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A Teacher—The Gospel Guide

Matthew O. Richardson

An officer from the court of Candace, Queen of Ethiopia, came to Jerusalem to worship. Following his devotional service, he returned to his country by way of Gaza. As he was sitting in his chariot reading from the book of Isaiah, Philip was inspired to approach him. When Philip heard the officer reading from the scriptures, he inquired: “Understandest thou what thou readest?” The faithful and honest Ethiopian replied: “How can I, except some man should guide me?” (Acts 8:26-31). As his guide, Philip helped this willing Ethiopian understand the scriptural passage in question and ultimately led him to receive baptism.

It is interesting that such a simple story can provide more insight into teaching than much of the educational writings and research available today. Rather than looking for typical pedagogical methods of teaching in this vignette, an investigation of key words used within the storyline may yield more insight. For example, the Ethiopian desired someone to “guide” his study. The original word, as used in this passage, is the Greek term *hodegeo*. Other biblical translations of this verse suggest that the Ethiopian was looking for someone to “explain” (NIV) to him or to “instruct” (LB) him. In other non-biblical literature, *hodegeo* is commonly translated as “teach.” *Hodegeo* is etymologically derived from two other Greek words: *hodegos* and *hodos*. A good historical translation of these three connected words renders: show (*hodegeo*), conductor (*hodegos*), and road (*hodos*). As we shall see, educators, especially religious educators, would do well to understand not only the meaning of these terms but how they define religious education.

Hodegeo: Showing

Hodegeo meaning, “to show the way,” emphasizes the act of *showing*. It is interesting that the Ethiopian was already engaged in personal study of the scriptures when his guide appeared. As Philip discovered, the officer desired someone, a guide, to “show” him how to understand. It would be absurd to assume the Ethiopian officer did not possess some means of understanding the gospel plan himself. Remember, as a “God-fearer” he had just returned from worship in Jerusalem and was sitting in his chariot reading Isaiah. His desire for a guide did not undermine his capability for discovery or the value of self-instruction. He did, however, wisely recognize limitations.

The Ethiopian was wise enough to seek further insight, clarification, and understanding to add to his own discoveries. In a way, he was a tourist of eternal truth. He was obviously bright enough to know the important sights, but he also recognized that his familiarity with the terrain was lacking. Therefore, 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/or even motivation to a journey that had already begun. Elder Jeffrey R. Holland taught, “We are, in fact, 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.”¹ Therefore, a guide must provide sufficient direction as well as practical means for progress in one’s journey.

Ideologically, many teachers relate well with this aspect of guiding. As a matter of fact, when reviewing current educational studies and trends, it becomes obvious that a great deal of energy has been devoted to the clinical aspects of teaching. Thus, pedagogy tends to concentrate on the “hows” of teaching.² While the way one teaches is a vital part of guiding, there is a danger with this mindset. It is interesting that many teachers cannot talk about teaching without talking about instructional techniques. Without careful consideration, teachers can become devotees of certain methods, viewing them as solutions rather than merely means to an end. If good teaching can be reduced to a “one-size fits all” checklist performance, it easily risks becoming routine. Thus, Jane Tompkins, author of “Pedagogy of the Distressed,” appropriately questioned “How did it come to be that our main goal as academicians turned out to be performance?”³ Amidst the lopsided approach in education’s quest of “how” to teach, one wonders if a balance might be achieved. Let us return to Philip and see how he practiced “guiding.”

From a textual standpoint, exactly “how” Philip showed the man is unclear. With a little creativity and editing we can conclude that Philip greets, inquires, reads, answers, and then baptizes the Ethiopian—not exactly meat enough for compiling a “how to” guide on effective teaching. Perhaps that is precisely the point. The emphasis in this account is not on “how” Philip showed his student, but on the fact that *showing* did take place. Like the Greek *hodegeo*, the biblical sense of guiding does not emphasize one method over the other.⁴ Thus, as long as the means are appropriate and help the student along the right road, guiding allows varied responses in showing. Thomas Groome, a professor of religious pedagogy, concludes that “there can never be a simple formula, technique, nor ‘how to do it’ for education of any kind.”⁵

Guiding does not discount, nor does it sponsor any one method of teaching over another. At the same time, however, it would be folly to assume that guiding is some sort of “free-for-all” activity—especially in religious education. To help put guiding in context, we can turn to the “law of the Church” (D&C 42). In this revelation, Saints “may know how to govern my church” and “have all things right” before the Lord (D&C 41:3). In section 42, the Lord reveals the fundamental law of teaching (D&C 42:5-11). “Showing,” or how one must teach, is included in the Lord’s revelation. “[Lift] up your voices as with the sound of a trump” the Lord instructs, “declaring my word like unto angels of God” (D&C 42:6). This emphasizes how a teacher should present material and not necessarily the appropriate method of presentation. Thus Socratic dialogue, experiments, object lessons, lectures, collaborative problem solving, and group discussion may all fit into the Lord’s method of showing. There is an important limitation, however, that must not be overlooked. The Lord instructs that the Spirit must direct guiding. If the Spirit is not part of the process of how we teach, then we “shall not teach” (D&C 42:14). The Spirit will direct and guide us in “how” we show the way. Without such guidance, it is likely that our methods would detract from the appropriate message. It is obvious that some teaching methods may offend the Spirit. Thus, if the Spirit determines the method, teaching is not only appropriate—it is effective.

Hodegos: The Conductor

Hodegos is commonly translated as teacher, but it literally means “conductor.” Thus, a guide (or teacher) is one who leads, manages, or directs the act of teaching. President Spencer W. Kimball once said that religious educators are the “custodians of the bread of life.”⁶ Philip conducted the act of

teaching the Ethiopian officer as well as conducted his own actions in a way that did not distract from the message. This example provides further understanding of the role of a religious guide. A guide has responsibility of conducting not only how a message is presented (the “showing” or *hodegeo*) but also in a way that will not hinder the presentation of the message or the future progression of the student.

One of the primary responsibilities of the guide is to direct what is to be taught as well as when it should be taught. Paul patiently instructed the Corinthians and declared “I have fed you with milk, and not with meat: for hitherto ye were not able to bear it, neither yet now are ye able” (1 Cor. 3:2). Elder Packer reaffirms this principle in his teachings. He said: “Teaching some things that are true, prematurely or at the wrong time, can invite sorrow and heartbreak instead of the joy intended to accompany learning.”⁷

A conductor should also direct how material is presented and by whom. Some educators allow students to control both the method and content of instruction with irrelevant comments or by promoting others in sharing unfounded opinions, experiences, or even theologies. Thus, teachers allow the comments of the students to conduct the tone and the content of their message. While comments of others and sharing appropriate insight is often beneficial, it is the guide’s responsibility, as the conductor, to meter the methods used in class. Dialogue, in whatever form, should be edifying (D&C 43:8; 88:122).

In addition to guiding the illustrations of others, a teacher should never use an illustration that is provocative, controversial (playing the devil’s advocate to create discussion, for example), or humorous just for the sake of being provocative, controversial, or funny. Illustrations should *illustrate!* Ill-advised teaching devices usually drive the Spirit from the

instruction and leave the students no better off for having been under the conductor's tutelage. Elder Packer felt that gospel students should be taught "at least one thought, one idea, one inspiration that is theirs for having been in the class."⁸ This is why Elder Holland reminded religious educators to avoid "theological Twinkies" or "fried froth" in their teaching.⁹ It is the guide's responsibility to determine the best method of teaching gospel doctrines, when they should be taught, and always be mindful of the audience. A guide must conduct the message in such a way that others will not only understand but do it "*so plainly that no one can misunderstand.*"¹⁰

Finally, we must remember that a guide must never misdirect his students or get in the way of their progress. The guiding messenger should never be confused with the message itself; otherwise, this can only result in priestcraft (2 Ne. 26:29). We must never create a "spiritual eclipse" by getting in the way of the light. Remember the Savior is the light we are to hold up (3 Nephi 18:24). It is important for religious guides to accept the responsibility to personally conduct themselves in a manner that is reflective of their message. "Teaching," according to Parker Palmer, an educational researcher and writer, "emerges from one's inwardness, for better or for worse." In light of this, Palmer concludes: "As I teach, I project the condition of my soul onto my students, my subject, and our way of being together."¹¹ In this way teaching could be considered a "mirror to the soul."¹² Elder Ezra Taft Benson taught that a teacher's first responsibility is to personally prepare spiritually.¹³ If our teaching reflects our soul, it is of little wonder why Alma asked if we have "clean hands and a pure heart" and if "the image of God [is] engraven upon our countenances" (Alma

5:19). We should reflect the Master. Thus, a religious guide should strive to “match” the message.”¹⁴

Hodos: The Path

Of all three terms, *hodos* is considered the primary root. *Hodos*, meaning “road, or way,” emphasizes the path, or content, in the act of guiding or teaching. This may be a new twist to some modern pedagogues who vacillate between teacher-centered and student-centered philosophies of teaching. Too often, we forget the foundation of teaching, or guiding, and neglect the importance of the subject. It’s not that we dismiss the subject altogether, but we typically emphasize something else in its place. When it comes to guiding or showing the way, for example, perhaps the emphasis is excessively placed upon *showing* rather than recognizing the importance of the *way* itself. Because of this misdirection, many educators are calling for a balanced return to a “subject-centered classroom.”¹⁵ It is apparent that good teaching requires a combination of many things, but its foundation is laid with sufficient quantity and quality of appropriate content.

Let us return to Philip and his Ethiopian student. After all his personal study, the officer was still in need of a clear path to pursue. It is interesting that in this story, very little detail is offered about the *path* that Philip teaches. It is clear, however, that Philip guides his student to and then along a specific road. Perhaps this is the beauty of the story; there is very little to get in the way of what Philip taught. According to the text: “Then Philip opened his mouth, and began at the same scripture, and preached unto him Jesus” (Acts 8:35). The road to which the Ethiopian was guided was Jesus Christ. Philip, by whatever means, taught Jesus Christ. Elder Neal A. Maxwell encouraged those who teach the gospel to focus on

appropriate subject matter. “Other truths, by comparison,” he reminded us, “are merely fleeting factoids about which we may be ‘ever learning’ without coming to a knowledge of the grand truths.”¹⁶ Thus, for religious educators, our textual analysis, illustrations, and even our testimonies should guide others to Jesus Christ through the restored gospel. In his classic address to religious educators, President J. Reuben Clark, Jr. adamantly stated: “your chief interest, your essential and all but sole duty, is to teach the Gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ as that has been revealed in these latter days.”¹⁷

Conclusion

Recently, Elder Holland pointed to the need for “sufficient instruction” to guide all of us in our search of truth. Sufficient instruction is the result of guiding. Elder Neal A. Maxwell has taught: “There is a golden mean . . . a kind of teaching which brings life and lessons together.” He continued, “Such teaching generates faith which moves us to productive action in behalf of others because the gospel is true.”¹⁸ Perhaps that is the best part of Philip’s guiding moment: the results. His teaching led to something or someone—Jesus Christ.

When one fully understands the meaning of guiding and how it defines teaching, a synthesis occurs. To understand the context of a guide, one cannot look at only part of the definition. A schism already exists between those who are subject-centered and those who are “how to”-centered teachers. When one understands and then seriously considers *guiding*, the gap is naturally narrowed. Guiding requires one to consider all elements of teaching: showing, the road, and the conductor. Syntheses of all three aspects of guiding provide an important understanding of religious education. Guiding brings the ancient proverb to mind, “Give instruction to a wise man, and he will be yet wiser: teach a just man, and

he will increase in learning” (Proverbs 9:9). Guiding, as bathed in Christ’s light, truly allows one to become more (1 Thes. 4:10).

Notes

1. Jeffrey R. Holland. in Conference Report. April 1998, 31.
2. See, for example, Neil Postman, *Technopoly* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1992), 42.
3. “Pedagogy of the Distressed,” *College English*, vol. 52 no. 6 (Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English, 1991), 654.
4. This relationship is detailed in a study of leading and guiding in Matthew O. Richardson, “The World Perspective and its Impact on Leadership Conceptions” (Ed.D. diss., Brigham Young University, 1996), 101-106.
5. *Christian Religious Education* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1980), 136.
6. Spencer W. Kimball, “Men of Example,” *Charge to Religious Educators*, 2d ed. (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1982), 45.
7. Boyd K. Packer, “The Mantle is Far, Far Greater Than the Intellect,” *Charge to Religious Educators*, 2d ed. (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1981-82), 34. See also D&C 19:22.
8. Boyd K. Packer, *Teach Ye Diligently* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, Co., 1975), 154.
9. Elder Holland’s full quotation is as follows: “Are we really nurturing our youth and our new members in a way that will sustain them when the stresses of life appear? Or are we giving them a kind of theological Twinkie—spiritually empty calories? President John Taylor once called such teaching ‘fried froth,’ the kind of thing you could eat all day and yet finish feeling totally unsatisfied.” Jeffrey R. Holland, in Conference Report, April 1998, 32.
10. Harold B. Lee, “Loyalty,” *Charge to Religious Educators*, 2d ed. (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1981-82), 64, emphasis in original.

11. Parker Palmer, *The Courage to Teach* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1998), 2.
12. *Ibid.*, 2.
13. Ezra Taft Benson, "The Gospel Teacher and His Message," *Charge to Religious Educators*, 2d ed. (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1981-82) 48.
14. Ezra Taft Benson, *Ensign*, May 1975, 65.
15. See, for example, Palmer, 116.
16. Conference Report, April 1997, 12.
17. J. Reuben Clark, Jr. "The Charted Course of the Church in Education," in *Charge to Religious Educators*, 2d ed. (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1982), 7.
18. *The Neal A. Maxwell Quote Book*, ed. Cory Maxwell (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1997), 338.