawing upon a First Presidency letter, explains the Church’s policy on the law of tithing as follows: “The simplest statement we know of is that statement of the Lord himself, namely, that the members of the

Church should pay ‘one-tenth of all their interest annually,’ which is understood to mean income. *No one is justified in making any other statement than this.*⁷⁶ This represents Church policy on the matter. In other words, once accepting the 10 percent principle, members of the Church are entitled to make their own decisions as to what they think they owe the Lord.⁷⁷ Elder Oaks has stated that teachers should “not teach any rules for determining what is a full tithing.”⁷⁸ An inaccurate comment made in a classroom setting may lead to some students applying the law of tithing in a questionable manner.

Another example of doctrinal application is conjecture about the Word of Wisdom. There are varying opinions within the Church as to what items are prohibited as part of this commandment. Should members avoid herbal tea, caffeine, the use of alcohol in cooking, and the regular use of meat? Does the Word of Wisdom apply to prescription and over-the-counter medications? What about drugs that are legal or illegal depending on the jurisdiction? How can members know what to avoid in their observance of this law? Teachers need to know what is and is not established doctrinal interpretation. For example, the current handbook of instructions comments as follows: “The only official interpretation of ‘hot drinks’ (D&C 89:9) in the Word of Wisdom is the statement made by early Church leaders that the term ‘hot drinks’ means tea and coffee. Members should not use any substance that contains illegal drugs. Nor should members use harmful or habit-forming substances except under the care of a competent physician.”⁷⁹ *Gospel Topics* states, “When people purposefully take anything harmful into their bodies, they are not living in harmony with the Word of Wisdom. Illegal drugs can especially destroy those who use them. The abuse of prescription drugs is also destructive spiritually and physically.”⁸⁰ *LDS Newsroom* comments that “the Church revelation spelling out health practices (D&C 89) does not mention the use of caffeine. The Church’s health guidelines prohibit alcoholic drinks, smoking or chewing of tobacco, and ‘hot drinks’—taught by Church leaders to refer specifically to tea and coffee.”⁸¹ *For the Strength of Youth* states, “Avoid any drink, drug, chemical, or dangerous practice that is used to produce a ‘high’ or other artificial effect that may harm your body or mind. Some of these include marijuana, hard drugs, prescription or over-the-counter medications that are abused, and household chemicals.”⁸²

Teachers may have their own personal opinions about doctrinal practice, some of them held very strongly. Such opinions are private unless they can be shown to be part of established Church teaching on doctrinal practice.

Conclusion

Teachers need to be careful and vigilant with comments made about gospel doctrine and doctrinal interpretation in classroom settings. It is not appropriate to make comments in a definitive manner without being certain that the comments are, in fact, in line with established Church doctrine. Definitive statements made in classroom settings can form deep impressions in the minds and hearts of students and are often remembered for many years after they were made. False teaching can lead to false practice. This places a great responsibility on teachers to be diligent in seeking after correct doctrine and to teach it in a manner that is proper and in line with current, authoritative teaching.

Teachers should be familiar with, and well-versed in, the doctrines they teach. They are to teach students the doctrines and principles of the gospel as found in the scriptures and the words of the prophets. This does not require a perfect mastery of every doctrine, for no one can claim to have such. Nonetheless, if a specific doctrine is not a documented Church teaching, it ought not to be taught until it can be assessed by reference to current official and approved doctrinal standing. This may involve postponing responses to difficult or complex questions to allow for more comprehensive analyses.

Before each lesson, notes should be made of relevant scriptures supported by the most current statements of prophets and apostles, preferably as found in current Seminaries and Institutes manuals. Not every single comment requires supporting documentation, but there is an imperative for the teaching of correct principles while avoiding unsound doctrinal interpretation. Multiple passages of scriptures are preferable to one passage of scripture, and it is important to note that historical statements no longer in line with Church teachings are not considered to be authoritative. Material outside the Church curriculum can be useful and informative. Notwithstanding this, doctrinal interpretation should be in line with current Church curriculum. As well-thought-out practices for determining doctrine and doctrinal interpretation are followed, students will be more likely to develop sound doctrinal understanding and personal application. **RE**

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43. The following is a standard disclaimer used in books that are written by General Authorities and published by Deseret Book: "This work is not an official publication of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. The views expressed herein are the responsibility of the author and do not necessarily represent the position of the Church or of Deseret Book Company." See, for example, M. Russell Ballard, *Daughters of God* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2009), copyright note.
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