"These Are [Your] Days"

Elder Neal A. Maxwell

"Today, I write to the young men and women of the Church, lest you be unnecessarily ‘weighed down.’ What follows will include several stern but needed prophecies, yet my comments will mostly feature some very reassuring and positive things.”

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After reciting a litany of social ills during his time, Mormon consoled his son, Moroni, suggesting that somber world conditions could unnecessarily “weigh thee down” (Moroni 9:25). Today, I write to the young men and women of the Church, lest you be unnecessarily “weighed down.” What follows will include several stern but needed prophecies, yet my comments will mostly be about some very reassuring and positive things. Though I write primarily to the youth of the Church, these assurances have ready application to all gospel teachers who have been entrusted with nurturing this royal generation.

My text is later Nephi’s phrase about his own time and season on earth. As he became less nostalgic for an earlier time and more submissive as to doing his duty in his particular season, he said, “I am consigned that these are my days.” I invite young men and women to do likewise by accepting your discipleship in “these . . . [your] days” (Helaman 7:9) in the history of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

Societies, as well as individuals, can “sleep,” cushioned and unawares, especially if sedated by materialism and ease. Those who remain sedated will fail to meet their rendezvous. Events can, however, constitute a wake-up call. In secular history, for instance, the summer and early autumn of 1939 brought the most beautiful weather in memory to England. Haunting remembrances of the terrible devastation of World War I along with the hovering prospects of

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a new war made appeasement so attractive to so many. Awakened, however, the British later rallied to their “finest hour.”

Likewise illustrative of that same period is a movie, Empire of the Sun. British citizens partied in their upscale, sequestered Shanghai colony largely unaware of impending events—portrayed in the movie as being ominously just over the hill. These events quickly brought on World War II with its grimness, shattering Shanghai’s sequestered “fools’ paradise.”

Lest young disciples, too, “sleep,” I will now note several prophecies, putting your own times in needed perspective.

The last days will certainly be more challenging to young disciples than simply coping with sharp economic downturns. In these, your days, “the love of many shall wax cold,” resulting in various and serious social consequences (Matthew 24:12). Widespread despair caused by iniquity is prophesied, too (see Moroni 10:22). Hence, you young disciples need to keep the two great commandments so that those two lamentable conditions do not characterize you. No wonder personal righteousness is so vital!

If your humility is “because of the word,” it will not be fleeting! In contrast, compelled humility often fades quickly (see Alma 32:13–16).

Various forms of help are near at hand, including many of the Church’s stakes that are to be “for a defense, and for a refuge from the storm”—a real blessing! (D&C 115:6).

Furthermore, in the last days, you will hear “of wars and rumors of wars, and the whole earth shall be in commotion, and men’s hearts shall fail them” (D&C 45:26; see also 88:92).

Such failing hearts suggest not cardiac arrests but a loss of will and hope. But again, such symptoms need not characterize you, as young disciples, nor your responses to life. You will see such things, of course, but, if managed in a framework of faith, these need not “weigh [you] down.”

Even the prophesied global commotion will include a dimension of redemptive turbulence—for “the kingdom of the devil must shake” in order that some therein will be “stirred up unto repentance” (2 Nephi 28:19). The Lord has His own unique way of getting good things out of bad situations, again and again.

In the days of young disciples, the nations of the earth will be in “distress . . . with perplexity,” foretelling a time of unusual perplexity and bewilderment (Luke 21:25). There will be so many rocks and so many hard places for some to get between. No wonder we
rightly and reassuringly sing, “We thank thee, O God, for a prophet to
guide us in these latter days.” Young disciples will have the blessed,
ongoing direction of the Lord, through His prophets.

After all, the restored gospel includes the reassuring truths
most needed in any age. Proximate and tactical troubles do not, for
instance, diminish from such reassuring strategic truths. For exam-
ple, we all are spirit sons and daughters of our Heavenly Father,
an encouraging genealogy without temporal and national borders.
Additionally, there is a redeeming plan of salvation that provides the
ultimate security for the righteous. We likewise can receive the rele-
vant and saving gospel ordinances, another great source of strength
for us as individuals!

Meanwhile, don’t worry if you cannot give glib explanations as
to the meaning of all things happening to you or around you. The
Lord loves you, His children, just as Nephi wrote (see 1 Nephi 11:17).
Spiritual certitude can exist amid distress and perplexity. So many
positive and prophetic promises are there to help latter-day disciples
to cope.

The Lord counseled, “Be of good cheer, for I will lead you along,”
and He said comfortingly, “I am in your midst” (D&C 38:7; 78:18).
“And ye cannot bear all things now; nevertheless, be of good cheer,
for I will lead you along. The kingdom is yours and the blessings
thereof are yours, and the riches of eternity are yours” (D&C 78:
18).

God watches the times and seasons. He knows your individual
bearing capacities. In the very, very last days, for example, He will
display His mercy in an unusual way: “And except those days should
be shortened, there should no flesh be saved: but for the elect’s sake
those days shall be shortened” (Matthew 24:22).

Thus, you can have full faith and trust in God, His mercy and
goodness. As the Psalmist wrote, “Some trust in chariots, and some
in horses: but we will remember the name of the Lord our God”
(Psalm 20:7).

We should not trust too much in modern weaponry either.

God has transcending capacities: “I am able to do mine own
work. . . . I will show unto the children of men that I am able to do
mine own work” (2 Nephi 27:20–21). Is He ever! He not only urges
us to trust Him but invites us to “[cast] all your care upon him; for he
careth for you” (1 Peter 5:7).

Remember, too, that your faith covers all portions of life’s trail.
You can have clear faith in the ultimate outcomes at the end of
the trail but still find vexing uncertainties in the steps immediately ahead. The Lord knows the end from the beginning and everything in between. You, however, function in the muddled, mortal middle. The help and comfort of the Holy Ghost are thus much needed for the short run, too!

Hence, you are to proceed with your lives within what is allotted to you, while letting adversity highlight any need for some personal and individual course corrections (see Alma 29:3). Happily, discipleship carries within itself its own witness that it is the true way of living; it is self-reinforcing.

The very first verse of the Book of Mormon is also very instructive concerning another blessing given to most all of you: being “born of goodly parents.” In the unfolding of your lives, you, too, may see “many afflictions,” though having also “been highly favored of the Lord.” You, too, can be blessed by relying on your “knowledge of the goodness . . . of God” (1 Nephi 1:1). By understanding that God is perfect in His goodness, Nephi kept his afflictions and trials in perspective, which is the challenge of discipleship in any age and any circumstance, including “these . . . [your] days.”

Prophetically, President Gordon B. Hinckley said to us at a recent general conference that current events in the world did not constitute the “all-consuming calamity.” President Hinckley also cautioned: “Peace may be denied for a season. . . . We may even be called on to suffer in one way or another. . . . Our safety lies in repentance. Our strength comes of obedience to the commandments of God. . . . This is the crux of the entire matter—obedience to the commandments of God.”

Given that important, prophetic guidance, consider these earlier assurances from President George Q. Cannon: “God has reserved spirits for this dispensation who have the courage [and] determination to face the world. . . . He has sent these spirits . . . to raise up a seed that will be righteous, and that will honor God, and honor him supremely, and be obedient to him under all circumstances.”

President Cannon’s words contain soaring and positive promises that include you and your generational cohorts! The obedience President Cannon foresaw is a trait that, to the degree there developed, comes with us from the premortal world.

President Lorenzo Snow further reassured us as to such inborn, spiritual momentum, saying: “We are here because we are worthy to be here, and that arises, to a great extent at least, from the fact that we kept our first estate. I believe that when you and I were in
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yonder life we made certain covenants . . . that in this life, when we should be permitted to enter it, we would do what we had done in that life—find out the will of God and conform to it.”5

We thus come to this life, to borrow Wordsworth’s phrase, “trailing clouds of glory” but also “trailing” traits developed in the premortal world.

Pay heed, therefore, to your inborn spiritual reflexes. Use, even more, the gifts of the Holy Ghost, who can fill you with “hope and perfect love” (Moroni 8:26; emphasis added). He can “enlighten your mind, . . . [and] shall fill your soul with joy” (D&C 11:13; emphasis added). How precious and relevant these gifts of hope, love, and joy are in any age, but certainly in yours, when so many feel unloved, hopeless, and sad!

The foregoing is just a small sample of positive promises! Hence, while we are clearly instructed to notice the leaves on the fig tree to know when “summer is nigh,” we are not to sit around moodily staring at the fig trees (see Matthew 24:32). There is so much work to be done in the Lord’s vast vineyard!

Many in the world, at the time of our “all-consuming calamity,” will be taken by total surprise—like a thief in the night. Others, however, will be “like a woman . . . in travail” where the pains of labor are foretelling, “even [in] the days of sorrow” (D&C 136:35). Still others, the “poor and the meek,” without being preoccupied, will be looking for the signs (see D&C 45:39; 35:15).

Back to where we began. Paul wrote: “The day of the Lord so cometh as a thief in the night. . . . But ye, brethren, are not in darkness, that that day should overtake you as a thief. . . . Therefore let us not sleep, as do others; but let us watch and be sober” (1 Thessalonians 5:2–6).

Cautioned the Prophet Joseph Smith, however: “It is a false idea that the Saints will escape all the judgments, . . . for all flesh is subject to suffer, and ‘the righteous shall hardly escape’; still many of the Saints will escape, for the just shall live by faith.”6

Amid all this, God, who lives in “eternal now,” is relentlessly and lovingly accomplishing His work, using His unique foreknowledge to ensure that all His purposes will prevail—not just some of them. The Prophet Joseph said: “The great Jehovah contemplated the whole of the events connected with the earth, pertaining to the plan of salvation, before it rolled into existence, or ever ‘the morning stars sang together’ for joy. . . . He knew . . . of the depth of iniquity that would be connected with the human family, their weakness and strength, their power
and glory, apostasies, their crimes, their righteousness and iniquity. . . . He was acquainted with the situation of all nations and with their destiny. . . . He knows the situation of both the living and the dead, and has made ample provision for their redemption.”

His “ample provision” is more than adequate! But faith is not built in a wordless vacuum. Instead, it takes hearing, pondering, believing, behaving, and likening the word to ourselves! (see 1 Nephi 19:23). The Restoration has given us the vital “key of knowledge” that Jesus said had been lost. It is “the fulness of the scriptures” that includes many plain and precious things to anchor and guide us as disciples (JST, Luke 11:53). “For they will hear my voice . . . and shall not be asleep” (D&C 35:21).

God has a timetable for this planet and for each person: “But all things must come to pass in their time” (D&C 64:32).

Within all of the drama cited are many individual dramas, making it imperative for you to allow the Lord to tutor you amid your discipleship.

Enoch rejoiced, and so can you over the grand, consoling reality regarding God: “And yet thou art there” (Moses 7:30). Privileged Enoch even saw the God of heaven weep! (7:29). Yet Enoch was very discouraged by the gross wickedness anciently. He said he would “refuse to be comforted” (7:44). The mentoring Lord, however, told Enoch to “lift up your heart and be glad; and look” (7:44). Then revealed to Enoch was Jesus’ Atonement in the meridian of time and also the latter-day Restoration. Enoch, who had been so distraught, now rejoiced!

May you not “refuse to be comforted.” Let the revelations comfort you. Let the scriptures refresh you!

Finally, think of some things that are special to your times. How many generations before yours, for instance, have lived in a time when there were so many operating temples? None! How many generations before yours have lived in a time when the gospel was spread to so many nations? None!

You young disciples are so privileged, and though the times in which you will live will be turbulent, there will be glorious accomplishments, too.

Thus, I have desired to place some perspective on these, your days, and I salute you for what your generation and its generational cohorts represent and the divine compliment God has given you by placing you here—now.

Make use of these, “your days,” for as you become more like
Notes

1. This essay is based on a series of firesides delivered in Salt Lake and Utah Counties in late 2001 and early 2002.
2. “We Thank Thee, O God, for a Prophet,” Hymns (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1985), no. 19.
7. Ibid., 220; emphasis added.
Elder Stephen B. Oveson and Dixie Randall Oveson

Photograph courtesy of Elder and Sister Oveson
A story has been told about a chicken and a pig who found themselves discussing their relative contributions to the farmer’s breakfast table. The hen bemoaned having to donate her eggs for the breakfast. The pig replied, “Yes, but for you, it’s just a sacrifice; for me, it’s a total commitment!”

This little anecdote reflects obvious lessons that are applicable to members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. We might ask ourselves whether we are the kind of people who feel that giving an occasional “egg or two” toward the building of the kingdom is sufficient or whether we want to be categorized among those who consecrate their all in this endeavor.

We can logically assume that true conversion to the gospel of Jesus Christ will have outward manifestations in the actions of members of the Church. That is to say, those who have received a spiritual witness resulting in strong testimonies of the truthfulness of gospel principles normally desire to strengthen that knowledge by living those principles to the fullest. They will be found doing whatever is necessary to magnify their callings, serve in their communities, pay a full tithe and generous fast offering, keep the Sabbath day holy, hold family home evenings, study the scriptures, be honest in their dealings, sustain the leadership of the Church, live the Word of Wisdom, be good neighbors, pray sincerely, spread the gospel to others, attend the temple, and keep the sacred covenants made
there. All these worthy acts, along with almost countless others, constitute personal efforts by those who are consecrated members of the Church.

Disciplining our spirits step-by-step to this higher order is a process that prepares us for celestial living. The Lord tells us in Doctrine and Covenants 88:22, “He who is not able to abide the law of a celestial kingdom cannot abide a celestial glory.” Hugh Nibley taught: “The main purpose of the Doctrine and Covenants, you will find, is to implement the Law of Consecration. . . . This law, the consummation of the laws of obedience and sacrifice, is the threshold of the celestial kingdom, the last and hardest requirement made of men [and women] in this life.”

When we discuss the subject of consecration, the first thing that often comes to mind is our temporal means. Admittedly, this is an important part of the law of consecration. What is currently required of the main body of the Church in this regard is to pay our tithes and offerings as a preparatory step in learning to return to the Father a portion of what He has given us, His stewards.

However, equally important to monetary donations is the giving of time, talents, and personal abilities—even to the submission of our very will. We might be under the impression that the law of consecration is held temporarily in suspension at the present time, having been replaced by the law of tithing.

A careful study of the Doctrine and Covenants shows that references to consecrate and consecration generally deal with material things associated with monies and properties but also accommodate other aspects of life (see D&C 82:19, 64:34; 88:67–68, 98:12–14). Those of us who attend the temple for the purpose of making sacred covenants with the Lord in His holy house understand that the law of consecration goes beyond the mere payment of tithes and offerings or the consecration of monies and properties to the Lord. “The law of consecration,” said Elder Bruce R. McConkie, “is that we consecrate our time, our talents, and our money and property to the cause of the Church: such are to be available to the extent they are needed to further the Lord’s interests on earth.”

In the 1830s, consecrate as a verb was defined as follows: “To make or declare to be sacred, by certain ceremonies or rites; to appropriate to sacred uses; to set apart, dedicate, or devote, to the service and worship of God.” As a noun, consecration was defined as “the act or ceremony of separating from a common to a sacred use, or of devoting and dedicating a person or thing to the service
and worship of God, by certain rites or solemnities. Consecration does not make a person or thing really holy, but declares it to be sacred, that is, devoted to God or to divine service.”

As a reflection of those definitions, members of the Church today, in living the law of consecration, are expected to “appropriate themselves to sacred uses.” Doing so requires them to dedicate all their time, talents, and possessions to the Church of Jesus Christ and its purposes.

Perhaps we may never be asked or required to give all, but our willingness to put everything on the altar is a sign between us and God that we submit to His will in all things.

As Elder Neal A. Maxwell said, “Consecration is . . . both a principle and a process, and it is not tied to a single moment. Instead, it is freely given, drop by drop, until the cup of consecration brims and finally runs over. . . . The submission of one’s will is really the only uniquely personal thing we have to place on God’s altar. The many other things we ‘give’ . . . are actually the things He has already given or loaned to us. However, when you and I finally submit ourselves, by letting our individual wills be swallowed up in God’s will, then we are really giving something to Him! It is the only possession which is truly ours to give!”

While we have served the Church in South America for almost six years, first under call as mission president and companion in the Argentina Buenos Aires South Mission and then in the presidency of the Chile Area, we have personally observed many acts that we consider to be true examples of consecrated service to our Heavenly Father and to His children. We will share a few of these experiences to illustrate what we consider to be latter-day forms of living the law of consecration—of members’ actions that truly reflect their appropriating themselves to sacred uses.

Early in our 1996–99 mission experience, we learned of a group of Cambodian immigrants who lived in Longchamps near Buenos Aires, Argentina. One family was being taught the discussions by a companionship of our missionaries. As the missionaries came to the fourth discussion that included the law of the fast, they explained fasting in about the following way: “Fasting constitutes a twenty-four-hour period in which we do not eat or drink anything, putting our bodies in submission to our spirits. We use the time to read the scriptures, pray, and engage in other uplifting activities, culminating in attending fast and testimony meeting, where we then give to the bishop of our ward the monetary equivalent of the food from which
we have abstained, in order that he may distribute it among the poor and needy.”

After this explanation, the missionaries suggested that because the following Sunday was the first Sunday of the month, the family might like to try fasting. The father agreed, and the missionaries left the home. The following Monday evening, the elders returned to give another discussion, at which time they asked for a report on the family’s experience with fasting. The father rather apologetically explained that they had tried and would surely try again. He said, “We began our fast in the afternoon with a prayer, followed by scripture reading and a discussion. We continued in this way until early the following morning. I regret to say that some of the younger children fell asleep during the night. We were very tired but showered in the morning and prepared to go to church, where our spirits were revived and filled with the beautiful testimonies that were given. Perhaps next time we’ll do better and the children will be able to stay awake with us all night.”

The missionaries were astounded. “You mean you didn’t go to sleep during this whole twenty-four-hour period?”

“No,” replied the father, “you didn’t mention sleeping.”

As you might imagine, the members of this wonderful, humble family were soon baptized members of the Church. They brought several other families to hear the missionaries, and other conversions resulted. Whenever we think of this incident, it reminds us of how much there is to be learned about consecration from people who humbly seek to be obedient.

We also learned a beautiful lesson about consecration from Elder Jon Jones, one of the assistants to the president in our mission. At that particular time, the decision had been made that one of our missionaries needed to be sent home from his mission early as a disciplinary action. He had been disobedient on several occasions despite counseling, contracts, and repeated warnings. The plane ticket had been purchased, and permission had been given by the presidency of the South America South Area to send this missionary home.

When the assistants brought the missionary in for his final interview, he protested loudly and tearfully that he did not want to go home. He promised to improve and said he would sign yet another contract in his determination to stay and finish his mission. In desperation, the two assistants and Sister Oveson were called into the office, and the elder was asked to wait outside while the possible
courses of action were discussed. Sister Oveson, somewhat out of patience with the whole situation, was resigned to the fact that sending him home was the only reasonable thing to do. “If he is allowed to stay,” she maintained, “the other missionaries might think that obedience is not important in the mission.”

One of the assistants said, “I have to agree with Hermana Oveson. I don’t think we really have a choice.”

When the other assistant, Elder Jones, was asked his opinion, he said, “I see much good in this elder. President, if you will let me go back out into the field, I will take him for my companion for the rest of my mission. I will take responsibility for him and help him to become a loving and obedient missionary.”

We all had tears in our eyes by the time Elder Jones finished his remarks about this offer. We could not believe that anyone could be so loving and caring, especially a twenty-year-old missionary. The decision was made to do as Elder Jones requested. He found it exceedingly difficult at first, but slowly his junior companion learned a great deal from him and became a trustworthy missionary. When Elder Jones went home, his companion stayed to finish his mission, becoming in time a senior companion and a trainer before he was honorably released. The follow-up to this true experience is that this elder has since married and is sealed in the temple to his wife and son. They are active in the Church and are helping to build the kingdom. What a difference a consecrated and Christlike person made in the life of this missionary and his future family.

Nearly every day we see examples of consecration in the lives of the missionary couples who come to serve in the temple or to be area welfare agents, area medical advisers, executive secretaries to the area presidency, or family history missionaries, many of whom are serving their fifth, sixth, or seventh missions. Couple missionaries, in whatever capacity, are as precious as gold. We had the great blessing of having several couple missionaries who served with us in the Buenos Aires South Mission. Typical examples are Bob and Glenell Fuller, who activated members, taught music, helped repair homes, and gave many hours of devoted service. When we recently returned for a visit to the district where they labored most of their eighteen months, everyone asked about Hermano and Hermana Fuller. Their example reflects the potential value of couple missionaries who understand the law of consecration and the need to appropriate our lives to sacred purposes.

Another example that stands out in our minds is the story of
Casey and Kitty Golightly, who recently finished their year and a half of service as missionaries in the Santiago Chile Temple. During their missionary experience, Elder Golightly, a temple sealer, had diabetes, stomach ulcers, a heart attack, skin cancer that necessitated the removal of part of his ear, and a broken leg from a fall he sustained on the stairs of the temple housing. Kitty celebrated her eightieth birthday during the time of their service, rarely missing her daily shifts at the temple, where she served as a trainer for other workers in addition to fulfilling her regular duties. During the final week of their mission, they celebrated their fifty-eighth wedding anniversary. As they bore their testimonies in the final sacrament meeting before their departure, Elder Golightly said, “While I was recuperating from one of my many procedures at the hospital, I conversed with the Lord, telling Him of my desire to stay and complete this mission, even if it meant returning home in a box!”

Through every trial, these two had smiles on their faces and good humor to share with everyone. Their service reflects the actions of truly consecrated souls who understand the blessings of dedicating themselves to building the Lord’s kingdom on the earth.

An excursion group from Punta Arenas recently came to the Santiago Chile Temple. This trip requires some eighty hours by bus and often uses up the only vacation time these people have during the year. One member of this group is a little lady named Hermana Alvarez, who is less than four feet tall and is somewhat crippled. She carried with her some twenty-seven family names for whom she wanted to do the vicarious work. What a thrill it was to be able to help her fulfill her worthy dream and to realize the extent to which so many Saints in faraway countries dedicate themselves to living and defending the principles of the gospel as a reflection of the law of consecration.

Gordon and Catherine Thomas are another couple who reflect consecrated living. They served as president and companion of the Argentina Mendoza Mission from 1996 to 1999. After returning home for a short while, where they were living their dream retirement in the Lake District of England, they looked at each other one day and said, “What are we doing here? We both know how to speak Spanish. We need to be serving a mission where we can use that gift to benefit others.”

Within months, they were back in South America, this time serving as the Chile Area welfare agents for two years, where their influence for good was incalculable. During one of our visits with
the Thomases, they asked a very thought-provoking question, one we hardly knew how to answer at the time. They wondered whether we would voluntarily go and do what other missionary couples were doing if we were not under call from the prophet. That question caused a great deal of introspection on our parts as we thought about dedicating ourselves to sacred uses following our present service to the Lord. By the time we finish our present calling, we will have served for nine years in countries far distant from our family members and friends. Should we apply for voluntary missionary service when we finish our present calling? That could prove to be another step in our lives reflecting the process of appropriating ourselves to sacred uses. Perhaps this is a consecration question that others may want to answer for themselves.

For some, proving themselves truly dedicated to the Lord’s work might be demonstrated in their unfailing faithfulness in the face of seemingly insurmountable adversities. “God hath said that He would have a tried people, that He would purge them as gold.” 6 We have known amazing parents who have remained steadfast as they learned of the death of their missionary son or daughter. When we think of consecration, we think of another set of parents who have spent countless hours in the rehabilitation efforts of a son who was critically wounded while serving in the mission field. We also think of those who draw ever closer to the Lord as they are faced with the loss of a spouse to death or divorce or those who must deal with unemployment or the heartbreak of a wayward child. Others may find that caring for aging parents or less-able children is the path they currently follow on the road to consecration. Certainly, there are times and seasons in our lives that permit us more or less personal time to donate to this lifelong quest, always keeping in remembrance that consecration is a sacred covenant offering a multitude of ways of appropriating ourselves to sacred uses.

Whenever scriptural reference is made to those who, as a society, have learned to live the law of consecration to the fullest, we read about a pure and peaceful people, devoid of strife and contention, a Zion people. The people of Enoch became such a people. We read in Moses 7:18, “And the Lord called his people Zion, because they were of one heart and one mind, and dwelt in righteousness; and there was no poor among them.” After the appearance of Christ to the Nephites on the American continent, they also developed such a consecrated society: “And surely there could not be a happier people among all the people who had been created by the hand
of God” (4 Nephi 1:16). Surely, when we have the fulness of the
gospel of Jesus Christ restored to the earth through the Prophet
Joseph Smith, our purpose should be to build another group of con-
secrated people—Saints of the latter days. Individually and collec-
tively, it will not happen with one single act; it cannot be a one-time
offer. In this endeavor, those who willingly accept calls to be nursery
leaders, Cub Scout den mothers, early-morning seminary teachers,
Scoutmasters, or other exceedingly time-consuming but sometimes
low-profile callings in the Church will surely be the examples of what
true consecration is all about.

In the long run, offering ourselves for sacred uses might simply
be shown through a consistent attitude of meek willingness to offer
all we are capable of giving at any given time while we help those
about us do the same. Consecration seems to be a day-to-day
process of dedication, humility, refinement, and purification as we
follow the example of the most consecrated person of all time—our
Savior and Redeemer, Jesus Christ.

Notes


2. Bruce R. McConkie, "Obedience, Consecration, and Sacrifice," Ensign,
May 1975, 50.

3. Noah Webster, American Dictionary of the English Language (New York: S.
Converse, 1828), s.v. "consecrate" and "consecration."

1992), 1:313, s.v. "consecration." See also D&C 82:19; 64:34; 88:67–68; 98:
12–14.

5. Neal A. Maxwell, "Swallowed Up in the Will of the Father," Ensign,

Fielding Smith (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1976), 135.
Personal Revelation and the Process of Conversion

Elder Gerald N. Lund

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While I was working on a missionary preparation committee, Elder M. Russell Ballard made available some statistical research the Missionary Department had collected on conversions. The results of the three thousand interviews were fascinating. Although some marvelous things were going on in the Church missionary program, there were some rather sobering trends as well. For example, in the United States and Canada, only one in three eligible young men was accepting a mission call. As a result, conversions had flattened out. In 1999, there were only eighteen hundred more conversions than in 1995, even though ten thousand more missionaries were in the mission field. Those are sobering figures.

As we discussed those statistics, we acknowledged that while they were of great concern to the Missionary Department, the implications should also be a concern for the Church Educational System (CES). Outside of a full-time missionary program, personnel associated with CES spend more time with the youth of the Church than any other agency—about seven hundred hours for each student if we take into account four years of seminary and two years of institute. Because of my administrative responsibilities, I interviewed 624 missionaries and had a chance to work with many of them. Among the questions I always asked are the following: Were you in seminary? Were you in institute? What was your teacher’s name? What kind of experience did you have in the program?

As a result of these interviews, I feel I know a great deal about
seminary and institute teachers. Overall, the responses from students were very positive. I rarely heard about negative experiences in seminary and institute. That is the good news. The bad news is that the CES programs are rarely pivotal. They are positive but not pivotal. One of the questions we like to ask is “What inspired you to accept a mission call?” Family was the primary motivator. I only occasionally heard, “It was my institute teacher or my seminary teacher who really turned me around.”

Another alarming fact is that many missionaries, maybe even the majority of them, have a very shallow understanding of the gospel. They know the doctrines superficially, but as soon as someone starts asking them questions, they are in over their heads.

This summer, Stewart Glazier and I had the privilege of taking Elder Ballard and his extended family along with Larry H. Miller and his family on the Mormon Pioneer Trail in Wyoming to express our gratitude for their help with the Pioneer Trails Workshop (CES summer in-service experience). At Martin’s Cove, Elder Ballard spoke to the whole group. He gave me permission to share his words. He said that President Gordon B. Hinckley had recently expressed concern that some Church members have mental but not spiritual conversion. The gospel appeals to them, but real conversion is when they feel something in their hearts and not just in their minds. President Hinckley went on to say, “There is mental assent but not spiritual conviction.”

Unfortunately, many missionaries reach mental assent but not spiritual conviction. Elder Ballard further quoted President Hinckley as saying, “The power and deep conversion of the Spirit is needed by our members to get into their hearts to confirm what they agreed to in their minds. This then will carry them through every storm and adversity, just as it did the pioneers.” In accordance with President Hinckley’s statements, Elder Ballard made this comment: “The great task, the great challenge of the First Presidency and the Twelve Apostles is to get the spirit of the gospel from people’s minds into their hearts to where they have spiritual experiences. And the spiritual experiences are enough that they change feelings. They change our view of life.”

In the research earlier mentioned, the three thousand people interviewed were divided into three groups: (1) people who had listened to the missionaries but never joined the Church, (2) people who had joined the Church but were no longer active, and (3) people who had joined the Church and remained active. Though the views were expressed in many ways, the researchers found two primary factors required for those who remained active.
The first of those factors is a willingness to "experiment on the word" (see Alma 32:27). When missionaries ask investigators, "Will you read the Book of Mormon and pray about it? Will you come to Church with us? Will you stop smoking? and Will you pay tithing?" they are asking investigators to experiment on the word.

The second factor is to have confirming experiences that occur after searchers for truth have experimented on the word. When investigators say such things as "I felt something when I read the Book of Mormon," "I felt like I got an answer to my prayers," and "I really had a wonderful feeling while I was in your Sunday meetings," they are expressing outcomes of experimenting on the word. That is the key to conversion—not just for investigators but for everyone. As stated in Alma 32, if we are not willing to give place in our hearts for the word or are not willing to awake and arouse our faculties, then the seed of faith will not grow. We will never be truly converted. If a person says, "Well, I really don't believe in prayer, so I don't think I'll pray about the Book of Mormon," there is not much anyone can do to further the conversion process.

So teachers must teach students about those two factors: (1) a willingness to experiment on the word and (2) an understanding of the confirming experiences that come from experimenting on the word. In addition to those two factors, teachers should be aware of another contributing factor. When a person has a friend, relative, or associate who is a positive example of a faithful member of the Church, such individuals often profoundly affect true conversion. Of all the investigators interviewed in the above-mentioned study, 44 percent had a close friend, relative, or associate who was a member of the Church. In the case of those who refused to continue and were never baptized, only 38 percent had a friend or relative who was a member. Of those who were baptized and remained active in the Church, 86 percent had a faithful friend or relative. Investigators said such things as, "I loved the missionaries, but I was having problems in my marriage and I didn't feel comfortable going to a nineteen-year-old, so I went to my dear neighbor who was a Latter-day Saint," or "I feel very uncomfortable going to Church in a new setting. While the missionaries were wonderful, it was my sister-in-law who took us and introduced us to people."

How can we accomplish desired conversion outcomes? In practical terms, what can we do as CES teachers to help bring about the conversion process? We have to do something more than we are now doing to change CES from just a positive experience to a pivotal experience in the lives of our students. Many students come from homes
where there is no conversion. Frankly, more and more of our students are coming from homes where the parents are only mentally converted.

Teachers must remember that they neither convert listeners nor give spiritual experiences to listeners. The First Presidency has said that we should help others receive their own spiritual experiences that change hearts and thereby change views of life. There are five practical ways to become an instrument in the Lord’s hands to aid in conversion.

1. Understand that teachers have to “want it.”

Teachers should have a passionate desire to teach. Two scriptures define our position as teachers of the gospel: D&C 6:8 and D&C 11:8. The message of these verses ought to be our watchcry: “Verily, verily, I say unto you, even as you desire of me so it shall be unto you; and if you desire, you shall be the means of doing much good in this generation.” Both scriptures say exactly the same thing. I am not just talking about desiring to be a good teacher or desiring to change hearts. We need to desire to do much good in this generation.

Some of the missionaries entering the Missionary Training Center are marvelous examples of conversion from strong Latter-day Saint homes of deep gospel knowledge. But many missionaries do not come from this type of home. The desire to be a defining force in the lives of students has to become a driving passion so that when we see those who lack conviction and depth in the gospel, we can help build their testimonies. To build desire, we have to pray, plead, and work. We have to pay a price just as Enos did when he wrestled with the Lord.

2. Help provide strong member support.

The catalytic factor where a member, friend, associate, or relative becomes integral in the conversion process can be true of teachers as well. I think of Stan Peterson’s sharing of two student letters that were examples of pivotal experiences in seminary. In one of the letters, the student mentioned her teacher, Russ Davies. This girl had come from a very abusive home with a less-active family. Just seeing her teacher’s smiling face and knowing he loved her turned this girl’s whole life around.

As teachers, we should make sure we are helping provide member support. In some cases, we become for young persons the supporting member—the rock, the friend, the counselor, the one they know loves them despite what might be going on at home. We become a model, especially reflecting the positive role of a spouse.
If students love their seminary and institute teachers, the teachers' privacy might be affected adversely. That is, young people have no concept of time. They can and will call to talk or stay so late that teachers can barely keep their eyes open. They will just keep talking because they love their teachers so much. Many of these students come from unhappy homes where they never see a positive marriage or a functional family. Part of being the support they need is providing the model they can look up to.

In providing member support, teachers also need to facilitate friendships. In his book *Teach Ye Diligently*, President Boyd K. Packer writes about a student who was a social outcast. To help this student, the teacher asked the seminary council simply to walk with her from the high school to the seminary. This common act changed that student's life. As noted previously, 86 percent of those who are converted and remain active have had a Latter-day Saint associate to strengthen them and help them in their conversion process. We need to concentrate on this kind of association as teachers.

3. Facilitate the experiment.

Since the first factor in the conversion process is a willingness to experiment, as teachers, we can stimulate that experimentation. There are four basic ways to do this.

*First, teach them the principle.* There ought to be many times when we say, “The only way you are going to know for yourself is to try it. You cannot just simply open your mind and say, ‘Heavenly Father, bless me.’” What is the definition of a sign seeker? The Lord condemns those who want confirmation without experimentation—those who want proof without effort.

*Second, model the process.* Show the students how to do it.

*Third, promise students in the name of the Lord that if they experiment, they will receive a confirmation.* That is what the scriptures teach. Promise them that they will see a difference if they are a little kinder to their brothers and sisters. Ask them to pray for strength not to use bad language in the locker room, and they will find that strength coming into their hearts.

*Fourth, challenge them.* I will give you an example from my own family. We had a son in high school who struck sparks with his mother every time they talked. No matter what we asked him to do, he fought us on it; life was a constant battle. I thought we had taught him better than that, but this conflict deeply affected his relationship with his
mother. In fact, it affected the whole family. One day his seminary teacher, whom he deeply respected, said, "I sense a little bit of conflict between you and your mother."

"Yeah, that's for sure."

"Do you hassle her when she asks you to do things?"

"Yeah."

"Does she make you do it anyway?"

"Well, yeah."

"Why don't you try this? The next time she asks you to do something, if you are going to end up doing it anyway, instead of hassling her, just say, 'Yes, Mother, I'd love to.'"

That's what he did. I thought my wife would die of shock—that simple thing changed their whole relationship. Interestingly, he is now a CES teacher and has been in the seminary program for eight years. The primary reason behind this change was a seminary teacher who not only loved him but also challenged him to experiment on the word.

Counseling students to experiment on the word is something teachers should do all the time. For example, teachers should say, "Read the Book of Mormon and pray about it. Don't just study; don't just read to mark it on your chart. Pray about it. Try it. See if doing these things makes a difference."

To fuel students' desire to experiment on the word, teachers should promise them in the name of the Lord that if they will experiment, they will receive confirmation—because that is what the scriptures teach. Simply promise them, "Look, just try to be a little kinder to your brothers and sisters, and I promise you that you will see a difference. Pray for strength that you don't use that kind of language in the locker room, and you will find that strength coming into your heart." That's the kind of thing we can do to stimulate the experiment.

4. Nurture the confirmation.

Following are two missionary examples that illustrate the problem of shallow conversion. A common scenario is one in which the missionaries say to an investigator, "Will you read the Book of Mormon and pray about it?"

Let us assume the answer is "Yes."

The next time they meet, the missionaries check on the reading progress to discover that the investigator did not read because the text was too confusing. What does the missionary say? "Well, try harder."

In other words, the investigator is the problem. That is not very nurturing.
Instead, some missionaries try another tactic. In the same situation, the missionaries say, “Let’s go to a passage you were reading. Show me what was troubling you.” And then they begin to define words and ask, “Now, do you see what the Lord is saying here? This is what He means.” That is nurturing.

Here is another missionary example. After a Church meeting, two missionaries ask their investigators what they thought of the meeting. “Well, it was pretty noisy, actually. Our church is very quiet and reverent.”

One missionary ducks his head and says, “Well, yeah, that is a little embarrassing.”

That is the nonnurturing missionary, whereas the nurturing missionary says, “I know, but there is something you need to understand about us. We believe in what Christ said, ‘Suffer the little children to come unto me’ (Mark 10:14). We believe passionately that the family is an eternal unit, and so we are willing to take the children into our meetings because it is so important in this family process.” With new perspective, a nurturing person turns the negative experience into a confirming experience.

Teachers can turn bad experiences into positive outcomes in three ways.

First, help students work through the process. If students come back and say, “Brother Jones, you know, I tried what you said and it just didn’t work.” In response, do not just say, “Try harder.” Sit down and say, “Tell me about it. What was going on? What were you doing?” Teachers should nurture students and help them work through the process of confirmation.

Second, help students see the hand of the Lord. Many will try the experiment and feel as though they did not see anything happening as promised. The teacher’s responsibility is to help them identify the soft whispering of the Spirit. When an investigator comes back and says, “You know, as I was thinking about this, all of a sudden a warm feeling came over me,” what does a missionary do? The missionary says, “That’s the Spirit!”

Many of our young people don’t know or recognize the Spirit, so we have to help them identify it.

Third, testify to students. Teachers need to testify that the process works, and they should testify from their own experiences. Teachers can also tell scripture stories. The principles associated with conversion are scattered throughout all the scriptures. Teachers should testify of God’s love and His mercy, testify that He knows students and cares for
them, and testify that the process works. In so doing, teachers will nurture the confirmation.

5. Teach students how the Spirit works.

Students have many misconceptions about the Spirit. The First Presidency is concerned that some members may not be having spiritual experiences that change their hearts. We may have emotional experiences in the Church, especially with our youth, but if the experiences are not from the Spirit, they don’t really change the heart. As we know, there is such a thing as counterfeit revelation. There is counterfeit revelation that comes from the evil side and counterfeit revelation that comes from our own emotions. We get confused and want something so badly we convince ourselves it is from the Lord.

Following are seven principles that will help students understand how the Spirit works.

The Lord sets all conditions of revelation. The most important aspect of understanding the Spirit is knowing that the Lord sets all conditions of revelation. Although the base scripture is D&C 88:68 and though it is clear, its interpretation is violated so frequently that it is almost unbelievable: “Therefore, sanctify yourselves that your minds become single to God, and the days will come that you shall see him; for he will unveil his face unto you” (D&C 88:68). And then comes this statement: “And it shall be in his own time, and in his own way, and according to his own will.” That is, the Lord sets all conditions of revelation.

This principle is so simple and yet so profound. Revelation comes in the Lord’s own time. How frequently do we stipulate the time by which we expect the Lord to give us an answer? How often do we tell Him we need a solution to the problem right now? Sometimes we act like the Lord is the Sears catalog. We ring up an order, ask Him to deliver it by Federal Express, and, if possible, request Him to overnight it to us. We need to realize that the Lord answers us in His own time.

On 28 February 2001, Elder Neal A. Maxwell spoke to missionaries at the Provo MTC, delivering a profound talk on revelation. One of the things he said was, “We need to learn not only to pray ‘Thy will be done,’ but ‘Thy time be done.’” That is a great lesson.

The Lord also sets the how of revelation. Revelation comes across a wide spectrum of experiences—some very direct, some very subtle—but we don’t tell Him how or when to give us a revelation. In fact, if we try to press things in our timetable, we open the way to be
deceived. We should remember a movement some years ago in which some people said, "I'm going up into the mountain, and I'm not coming down until I have a spiritual confirmation." In essence, such seekers after truth are telling the Lord how to do His business. How can we—simple, ignorant, sinful, finite individuals—tell the Infinite how best to help us? That is the ultimate audacity, and yet we are guilty of it far too often. We tell God what we want. We work out the whole problem and then ask the Lord to bring it about for us. We must be careful that we don't try to tell the Lord how to do His business. As Jacob 4:10 teaches, "Seek not to counsel the Lord, but to take counsel from his hand."

Revelation comes in quiet, subtle, nondramatic ways. I remember one occasion when I came home from work and found my daughter standing at the sink. "Good afternoon," I said.

She burst into tears. When I asked her what was the matter, she blurted out, "I don't have a testimony, Dad."

I was flabbergasted because this girl had always been diligent in doing what is right. Some nights I got up at 1:20 A.M. and went downstairs to find her reading her scriptures after her night shift at McDonald's just so she would not miss a day. "Not a testimony! How can you say that?"

Evidently, a well-meaning teacher had given a lesson on testimony. He used three potent examples of conversion with them: Alma the Younger, Enos, and King Lamoni. That is very tough competition. Although those are real experiences, they are not typical. Because my daughter's conversion was not dramatic or marvelous, she felt she was void of a testimony. As a precursor to my explaining that revelation comes in quiet, subtle, nondramatic ways, I facetiously asked, "So what are you looking for—three days of unconsciousness?"

Two scriptures define this second principle: D&C 85:6 and D&C 8:2–3. The first scripture tell us two things: (1) the voice of the Lord is still and small and (2) it whispers. The second tells us that revelation comes to our minds (thoughts) and hearts (feelings). What an interesting description! As I have said on occasion, it is too bad the Lord does not use microphones and eighty-megawatt speakers so the room thunders and we feel the walls vibrate. Then, we would say, "Yes, that one was from the Lord." Thunderous answers are very rare, and that is part of the Lord's way.

There is great wisdom to absorb here—if the Lord gets too direct, the result overwhelms our agency. He is always very careful about agency. The other thing we have to remember is that revelation comes across a wide spectrum. There are occasions where the Lord actually
speaks to people in an audible voice. I have never personally heard an audible voice, although I have a friend who did. What came to him in that audible voice is no more important than what comes in the quiet whisperings of the Spirit. It is what comes, not how it comes, that matters. In D&C 6:14, we learn that inspiration sometimes comes as flashes of insight—or what I call the “aha experience.” We should watch for that in our students. When we are teaching and all of a sudden a student’s head jerks up and he or she says, “Oh!” then we are doing what we ought to be doing. And in D&C 6:15, we learn that inspiration comes as enlightenment.

*The Lord puts His “signature” on revelation.* In working with students, teachers should watch for what I call “the Lord’s signature.” Sometimes the Lord answers prayers in such a way that it is unmistakably from Him. This is the Lord’s “autograph.” It is as if He is saying, “This one is from Me.” We need to have the eyes to see His signature. Following are two examples of this principle.

A busy mother of five was assigned to give the spiritual living lesson one Sunday morning. Her husband left at 6 A.M. for his bishopric meeting, so it was up to the mother to get all the children to the chapel on time. Relief Society was the first hour, nine o’clock, so she was trying to get there a little early to set up. As she tells the story, “By five minutes to nine, I was still missing two of a possible four pairs of shoes. We had searched everywhere, and my tension level was rising. I was starting to yell at the children, ‘We’ve got to find those shoes!’ Suddenly, I realized I didn’t like what was happening to me, knowing that I was going to have to go and supposedly teach by the Spirit. So I bowed my head and said, ‘Heavenly Father, I know shoes are not a big thing in the kingdom, but I need your help if I’m going to give this lesson with the Spirit.’ I said, ‘amen,’ raised my head, and opened my eyes to see the two shoes in the crack between the refrigerator and the wall. My youngest had stuffed them in there. Now, that was just like the Lord saying, ‘I heard you and this one’s from me.”’

Another example of the Lord’s “signature” comes from the wonderful Church history account of Ellen Neibaur. She was so poor that she walked barefoot to Utah because she could not afford shoes. For eight years, she literally put pennies aside to save enough money for a pair of high-top, button, patent-leather shoes from the East. When her shoes finally arrived, she was very proud of them. A few days later, she went to the 1856 October general conference where Brigham Young stood up and said, “Brethren and sisters, we have just learned that there are two handcart companies out on the plains. We need drivers.
We need teams. We need flour. We need clothing. We need shoes.” Sister Neibaur, after eight years of sacrifice, went right to the back of the old tabernacle, sat down, and took off those new shoes and gave them to the rescue effort. What a wonderful display of faith, commitment, and covenant!

Interestingly, when the handcart companies finally came in, all the Saints went out to meet them. Typically, when meeting incoming companies, the Saints searched faces to find someone they knew. What do you think Ellen Neibaur was looking at? She was looking at feet. She wanted to see who had gotten her shoes. When she finally saw them, she was utterly astonished. It was a childhood friend from England who had not yet joined the Church at the time Ellen left but since had joined and had come across the plains with the Martin and Willie handcart companies. It was as if the Lord had said, “I know what you did. Let me validate that for you in a special way.” Teach your students to look for those kinds of experiences.

Revelation is an active, not a passive, experience. Along with teaching students to look for the Lord’s hand in their lives, we should teach them that revelation is an active rather than a passive experience. This principle is taught in D&C 9:7, in which the Lord chastises thoughtless prayers: “You took no thought save it was to ask me.” That is true of many of our students. Sometimes students think all they have to do is ask, but what they fail to realize is that revelation is not a passive experience. It is not a spectator sport. The verbs used in the scriptures call for action. Rather than our simply reading the scriptures, the Lord invites us to “treasure up . . . the words of life” (D&C 84:85), “seek ye diligently” (D&C 88:118), “[feast] upon the word” (2 Nephi 31:20), and be diligent, humble, and faithful.

President Packer stated, “There are those who have made a casual, even an insincere, effort to test the scriptures and have come away having received nothing, which is precisely what they have earned and what they deserve. If a person thinks these books will yield to a casual inquiry, to idle curiosity, or even to well-intentioned but temporary searching, he is mistaken. They likewise will not yield to the overzealous or to the fanatic” What a powerful concept! President Spencer W. Kimball said, “When man begins to hunger, when arms begin to reach, when knees begin to bend and voices begin to articulate, then, and not until then, does the Lord make himself known.” We do our students a great disservice if we do not tell them that a price has to be paid for these spiritual experiences. If it were not so, we would not value them. They would not become heart-changing. They would not become life-changing.
Concerning revelation, Elder Maxwell said during a talk on 28 February 2001 at the Provo MTC, "I've been studying personal revelation for about ten years now." This was electrifying to me; I had never thought of it in this way—studying revelation. Later, in the same talk, he said, "President Packer often teaches the Twelve this principle, and I quote, 'The Lord often gives direction without explanation.'" That is frustrating, isn't it? Our nature is to want to know why. The Lord gives us a prompting, and we say, "So what am I supposed to do with this?" Often, the Lord chooses not to answer this question at that point.

A phrase in the hymn "Lead, Kindly Light" has come to mean a lot to me. In the second verse is the sentence "I do not ask to see the distant scene—one step enough for me." How do we get direction without explanation? On the trail, as the rescue party for the handcart companies went down about three miles into the willows near Rock Creek to wait for further word from the express company, there was a howling blizzard in the camp. Winters in the Wyoming area are fierce. I have talked to ranchers who say that when they are in a Wyoming blizzard, they have to be careful going from the house to the barn because they can get lost and never return. Despite the snow, a man named Harvey Cluff started worrying about the express party, thinking, "How are they going to know we pulled off the trail if they turn around and come back?" Reluctantly, he decided to go back and post a sign. Harvey Cluff later commented, "It was a difficult thing for me to face that northern blast as I went back up the hill." That is an understatement.

Now, think of a blizzard. Think how fast footprints can be erased. Brother Cluff went on to report, "I had only been back to camp a short time when two men rode up from the Willie handcart company." James G. Willie and Joseph Elder must have come within five or ten minutes of Harvey's putting up the sign. Imagine what would have happened if Willie and Elder had passed by. They would have perished along with the whole company. Sometimes God gives us direction without explanation.

True revelation does not contradict gospel principles or established Church procedure. We should teach students to understand that true revelation never contradicts gospel principles or established Church procedure. However, there is one exception to this standard—when the prophet receives new direction from the Lord. All things must be done in order. We do not have the right to contradict gospel principles or established Church procedure, but the prophet does. We are counseled in D&C 28:13 not to go contrary to God's order. Yet sometimes
we have the wildest rumors passed around. I’ve sometimes felt that the Church has a system of communication that puts AT&T, MCI, and Sprint to absolute shame. We pass around stories of hitchhikers warning us about food storage. In firesides, we give warnings of upcoming earthquakes. We have predicted the Second Coming—the actual date—even though the scriptures explicitly say, “The hour and the day no man knoweth, neither the angels in heaven, nor shall they know until he comes” (D&C 49:7). I actually heard a fireside tape of a man who, after quoting that scripture, said, “I know what that scripture says about no one knowing, but with diligent efforts, I have worked it out.” The incredible thing was that this was passed to me as a bishop by one of my ward members. Teach your students that revelation never contradicts Church principles. Elder Dallin H. Oaks tells the story of a woman who was deeply hurt by her lifelong friend. She decided she wanted to get even, so she prayed for help. We laugh at that, but there are people, some of them students, who do things like this—contrary to how the Church works.

The Lord expects His children to develop spiritual self-reliance. As the Lord points out in D&C 58:26–27, “a slothful and not a wise servant” is the kind of servant who has to be told everything to do. Therefore, the Lord expects us to develop spiritual self-reliance. Elder Maxwell stated in his talk at the Provo MTC that “expecting revelation in every little thing leads to being misled.” I’ve known people like that. They credit everything to the Spirit. “The Spirit told me to do this or to do that.” “I can’t do that because the Spirit hasn’t confirmed it.” Elder Oaks commented, “We believe in continuing revelation, not continuous revelation.” That is a great concept. He also said, “The Spirit of the Lord is not likely to give us revelations on matters that are trivial. I once heard a young woman in testimony meeting praise the spirituality of her husband, indicating that he submitted every question to the Lord. She told how he had accompanied her shopping and would not even choose between different brands of canned vegetables without making his selection a matter of prayer.” Now, if you read that statement to students, you will have students who will say, “Wow! Wouldn’t it be great to be that spiritual?” Elder Oaks responded by saying, “That strikes me as improper. I believe the Lord expects us to use the intelligence and experience He has given us to make these kinds of choices.”

Revelation for others must involve appropriate stewardship. As we read in D&C 28:6, “Thou shalt not command him who is at thy head.” Therefore, there is a principle of stewardship in revelation. We
never get true revelation for someone unless we have a stewardship over that person—parents for children, a bishop for his ward, and so forth. As soon as the bishop starts telling the stake president what to do, the bishop is out of line. When Johnny says he has had a revelation that his girlfriend is to marry him, the girl need not pay attention. Johnny has no stewardship over her. He cannot get a revelation that tells her what to do. She has a right to receive her own revelation. Carlfred Broderick, a Latter-day Saint family counselor, calls that kind of revelation a "hormonal revelation."

The end result of all that is done in the Church Educational System is conversion—through scripture mastery, object lessons, institute socials, and all the hundreds of things done in the program. If what is done is not sustaining, supporting, or facilitating conversion, that activity is not accomplishing the primary goal of CES.

I have a strong testimony that someday everyone in the CES program will stand before the Lord and have Him say, "Tell me what you did." I do not think I will be ashamed if I at least can say, "I tried. Sometimes I failed, but I really tried." But I cannot imagine saying to the Savior of the world, "I am sorry. I did not care enough."

What we do matters greatly. In D&C 78:17, we are told about the great blessings the Father has prepared for us, and we will be blessed if we turn to Him and help our students do the same. RT

Notes

8. Ibid.
One of the desirable outcomes of a mature organization is the accumulation, over time, of historical information about the organization. That information can be retained or disseminated by the organization according to its policies, or the information can be used by individuals or groups with interests or ties to the organization.

From its inception, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints has been vitally concerned with historical information about itself (see D&C 21:1). By commandment received on the day the Church was organized, the Lord said, “A record shall be kept.” The Church has been very diligent in the past 170-plus years in fulfilling this inspiring charge. In fact, perhaps few organizations have been as concerned or as diligent in accumulating information about themselves as has the Church of Jesus Christ. An interesting study would be one that compares the amount and variety of information accumulated about various ecclesiastical organizations in the world. I think the Church would fare extremely well in such an investigation.

Many action verbs can be used to describe the activities that potentially take place associated with Church historical information. Such action verbs as keep, record, accumulate, gather, store, retrieve, chronicle, report, enter, post, write, transcribe, itemize, collect, gather, amass, assemble, and compile are examples of verbs associated with the keeping of historical information. Other action verbs such as examine, analyze, apply, employ, use, manipulate,
and utilize are examples associated with the processes of doing something with the historical information after it is accumulated.

For the past several years, I have enjoyed gathering information about the Church and compiling this information into chart and table form. The process has taken on the flavor of a hobby, and I often find myself wanting to share the results of my work with other interested individuals.

A significant part of my gathering and compiling of Church-related information deals with the General Authorities of the Church. As I have learned more about these faithful Brethren and the service they have so unselfishly rendered to the Lord and His Church, I have strengthened my testimony by looking at their examples—and I have felt even more keenly that others might be interested in my endeavors. My perspective is that every fact and detail relating to the Church and its leaders, even if seemingly trivial, is important and can build faith.

I am pleased to share with readers of the Religious Educator three tables I have assembled containing information about the Presidents of the Church. Although the information in the tables

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<th>Date Ordained</th>
<th>Birth Date</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Joseph Fielding Smith</td>
<td>93 years 6 months</td>
<td>23 Jan. 1970</td>
<td>19 July 1876</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Howard W. Hunter</td>
<td>86 years 6 months</td>
<td>5 June 1994</td>
<td>14 Nov. 1907</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ezra Taft Benson</td>
<td>86 years 3 months</td>
<td>10 Nov. 1985</td>
<td>4 Aug. 1899</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gordon B. Hinckley</td>
<td>84 years 9 months</td>
<td>12 Mar. 1995</td>
<td>23 June 1910</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lorenzo Snow</td>
<td>84 years 5 months</td>
<td>13 Sept. 1898</td>
<td>3 Apr. 1814</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wilford Woodruff</td>
<td>82 years 1 month</td>
<td>7 Apr. 1889</td>
<td>1 Mar. 1807</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spencer W. Kimball</td>
<td>78 years 9 months</td>
<td>30 Dec. 1973</td>
<td>28 Mar. 1895</td>
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<tr>
<td>David O. McKay</td>
<td>77 years 7 months</td>
<td>9 Apr. 1951</td>
<td>8 Sept. 1873</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>George Albert Smith</td>
<td>75 years 2 months</td>
<td>21 May 1945</td>
<td>4 Apr. 1870</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Harold B. Lee</td>
<td>73 years 3 months</td>
<td>7 July 1972</td>
<td>28 Mar. 1899</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>John Taylor</td>
<td>71 years 11 months</td>
<td>10 Oct. 1880</td>
<td>1 Nov. 1808</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joseph F. Smith</td>
<td>62 years 11 months</td>
<td>17 Oct. 1901</td>
<td>13 Nov. 1838</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Heber J. Grant</td>
<td>62 years</td>
<td>23 Nov. 1918</td>
<td>22 Nov. 1856</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brigham Young</td>
<td>46 years 7 months</td>
<td>27 Dec. 1847</td>
<td>1 June 1801</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joseph Smith</td>
<td>26 years 1 month</td>
<td>6 Apr. 1830</td>
<td>23 Dec. 1805</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
is available through various other sources, I know of no source that presents the information in the way I have presented it in the tables.

Initially, the information in the tables might appear to be somewhat menial. However, I have found that examining the information thoroughly and pondering its possible implications produces relevant insights that strengthen testimony and increase understanding. I think teachers of the restored gospel might be able to use the information in their teaching for those purposes.

Table 1 shows the ages of the Presidents of the Church when they were called to be Church President—listed by descending age. For reference purposes, I have also included the date each prophet was ordained as President.²

Table 2 shows the same information as in table 1 except the information is listed according to succession of the Presidents of the Church.

Table 3 shows the time each prophet served as President and the dates of his service—listed according to decreasing time of ser-

### Table 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Prophet</th>
<th>Age When Ordained</th>
<th>Date Ordained</th>
<th>Birth Date</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Joseph Smith</td>
<td>26 years 1 month</td>
<td>6 Apr. 1830</td>
<td>23 Dec. 1805</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brigham Young</td>
<td>46 years 7 months</td>
<td>27 Dec. 1847</td>
<td>1 June 1801</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>John Taylor</td>
<td>71 years 11 months</td>
<td>10 Oct. 1880</td>
<td>1 Nov. 1808</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wilford Woodruff</td>
<td>82 years 1 month</td>
<td>7 Apr. 1889</td>
<td>1 Mar. 1807</td>
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<td>Lorenzo Snow</td>
<td>84 years 5 months</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Heber J. Grant</td>
<td>62 years</td>
<td>23 Nov. 1918</td>
<td>22 Nov. 1856</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>George Albert Smith</td>
<td>75 years 2 months</td>
<td>21 May 1945</td>
<td>4 Apr. 1870</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>David O. McKay</td>
<td>77 years 7 months</td>
<td>9 Apr. 1951</td>
<td>8 Sept. 1873</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joseph Fielding Smith</td>
<td>93 years 6 months</td>
<td>23 Jan. 1970</td>
<td>16 July 1876</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Harold B. Lee</td>
<td>73 years 3 months</td>
<td>7 July 1972</td>
<td>28 Mar. 1899</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spencer W. Kimball</td>
<td>78 years 9 months</td>
<td>30 Dec. 1973</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ezra Taft Benson</td>
<td>86 years 3 months</td>
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<td>Howard W Hunter</td>
<td>86 years 6 months</td>
<td>5 June 1994</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gordon B Hinckley</td>
<td>84 years 9 months</td>
<td>12 Mar. 1995</td>
<td>23 June 1910</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
vice.

I have prepared scores of tables and charts through which I have pulled together in succinct form all kinds of historical information about the Church of Jesus Christ, and some of this information will be shared with readers of the Religious Educator in future issues. If you have any questions or suggestions, please send them to Michael Taylor at mdtaylormd@attbi.com.

Notes

1. See D&C 10:81–83; 21:1; 47:3; and 85:1 for instances when the Lord gave commandments associated with the keeping of historical records associated with the history of the Church.

2. The word “ordained” in the column headings for both tables 1 and 2 implies “ordained and set apart.” For some of the Presidents, the Church Almanac gives only the dates of “sustaining.” In the case of Joseph Smith, he was sustained as the first elder of the Church on 6 April 1830.

### Table 3

Tenure in Office of Church Presidents, Listed by Decreasing Length of Service

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Prophet</th>
<th>Tenure as President</th>
<th>Dates of Service as President</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Brigham Young</td>
<td>29 years 8 months</td>
<td>27 Dec. 1847 to 29 Aug. 1877</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Heber J. Grant</td>
<td>26 years 5 months</td>
<td>23 Nov. 1918 to 14 May 1945</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>David O. McKay</td>
<td>18 years 9 months</td>
<td>9 Apr. 1951 to 18 Jan. 1970</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joseph F. Smith</td>
<td>17 years 1 month</td>
<td>17 Oct. 1901 to 19 Nov. 1918</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joseph Smith</td>
<td>14 years 3 months</td>
<td>6 Apr. 1830 to 27 June 1844</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spencer W. Kimball</td>
<td>11 years 10 months</td>
<td>30 Dec. 1973 to 5 Nov. 1985</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wilford Woodruff</td>
<td>9 years 5 months</td>
<td>7 Apr. 1889 to 2 Sept. 1898</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ezra Taft Benson</td>
<td>8 years 7 months</td>
<td>10 Nov. 1985 to 30 May 1994</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gordon B. Hinckley</td>
<td>7 years on 12 Mar. 2002</td>
<td>12 Mar. 95 to present</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>John Taylor</td>
<td>6 years 9 months</td>
<td>10 Oct. 1880 to 25 July 1887</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>George Albert Smith</td>
<td>5 years 11 months</td>
<td>21 May 1945 to 4 Apr. 1951</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lorenzo Snow</td>
<td>3 years 1 month</td>
<td>13 Sept. 1898 to 10 Oct. 1901</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joseph Fielding Smith</td>
<td>2 years 5 months</td>
<td>23 Jan. 1970 to 2 July 1972</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Harold B. Lee</td>
<td>1 year 6 months</td>
<td>7 July 1972 to 26 Dec. 1973</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Howard W. Hunter</td>
<td>9 months</td>
<td>5 June 1994 to 3 Mar. 1995</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Prophecies and Promises of Joseph Smith—Matthew

D. Kelly Ogden

Joseph Smith—Matthew was translated by the gift and power of God, not by mastery of ancient Greek. It is noteworthy that the Prophet emphasized Matthew 24 more than any other chapter in the New Testament, and he made more changes in its text than in any other. This revision contains 33 percent more material than Matthew 24 in the Bible. Significant changes, corrections, or additions made by the Prophet are highlighted and emphasized in this commentary with italics. (See also D&C 45 for a parallel account of much of what appears in this chapter; D&C 29:9–27 and 88:87–97 provide additional details.)

Why were these instructions and prophecies given? To frighten us? No, they are given to the true believers in the Lord Jesus Christ to prepare us, not to scare us. Panic is not part of the gospel. We have His assurance that if we are prepared, we have no need to fear (see D&C 38:30).

We are actually commanded to study and learn the signs of His coming: “He that feareth me shall be looking forth for the great day of the Lord to come, even for the signs of the coming of the Son of Man . . . and he that watches not for me shall be cut off” (D&C 45:39, 44).

The following verse-by-verse commentary will help gospel teachers and students to understand and explain the glorious prophecies and promises of Joseph Smith—Matthew. Many of these prophecies have double meaning; they apply to both ancient and modern
times—conditions in the world and among God’s people after His first coming and before His Second Coming.

Teachers may find it helpful to share a basic outline showing dates for each section, as follows:

Verses 1–11: DG 33–70
Verses 12–20: DG 70
Verses 21–55: The Restoration to the Second Coming

Verse 1

The first half of this verse comes from Matthew 23:39, with the Prophet Joseph Smith’s addition. The second half of the verse, beginning with the words “in the clouds of heaven,” is new material. “Blessed is he that cometh in the name of the Lord” refers to His coming in glory at the end of the world—in the clouds of heaven with all the holy ones (the Saints) accompanying him.

Verses 2–3

Mark 13:1 notes that the disciples were impressed with the grandeur of the Jerusalem temple. Of all the building enterprises of Herod the Great, there was none greater than in the capital, Jerusalem. He rebuilt the former Hasmonean fortress and named it the Antonia Fortress in honor of his Roman friend Mark Antony. Herod also constructed his royal palace and towers, a theater, an amphitheater, a stadium, and monumental gates and staircases to the Temple Mount. However, his grandest edifice was the temple in Jerusalem.

The Temple of Herod was constructed beginning in 20 EF with the help of ten thousand workmen. One of Herod’s main purposes was to provide greater space for the hundreds of thousands of worshipers who came to the temple during the pilgrimage festivals and high holy days. One thousand priests who had been trained as masons and carpenters helped to build the holiest parts, and a thousand wagons transported materials. The temple proper was under construction for a year and a half, and the courtyards and porticoes for eight years (though embellishment of the outer courts actually continued for more than eighty years). It was said that whoever had not seen the Temple of Herod had never seen a beautiful building in his or her life. No other temple complex in the Greco-Roman world compared with its expansiveness and magnificence.

Jesus prophesied that not one stone of the temple would be left standing on another (see Mark 13:1–2; Luke 21:6). The magnificent temple, the house of the Lord, to which many Jerusalemites
must have looked with a confident sense of inviolability, would be leveled to the ground and the Temple Mount plowed! Isaiah had once assured the Lord’s people that as birds protectively hovered over their young, so the Lord of Hosts would defend and preserve Jerusalem (see Isaiah 31:4–5). But with no allegiance and devotion to their God, the leaders of the Jews and many of their followers had abandoned the Hope of Israel. Without their faith and faithfulness, the Lord’s hand would not be stretched out to protect them or the holy temple. In this case, the temple would be destroyed, as foreseen by Daniel the prophet: “[Then] shall Messiah be cut off . . . and the people of the prince [Latin, princeps, as the Roman general Titus] that shall come shall destroy the city and the sanctuary” (Daniel 9:26; emphasis added). The largest and grandest of the temples in Jerusalem would also be the shortest lived.1

Jesus’ prophecy was that not one stone would be left standing on another “upon this temple.” The last phrase was added by the Prophet Joseph Smith. The Lord was not referring to the massive retaining walls around the Temple Mount—the eastern, southern, and western parts of which are still standing—but to the temple proper. That prophecy was literally fulfilled within a generation or so after His departure.

Verse 4

Upon leaving the Temple Mount, Jesus walked down and crossed the Kidron and then hiked up onto the Mount of Olives to a point overlooking the temple. The Apostles came to Him privately and asked three questions involving two different dispensations: [1] “Tell us when shall these things be which thou hast said concerning the destruction of the temple, and the Jews; and [2] what is the sign of thy coming, and [3] of the end of the world?” Of all the question words—what, how, when, who, where, why, and so forth—the Savior’s Apostles, some of the greatest men on earth at the time, wanted first to know when. The Old Testament prophet Daniel also wanted to know when (see Daniel 12:6). Joseph Smith also wanted to know when (see D&C 130:14). That seems to be the first question we all have. Our natural human curiosity wants to know when pivotal events will occur, either because of our fear of being caught unprepared or because of a righteous desire to be ready ourselves and help others be ready.

A significant portion of their questions is presented here for the first time, added into the scriptural record by the Prophet Joseph
Smith: “Tell us when shall these things be which thou hast said concern-ing the destruction of the temple, and the Jews [in DG 70]; and what is the sign of thy coming, and of the end of the world, or the destruction of the wicked; which is the end of the world? [yet future].” The Apostles asked when, and Jesus responded with details about events.

Incidentally, in D&C 101, the Lord gave a parable concerning the redemption of Zion—one of the signs of the end of the world. In verse 59, the question is asked, “When shall these things be?” The answer given in the next verse is “When I will[!]” Then, verse 62 notes that “after many days all things were fulfilled.” The cross reference on that verse is D&C 105:37, which reveals the same message: all things pertaining to Zion will be accomplished “after many days.” Earlier, the Saints in Zion, Jackson County, Missouri, were advised by the Lord that they were honored in laying the foundation of the land upon which the Zion of God shall stand (see D&C 58:7). The Lord continued to explain that “the time has not yet come, for many years, for them to receive their inheritance in this land” (58:44; emphasis added).

Verses 5–11

These verses describe conditions in Jerusalem between the conclusion of the Savior’s ministry (DG 33) and the destruction of the city and the temple less than forty years later. The order of the verses in Matthew 24 was appropriately changed by the Prophet Joseph Smith in this inspired revision.

Verses 5–7

The disciples could expect to see false Christs or false Messiahs who would deceive many people. They could also expect to be afflicted, hated, and killed for the cause of Christ. For example, Peter and John were delivered up to the Jerusalem Sanhedrin. Paul was delivered up to Gallio, Felix, Festus, and Agrippa. Stephen, James, Peter, Paul, and others were killed.

Verses 8–11

In those days (as in modern times) many, even in the Church, would be offended, betray one another, hate one another, be deceived by false prophets, and, because of sin, lose their natural human affection. Violence, irreverence, coarseness, and crudity all cause abandonment of
normal human sensitivities. Would anyone be safe and be saved during these treacherous times? Yes, “he that remaineth steadfast and is not overcome” (verse 11).

Verses 12–20

These verses describe conditions and events in the fateful year of DG 70. “These things I have spoken unto you concerning the Jews” (verse 21) and their city of Jerusalem in DG 70 (see verse 18).

Verse 12

For many centuries, scholars and lay readers alike have wondered about the meaning of Daniel’s phrase “the abomination of desolation.” The Prophet Joseph Smith added a defining statement into the verse: the abomination of desolation refers to the destruction of Jerusalem. When the destruction comes upon Jerusalem, it is good to be found standing “in the holy place[s]”—that is, among the Saints, among the pure in heart, or in Zion (see D&C 45:32; 87:8; 101:22–23). Any additional meaning is left to the reader: “Whoso readeth let him understand.”

Verses 13–17

How to survive the desolation in those days: stand in holy places and flee the city. According to Eusebius, the members of the Church of Jesus Christ fled Jerusalem before its destruction in the DG 70 and settled in Pella, a few miles southeast of the Sea of Galilee.2 Survival instructions are urgent and decisive: don’t even go back home to retrieve some coveted items; leave, get out quickly! It would be particularly hard on women who are pregnant and breast-feeding their infants in those days. The Lord adds that they should pray their flight is not in winter nor on the Sabbath (verse 17).

Verses 18–21a

Much in these verses is new material. The tribulation of the Jews and Jerusalem in DG 70 was the worst since the establishment of their kingdom (in the days of David, ca. 1000 EF, or upon the death of Solomon, ca. 935 EF) and the worst that would ever be sent by God upon them. Other horrible, tragic tribulation would later come (such as the Holocaust), but it would not be sent “of God.”

What happened to the Jewish people in DG 70 was only the
beginning of the sorrows that would come upon them (verse 19). When the Savior spoke that idea, it was prophecy; now, as we look back over the centuries, it is history.

Were the sufferings involved in that destruction in the first century not cut short, the Lord says that the Jewish people might be made extinct (verse 20); but because of the covenant (the promises made to them) He would step in and stop the destruction. The remnants must be scattered to the far-flung reaches of the world until the gathering at the end of days.

Verses 21–55

In the middle of verse 21 (“after the tribulation of those days”), the scene shifts to the latter days. Warnings are repeated: we can anticipate and expect to see false Christs and false prophets who will show great signs and wonders. The “miraculous” powers of Satan are quite visible in our modern world; spiritualistic phenomena are plentiful. “And he that seeketh signs shall see signs, but not unto salvation” (D&C 63:7). Not all supernatural manifestations are from God. “Ask of God . . . that ye may not be seduced by evil spirits, or doctrines of devils, or the commandments of men; for some are of men, and others of devils” (46:7). Even the elect have to be careful so as not to be deceived. Each must have his or her own light and knowledge and faith and testimony. And the remarkable promise is that “whoso treasureth up my word, shall not be deceived” (verse 37).

Verses 23–24

Jesus taught all these things for the sake of His Saints, the elect, the covenant people. There will be many wars (unceasing since the American Civil War; D&C 87:1–2) and rumors of wars. These are no surprises, as He has explained clearly beforehand what is to happen: “See that ye be not troubled, for all I have told you must come to pass.”

Verses 25–26

If some were to claim that the Messiah is out in the desert or in the secret chambers, don’t believe them, for His coming will be open, conspicuous, and grand.

According to the King James Version, Matthew used lightning to describe the Second Coming of the Savior: “For as the lightning
cometh out of the east, and shineth even unto the west; so shall also the coming of the Son of man be” (24:27). That analogy from nature—Jesus coming as lightning from the east—is a brilliant and powerful image but is meteorologically incorrect. In the Holy Land, lightning does not come from the east. Lightning, as with all storm clouds and precipitation, originates in the west from over the Mediterranean. The Prophet Joseph Smith (who, of course, had no training in Near Eastern weather patterns) corrected the prophecy to read: “For as the light of the morning cometh out of the east, and shineth even unto the west, and covereth the whole earth, so shall also the coming of the Son of Man be” (Joseph Smith—Matthew 1:26).

Verse 27

Jesus’ parable indicates that wherever the carcass is, there will the eagles be gathered together. The King James text leaves the reader to surmise what the lesson of this analogy might be, but Joseph Smith—Matthew includes a simple explanation: “So likewise shall mine elect be gathered from the four quarters of the earth.” The JST of Luke 17:37–38 gives additional insight: “Wheresoever the body is gathered; or, in other words, whithersoever the saints are gathered, thither will the eagles be gathered together; or, thither will the remainder be gathered together. This he spake, signifying the gathering of his saints, and of angels descending and gathering the remainder unto them.”

Verses 28–29

Foreshadowing of wars and rumors of wars is a repetition. So also is the Lord’s declaration that He is speaking for the elect’s sake. Natural disasters will also occur: famines, pestilences, and earthquakes (and we might add floods, hurricanes, tsunamis, typhoons, volcanic eruptions, tornadoes, and fires). These catastrophes seem to be increasing as we approach the Second Coming.

Verses 30

In the last days, the love of men shall wax cold—one of the most frightening of all conditions among those who live without God in the world. And why does this happen, this lack of natural human affec-
tion? “Because iniquity shall abound.” Sin breeds more sin; satisfying the lusts of the flesh foments abortion, abuse, and violence.

Verse 31

Again, in the last days, the gospel will be carried by the missionaries and members of the kingdom to all parts of the world. The end of the world, the destruction of the wicked, will not come until the witness has penetrated all nations. The Lord’s hand is clearly evidenced in the recognition of the Church in numerous nations and the opening of the way for the preaching of the message of salvation. Of approximately two hundred nations in the world, the Church is currently represented in at least 156 nations, but there is still a very large portion of the earth’s population without contact of any kind with the Lord’s representatives.

Verse 32

In the last days, the abomination of desolation, spoken of by Daniel the prophet, will be fulfilled. That is, as in the first century after Christ (verse 12), so in the last century before His Second Coming, Jerusalem will be besieged and suffer much destruction.

Verse 33

Immediately after the tribulation of those days (such things as enumerated in the previous verses), the sun shall be darkened, the moon shall not give her light, and the stars shall fall from heaven. Many passages of scripture foreshadow these ominous irregularities in the celestial orbs (see Isaiah 13:10; Ezekiel 32:7; Joel 2:10, 3:15; Revelation 6:12–13; D&C 29:14, 45:42, 88:87). What is the cause of this strange behavior of all the heavenly luminaries? The answer is found in D&C 133:49: “So great shall be the glory of his [that is, the Lord’s] presence that the sun shall hide his face in shame, and the moon shall withhold its light, and the stars shall be hurled from their places.” Section 133 of the Doctrine and Covenants details several effects of the Savior’s coming in glory:

1. The sun, moon, and stars will hide or withhold their light, being insignificant compared to the brilliance of Him who is literally the light of the world (see D&C 88:7–13). Recall that Joseph Smith described Him and His Father as “above the brightness of the sun . . . whose brightness and glory defy all description” (Joseph Smith—History 1:16, 17; cf. verses 30–31).
2. Mountains will flow down at His presence (D&C 133:40, 44).
3. Waters on the earth will boil (verse 41).
4. All nations will tremble at His presence (verse 42).
5. Wicked people and things will be burned and destroyed by the brightness of His glory (D&C 5:19; Malachi 4:1–3; 2 Thessalonians 2:8; Joseph Smith—History 1:37; D&C 29:9, 12; 64:24; 101:23–25; see further on Joseph Smith—Matthew 1:36).

John the Revelator wrote in his description of the celestial city of God, the New Jerusalem, “The city had no need of the sun, neither of the moon, to shine in it: for the glory of God did lighten it, and the Lamb is the light thereof” (Revelation 21:23).

Verse 34

“This generation [of Jews; D&C 45:21], in which these things [all these signs of the Lord’s coming] shall be shown forth, shall not pass away until all I have told you shall be fulfilled.” The Jewish race (“this generation”) will still be a distinct people at the Second Coming.

Verse 35

Heaven (the atmosphere around our earth) and the earth itself will pass away—that is, be changed from a telestial to a terrestrial order (for the Millennium) and then from a terrestrial to a celestial order for eternity (see Revelation 21:1; D&C 29:23). The word of God, however, will not pass away; His words are unchanging and will all be fulfilled (see also D&C 1:38). “The word of our God shall stand for ever” (Isaiah 40:8). “The word of the Lord endureth for ever” (1 Peter 1:25).

Verse 36

The Savior repeats: After the tribulation of those days, and the powers of the heavens are shaken (see verse 33), then there will appear in heaven “the sign of the Son of Man.” Exactly what this one grand sign consists of has been the topic of innumerable discussions and suppositions, but the verse itself as expanded by the Lord through the Prophet Joseph Smith defines and clarifies the subject of the sign: “They shall see the Son of Man coming in the clouds of heaven, with power and great glory.” The one grand sign, Joseph Smith taught, is the Lord Himself.3 He comes with power and great glory and with tens of thousands of His holy ones (Saints) accompa-
nying Him (the subject of the Harry Anderson painting that hangs at
the entrance of our visitors’ center at Independence, Missouri—the
Savior with arms extended and the hosts of angelic trumpeters on
both sides). Who are they who accompany the Savior at His com-
ing? They are the inheritors of His celestial kingdom: “These are
they whom he shall bring with him, when he shall come in the clouds
of heaven” (D&C 76:63).

The power and the glory of the Lord at His coming, when all the
world will see and know that He has come, is described variously
in superlative terms in the scriptures. His aura or dwelling cloud or
Shekhinah is depicted as “glory,” “fire,” “like lightning,” “light,” “exqui-
site whiteness,” “brightness,” “brilliance,” and “radiance.” The fire,
or glory, of the Lord will remove all telestial people and things from
this sphere. The “fire-insurance” policy that Church members may
contract and honor is the payment of tithing: “Behold, now it is called
today until the coming of the Son of Man, and verily it is a day . . . for
the tithing of my people; for he that is tithed shall not be burned at
his coming . . . for verily I say, tomorrow all the proud and they that
do wickedly shall be as stubble; and I will burn them up, for I am the
Lord” (D&C 64:23–24).

Another question is appropriate: To where is the Lord coming
in His glory? “The Lord, whom ye seek, shall suddenly come to his
temple” (Malachi 3:1; 3 Nephi 24:1). Here is another unequivocal
sign of the Lord’s coming—He will come to His temple (see also
D&C 36:8; 42:36; 133:2). But what temple? He will come to the
house of the Lord in the New Jerusalem and in the Old Jerusalem.

This great prophecy [Isaiah 2:2–4], as is often the case, is sub-
ject to the law of multiple fulfillment. (1) In Salt Lake City and
other mountain locations temples, in the full and true sense of the
word, have been erected, and representatives of all nations are
flowing unto them to learn of God and His ways. (2) But the day
is yet future when the Lord’s house is to be built on the “Mount
Zion” which is “the city of New Jerusalem” in Jackson County,
Missouri. (D&C 84:2–4.) Mount Zion, itself, will be the mountain
of the Lord’s house in the day when that glorious temple is erect-
ed. (3) When the Jews flee unto Jerusalem, it will be “unto the
mountains of the Lord’s house” (D&C 133:13), for a holy temple
is to be built there also as part of the work of the great era of
restoration (Ezekiel 34:24–28.)

Verse 37
If we don’t want to be caught up in the deceptions of the world, the Lord counsels us to treasure up His word. In fact, He puts it in the form of a promise: “Whoso treasureth up [not just reads, or even studies, but treasures up] my word, shall not be deceived.” If we are not caught up in the deceptions of the world, we may be caught up to meet the Lord in glory (see verses 44–45).

Verses 38–39

We can and should become acquainted with the signs of the Lord’s Second Coming and be prepared for all these events and phenomena. We can and should know the general timing of His coming. There are three simple illustrations Jesus gave to enable us to judge the proximity of His arrival: (1) the fig tree, (2) a thief in the night, and (3) a woman in travail.

The Holy Land where Jesus lived has only two seasons: the hot, dry season (summer) and the cold, wet season (winter). The New Testament mentions only these two seasons. During late winter (usually in March), the fig tree issues its first tiny leaves, signaling the beginning of the warm season. “Now learn a parable of the fig-tree—When its branches are yet tender, and it begins to put forth leaves, you know that summer is nigh at hand; so likewise, mine elect, when they shall see all these things, they shall know that he is near, even at the doors.”

Jesus also made the curious parallel between His return to earth and the coming of a thief in the night (1 Thessalonians 5:2; D&C 45:19; 106:4–5). “If the good man of the house had known in what watch the thief would come, he would have watched, and . . . been ready” (Joseph Smith—Matthew 1:47).

A homeowner who knows exactly when a thief is going to attempt to break into his or her home will be up and ready. In the same fashion, if Jesus had told us exactly when He is coming, we would be up and ready. He does not want us to be prepared for a certain date; He wants us to be ready always.

Jesus also made a parallel between His return to earth and a woman in travail (1 Thessalonians 5:3; D&C 136:35). Even though doctors can give a fairly accurate forecast of when a baby is due, even marking a certain date on the calendar, there is no way to know exactly what day or hour the babe will come. When a woman is about to deliver, the physical signs of the imminent arrival are evident. So a true disciple of Jesus will know and recognize the signs
of His imminent coming.

Verse 40

No one knows the day nor the hour of Jesus’ coming again to the earth, not even the angels of God in heaven. Only the Father and the Son know when the time will be. Some have noticed the words “neither the Son” in Mark 13:32, but that phrase was deleted in the Joseph Smith Translation. Of course the Son knows when He is returning to the earth; “he knoweth all things, and there is not anything save he knows it” (2 Nephi 9:20; see also Mormon 8:17; Moroni 7:22; D&C 38:2; 130:7; Abraham 2:8).

There are many over the ages, especially in modern times, who have calculated and even published a date for the Second Coming—only to reap disappointment and lose faith. Our natural propensity to want to know “when” is perilous and fruitless, given the explicit declaration of the Lord Himself that no man would know that particular detail of the plan (or if it were sometime revealed to a prophet, He would seal it up and not reveal it to others). The Jews as a people have been disillusioned numerous times over the centuries by those who claimed to know the coming of the Messiah, to the point that one old sage published a terse warning to all who think they know: “May the bones of those who calculate the end rot.” Of the time of the Savior’s Second Coming, President Boyd K. Packer wrote:

Teenagers . . . sometimes think, “What’s the use? The world will soon be blown all apart and come to an end.” That feeling comes from fear, not from faith. No one knows the hour or the day (see D&C 49:7), but the end cannot come until all of the purposes of the Lord are fulfilled. Everything that I have learned from the revelations and from life convinces me that there is time and to spare for you to carefully prepare for a long life.

One day you will cope with teenage children of your own. That will serve you right. Later, you will spoil your grandchildren, and they in turn spoil theirs. If an earlier end should happen to come to one, that is more reason to do things right.

How grateful we are to have living prophets! President Gordon B. Hinckley, in the October 2001 general conference of the Church, said the following: “I do not wish to sound negative, but I wish to remind you of the warnings of scripture and the teachings of the prophets which we have had constantly before us. . . . I cannot dis-
miss from my mind the grim warnings of the Lord as set forth in the
24th chapter of Matthew. . . . Now, I do not wish to be an alarmist. I
do not wish to be a prophet of doom. I am optimistic. I do not believe
the time is here when an all-consuming calamity will overtake us. I
earnestly pray that it may not. There is so much of the Lord’s work
yet to be done. We, and our children after us, must do it.”

Verses 41–43

The comparison with the last days of Noah is most appropri-
ate—gross wickedness before the world is cleansed—back then by
water (the earth’s baptism by water) and at the Second Coming by
fire (the earth’s “confirmation” by fire, which fire is a symbol of the
Holy Ghost). An ability to see the signs of the times will continue
until the people are caught as it were—suddenly—with catastrophic
destruction.

Of the conditions at His Second Coming, Jesus said: “As it was
in the days of Noah, so it shall be also at the coming of the Son of
Man.” And how was that? “The earth was corrupt before God, and
it was filled with violence. And God looked upon the earth, and,
behold, it was corrupt, for all flesh had corrupted its way upon the
earth. And God said unto Noah: The end of all flesh is come before
me, for the earth is filled with violence, and behold I will destroy all
flesh from off the earth” (Moses 8:29–30; emphasis added). Does
that mean it will be impossible for us to live a good, wholesome life
just before the Second Coming? We do not know how difficult life
will be for the Saints during those years, but we do know that it will
be possible to remain faithful. Moses 8:27 says, “Noah found grace
in the eyes of the Lord; for Noah was a just man, and perfect in his
generation; and he walked with God, as did also his three sons.”

Verses 44–45

At the Lord’s Second Coming, there will be a selective destruc-
tion—two will be working in the field; one will be taken and the other
left. Two will be grinding at the mill; one will be taken and the other
left. But which is preferred—to be taken from the earth or to be left
on the earth? Would it be preferable to remain on the earth to be
with the Savior and not taken away and destroyed? Or would it be
preferable to be taken up to meet Him in His glory and not remain
on the earth to be consumed in the inevitable mass destruction?
Fortunately, there is a clear and specific answer to the query about
which situation is preferred. Doctrine & Covenants 88:96 indicates that “the Saints that are upon the earth, who are alive, shall be quickened and be caught up to meet him.”

Verses 46, 48

Again, the divine injunction and warning is given to watch and be ready at all times because we do not know the hour of His coming. In fact, it appears that He will come when we least expect Him.

Verses 49–50

Who are the servants who are firm and steadfast? They are the chosen servants who are feeding the flock and giving meat to the sheep of the Good Shepherd. Those whom He finds valiantly fulfilling their callings to feed His sheep He will make rulers over all His goods; all that the Father has shall be theirs. “Therefore all that my Father hath shall be given unto [them]” (D&C 84:38; see also Luke 12:44; 15:31; Romans 8:32; Revelation 21:7; D&C 50:27; 76:55, 59).

Verses 51–54

Many who grew up in the latter half of the twentieth century grew up thinking that the Savior’s coming in glory would usher in the seventh thousand-year period of this world’s temporal existence—the great Millennium. But a careful examination of Revelation 8 and 9 (see the chapter headings) and D&C 77:12–13 shows that the seventh seal, the seventh thousand-year period, will open and plagues will be poured out, signs fulfilled, temples built, a great final war fought, and so on. All these things “are to be accomplished after the opening of the seventh seal, before the coming of Christ” (D&C 77:13A; emphasis added).

The timing of the Second Coming appears to be as the servant in verse 51 clearly hints: “My lord delayeth his coming.” Matthew 25:5 notes that “the bridegroom tarried”; and D&C 45:26 says “Christ delayeth his coming.” These combined passages teach that the
Savior will not come until some time into the seventh thousand-year period, “in an hour that [we are] not aware of” (verse 53). Thus, the beginning of the seventh thousand years and the actual coming of the Lord are not the same occasion. The millennial era of peace, tranquillity, righteousness, and terrestrial (or transfigured, renewed, paradisiacal) glory will definitely commence when He appears and reigns as King of kings and Lord of lords.

Verse 55

This is a new verse added by the Prophet Joseph Smith, and it includes a prophecy of Moses. The end of the wicked—that is, those who will be cut off from among the people—is the end of the world, this telestial world (refer back to verse 4). The end of the earth itself is a different matter. The earth will be changed at the Lord’s coming into a terrestrial sphere. Then, at the end of the Millennium, it will be changed again, this time into a celestial sphere (refer to verse 35).

A Glorious Day

The Savior gave His disciples the prophecies and promises recorded in Joseph Smith—Matthew to help us be prepared temporally and spiritually for the great day of His return. For those who have paid the price to be ready, it will be a glorious and welcome day. We will be able to see and participate in that world-changing occasion and rejoice in it.

Notes

2. Jerusalem: The Eternal City, 224.
6. Talmud, Sanhedrin 97b.
Heinrich Hofmann (1824—1911) painting, Christ in Gethsemane

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How can we as teachers of the restored gospel effectively teach the sublime and deep doctrine of the Atonement? How have the prophets done so? And what can we learn from them?  

Although prophets through the ages have reflected varying talents and unique teaching skills, certain underlying principles occur again and again in their teaching ministries. Set forth below are some teaching techniques and resources used by the prophets to explain the atoning doctrine and its infinite implications.

A Spiritual Shot across the Bow

King Benjamin called his subjects together—but not for a day of entertainment. If any had come with spiritual thimbles to receive his words, he was quick to inform them of the need for much larger receptacles: “I have not commanded you to come up hither to trifle with the words which I shall speak, but that you should hearken unto me, and open your ears that ye may hear, and your hearts that ye may understand, and your minds that the mysteries of God may be unfolded to your view” (Mosiah 2:9; emphasis added). His introduction was a warning shot that ears needed to be spiritually attuned and hearts softened to receive the message of supernal import that was about to follow. He then gave one of the most masterful sermons ever delivered on the Atonement. Years later, Elder Bruce R.
McConkie began his never-to-be-forgotten sermon on the atoning sacrifice with these profound words: “I feel, and the Spirit seems to accord, that the most important doctrine I can declare, and the most powerful testimony I can bear, is of the atoning sacrifice of the Lord Jesus Christ.” Just like King Benjamin, he first set the stage before launching into his inspired message. As a result, ears perked up, minds became more focused, and hearts yielded to receive the spiritual reservoir that was about to be released. The impact of these messages was life-changing for many. Those who heard the words of King Benjamin cried with one accord, “We believe all the words thou hast spoken unto us; and . . . we have no more disposition to do evil, but to do good continually” (Mosiah 5:2).

These prophets began their sermons by firing a spiritual shot across the bow. It was a warning, a wake-up call, that the message to follow deserved far more than the listener’s casual attention. It required an intense alertness of all his spiritual faculties. Why? Because these prophets knew that the beautiful but difficult doctrine of the Atonement can be comprehended only by the spiritually prepared. Their messages are poignant reminders of the spiritual tone we ought to set before we commence teaching what Robert L. Millet calls “the doctrine of doctrines.”

Laying the Groundwork

A person could never master calculus without first mastering algebra. A certain order of events is required in the learning process. Isaiah taught, “Whom shall he teach knowledge? and whom shall he make to understand doctrine?” Then, he gave the simple but profound formula for mastering the doctrines of the Church: “precept upon precept; line upon line” (Isaiah 28:9–10). President Ezra Taft Benson taught, “No one adequately and properly knows why he needs Christ until he understands and accepts the doctrine of the Fall and its effect upon all mankind.”

Students quickly learn the impossibility of adequately comprehending the Atonement without first understanding the Fall. Lehi gave a magnificent discourse on the Atonement (see 2 Nephi 2). In the course of it, he first explained the conditions that existed in the Garden of Eden. Then, he followed his introduction with a succinct summary of why the Savior came: “The Messiah cometh in the fulness of time, that he may redeem the children of men from the fall” (2 Nephi 2:26). Thus, we learn that the Atonement was neces-
sary to correct certain conditions brought about by the Fall (that is, physical and spiritual death). Alma, in counseling his wayward son Corianton, discerned, “I perceive there is somewhat more which doth worry your mind, which ye cannot understand—which is concerning the justice of God in the punishment of the sinner.” Then, he said, “Now behold, my son, I will explain this thing unto thee” (Alma 42:1–2). In the next eleven verses, Alma laid the groundwork for his answer by detailing the conditions in the Garden of Eden and the consequences of the Fall. Only then did he proceed to explain the relationships among justice, mercy, and the Atonement.

Because of the need to understand the Fall before we can fully comprehend the purposes of the Atonement, I have found the following chart useful in helping students grasp how the Atonement corrects or redeems the “negative” consequences of the Fall:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Before the Fall</th>
<th>After the Fall</th>
<th>After the Atonement</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2. Lived in God’s presence (+) Genesis 3:8, Moses 4:14</td>
<td>2. Spiritual death (-)</td>
<td>2. Overcame spiritual death (+)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>b. Second spiritual death (separated from God because of individual sin) Alma 34:15–16; Alma 42:13–16</td>
<td>b. Conditional because second spiritual death is overcome only if we repent Helaman 14:15–18 Moroni 9:12–14</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The Book of Mormon Comes to the Rescue

The doctrines of the Fall and the Atonement are the centerpiece of Christianity, yet many misconceptions exist concerning their
underlying principles because the Bible, as inspired as it is, has had “many plain and precious things taken away” (1 Nephi 13:28) from its original manuscripts. As a result, “an exceedingly great many do stumble, yea, insomuch that Satan hath great power over them” (1 Nephi 13:29). Elder Bruce R. McConkie once offered this challenge: “Choose the one hundred most basic doctrines of the gospel, and under each doctrine make two parallel columns, one headed Bible and the other Book of Mormon. Then place in these columns what each book of scripture says about each doctrine. The end result will show, without question, that in ninety-five of the one hundred cases, the Book of Mormon teaching is clearer, plainer, more expansive, and better than the biblical word. If there is any question in anyone’s mind about this, let him take the test—a personal test.”

Nowhere is this invitation more applicable than with respect to the Atonement. Without the Book of Mormon, many misconceptions have arisen in the Christian world on this keystone doctrine. For example:

First misconception: Many teach that Adam and Eve would have had children in the Garden of Eden if they had been allowed to remain. After their transgression in the garden, the Lord said that “in sorrow thou shalt bring forth children” (Genesis 3:16). Accordingly, some have interpreted this to mean that if no transgression had occurred, Adam and Eve would have had children without sorrow in the Garden of Eden. But the Book of Mormon reveals the truth: “And they would have had no children” (2 Nephi 2:23; see also Moses 5:11).

Second misconception: Some teach that Adam and Eve were living in a state of bliss—of unparalleled joy—in the garden. Again, the Book of Mormon teaches the truth: “They would have remained in a state of innocence, having no joy, for they knew no misery” (2 Nephi 2:23). As a result of the first two misconceptions, much of the Christian world believes the Fall was a tragic step backward. They have innocently, but incorrectly, concluded that if Adam had not fallen, all of us would have been born in the Garden of Eden and thereafter lived in a state of eternal bliss. Such reasoning, however, would have negated the need for the Atonement, an event that was foreordained in the premortal life (see Ether 3:14). John so witnessed when he spoke of the Savior as “the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world” (Revelation 13:8).

Third misconception: There are those who teach that because of the Fall, all infants are tainted with original sin. Mormon gave a
scathing rebuke to those who so believed: “I know that it is solemn mockery before God, that ye should baptize little children.” He quoted the Savior in explaining the reason why: “The curse of Adam is taken from them in me, that it hath no power over them” (Moroni 8: 8, 9).

Fourth misconception: Some people believe that grace alone can save us, regardless of any works on our part. Nephi puts the doctrines of faith and works in their proper perspective: “For we know that it is by grace that we are saved, after all we can do” (2 Nephi 25:23; emphasis added). We do not earn our salvation, but Nephi taught we must contribute the best we have to offer. C. S. Lewis hit the nail on the head while discussing the age-old debate between faith and works: “It does seem to me like asking which blade in a pair of scissors is most necessary.”

Fifth misconception: Another fallacy is that the physical Resurrection of the Savior is merely symbolic and that we will be resurrected without the “limitations” of a physical body. Alma, however, left no doubt about the corporeal nature of the Resurrection: “The soul shall be restored to the body, and the body to the soul . . . yea, even a hair of the head shall not be lost” (Alma 40:23).

Sixth misconception: Many people teach that the Atonement does not have the power to transform us into gods; in fact, according to them, such a thought is blasphemous. The Savior Himself, however, extended the divine challenge: “What manner of men ought ye to be? Verily I say unto you, even as I am” (3 Nephi 27: 27). The concluding chapter in the Book of Mormon then reinforces this lofty doctrine: “Yea, come unto Christ, and be perfected in him . . . by the grace of God, through the shedding of the blood of Christ” (Moroni 10:32–33).

Although Nephi knew that many plain and precious truths would be deleted from the Bible, he likewise knew that the Book of Mormon, among other sacred writings, would come to the rescue: “These last records, which thou hast seen among the Gentiles, shall establish the truth of the first, which are of the twelve apostles of the Lamb, and shall make known the plain and precious things which have been taken away from them” (1 Nephi 13:40).

President Ezra Taft Benson spoke of the absolute need for the Book of Mormon to comprehend the divinity and Atonement of the Savior: “Much of the Christian world today rejects the divinity of the Savior. They question His miraculous birth, His perfect life, and the reality of His glorious resurrection. The Book of Mormon teaches
in plain and unmistakable terms about the truth of all of those. It also provides the most complete explanation of the doctrine of the Atonement. Truly, this divinely inspired book is a keystone in bearing witness to the world that Jesus is the Christ."

The Book of Mormon is a gold mine for discovering the magnificent truths of the Atonement. The following are but a sample of the many chapters filled with golden nuggets for those who are willing to do some panning:

2 Nephi 2 (Lehi)  Alma 40 and 42 (Alma)
2 Nephi 9 (Jacob)  Helaman 14 (Samuel)
Mosiah 2–5 (King Benjamin)  3 Nephi 11 (the Savior)
Alma 34 (Amulek)  Moroni 10 (Moroni)

As we feast upon the words of the Book of Mormon, we will connect the spiritual dots that unveil the glorious picture of the Savior’s atoning sacrifice.

The Power of a Good Question

How is the Savior’s Atonement infinite? Did the Savior suffer for sins both in the Garden of Gethsemane and on the cross? Could He, a perfect man, understand what it is like to have weaknesses—to be rejected? Was there a backup plan if He chose not to proceed? Could a person suffer for his or her own sins and be redeemed?

The power of a good question is of inestimable worth. In many ways, it is like a mental alarm clock that awakens us out of our mental doldrums. It is a catalyst that jump-starts our mental engines. It causes the cerebral wheels to move and thrusts upon us a certain uneasiness, an anxiety that triggers a fixation on the subject at hand until relief comes only in the form of an answer that is both satisfying to the mind and acceptable to the heart. Until that answer comes, it is like staring at a crooked picture without being able to fix it or working on a puzzle with one piece missing—there is an irresistible urge to straighten the painting and a compelling urge to find and place the final piece of the puzzle in its rightful place. Until that happens, one’s mind is in overdrive—considering all the options, weighing, sifting, and sorting until the answer comes. A tremendous difference exists between being told the answer and discovering it. It is somewhat like being given a picture versus painting one, receiving a book compared to writing one, or listening to Rachmaninoff’s Piano
Concerto No. 3 versus playing it. Discovering the answer brings immense satisfaction, gives ownership, and makes a permanent deposit in our memory bank—not just some “in-and-out” entry.

There are many types of questions. There are factual questions to acquire background information. Such inquiries, however, are usually a means, not an end. For example: Where was the Savior born? How long was He in the Garden of Gethsemane? These questions are helpful in setting the stage, but in and of themselves, they do little to stir human emotions or fire human resolve. Nonetheless, a factual setting is often a necessary prerequisite to discovering the greater truths.

There are questions that elicit a self-evaluation. God’s question to Adam, “Where art thou?” (Genesis 3:9) was more than a request for Adam’s physical location. It was also an inquiry into Adam’s spiritual standing. The climax of Alma’s sermon to the people of Zarahemla consisted of eleven consecutive, introspective questions, such as, “Have ye spiritually been born of God? Have ye received his image in your countenances? Have ye experienced this mighty change in your hearts?” (Alma 5:14). A thoughtful teacher might ask similar questions that require self-evaluation of one’s faith and worthiness: Do you believe you can be totally cleansed of your sins because of the Savior’s infinite sacrifice? Do you have faith that His Atonement provides a remedy for each of your weaknesses, sins, infirmities, and shortcomings? Do you have a broken heart and a contrite spirit?

There are other questions that heighten our level of commitment. Three times the Savior asked Peter, “Lovest thou me?” (John 21:15–17). No doubt, Peter responded each time with greater passion—an even deeper commitment to the Holy One. Teachers might ask similar questions: Do we love the Savior enough to forgive others as He forgives us? Do we appreciate His sacrifice to the extent we are willing to consecrate our all in furthering His cause?

Questions can also be effective answers. Corianton wondered why the coming of Christ “should be known so long beforehand.” The answer his father Alma gave was in the form of a series of questions: “Behold, I say unto you, is not a soul at this time as precious unto God as a soul will be at the time of his coming? Is it not as necessary that the plan of redemption should be made known unto this people as well as unto their children?” (Alma 39:17–18). Suppose a student were to ask, “Is the Atonement retroactive? Could the people of Old Testament times receive its benefits before
the purchase price was paid?” Resisting the temptation to give the instant answer, a wise teacher might respond with another question, “Do we have anything in our current society that allows us to enjoy the benefits before we pay the price?” The resulting discussion might reflect the credit card as an example. This outcome might further lead to the fact that the Savior’s credit was pure “gold” in the premortal existence because He always kept His word. Accordingly, under the laws of justice, the benefits of His Atonement could be enjoyed before the purchase price was paid because there was no doubt He would pay “the bill” when it was presented to Him in the garden and on the cross (see Alma 39 headnote and Mosiah 3:13).

A good question can often be the springboard for an entire sermon or class discussion. So it was for Amulek who discerned “that the great question which is in your minds is whether the word be in the Son of God, or whether there shall be no Christ” (Alma 34:5). In response, Amulek delivered his wonderful sermon on the infinite nature of the Atonement.

And Then More

How does a mere mortal understand and grasp the Savior’s love and sacrifice of infinite proportions? Of course a mortal cannot fully do so. But the prophets have done their best to help bridge the gap by comparing the Atonement to two of the most passionate, loving relationships known by man and then suggesting that it is all this plus more, much more.

One example addresses the story of Abraham and Isaac. In speaking of Abraham’s sacrifice of Isaac, Jacob notes that the event was “a similitude of God and his Only Begotten Son” (Jacob 4:5; emphasis added). It would be difficult, if not impossible, for a father to contemplate a greater trial than to sacrifice his beloved son, the very one through whom the blessings of eternity were to flow. What father cannot empathize with Abraham as he bound his son and then stretched forth the knife to spill the lifeblood of this promised child? The pain must have been bitterly acute—the emotions heart wrenching—as he raised his hand to make the fatal plunge. But at such a moment, the angel of mercy released him: “Lay not thine hand upon the lad, neither do thou any thing unto him: for now I know that thou fearest God, seeing thou has not withheld thy son, thine only son from me” (Genesis 22:12). Abraham then found a ram
caught in the thicket to be the “sacrificial lamb” in place of his son; but for our Father in Heaven, there was no ram to be caught in the thicket, no angel of mercy to stay the hand of death. Our Father’s sacrifice would be all that Abraham encountered, and then more.

Isaiah knew there was no love like the love of a mother for her nursing child. And so he asked, “Can a woman forget her sucking child?” As unlikely as that possibility might be, he used it as his spiritual yardstick to show that God’s infinite love encompasses a mother’s love—and then more: “Yea, they may forget, yet, will I not forget thee. Behold, I have graven thee upon the palms of my hands” (Isaiah 49:15–16). Lest there be any question, the nail marks of the cross would be a tangible reminder that His love transcended even the love of a mother for her infant child.

These examples cause us to plumb the depths of our emotional reservoirs. They are windows to the infinite. Although we cannot fully comprehend, they nonetheless help us momentarily glimpse the unbounded love of the Father and the Son.

The Pure Doctrine of the Atonement

Perhaps the most masterful discourse on the Atonement in the revealed scriptures is that delivered by King Benjamin (see Mosiah 2–5). In his own words, he said, “I have spoken plainly unto you that ye might understand” (2:40). With clarity and conciseness, he proceeded line by line and verse by verse with compelling logic and an uncompromising testimony that cannot be refuted by the mind or spirit. This sermon is a spiritual missile launched with laser precision to the center of the soul. It is as though the spiritually attuned are receiving the wondrous atoning truths in undiluted fashion, akin to a spiritual transfusion of pure doctrine. There is no need for outside collaborating sources or historical evidences. None of that is necessary because these spiritually mature Saints are ready and eager to receive the atoning doctrine in its fullest dose. And so they do.

Set forth below is the doctrine of the Atonement in the most concise and accurate way I can express it. Perhaps when we are spiritually prepared and our students are spiritually ready, we can, like King Benjamin, give the full dose and “tell it like it is” so that “he that preacheth and he that receiveth, understand one another, and both are edified and rejoice together” (D&C 50:22).

The doctrine of the Atonement is the most supernal, mind-expanding, passionate doctrine this world or universe will ever
know. It is this doctrine that gives life and breath and substance to every gospel principle and ordinance. It is the spiritual reservoir that feeds the streams of faith, provides the cleansing powers to the waters of baptism, and supplies the healing balm to the wounded soul. It is the focal point of the sacrament, temple, and other gospel ordinances. It is the rock foundation upon which all hope in this life and eternity is predicated.

By definition, the Atonement is the foreordained mission of the Savior. It is that love displayed, that power manifested, and that suffering endured by Jesus Christ in three principal locations—namely, the Garden of Gethsemane, the cross of Calvary, and the tomb of Arimathea. It is the universal act of supreme submission in which the Savior completely yielded His will to that of the Father.

The Atonement was necessitated by the Fall of Adam. Lehi wrote, “The Messiah cometh in the fulness of time, that he may redeem the children of men from the fall” (2 Nephi 2:26). Adam’s transgression was called the Fall because Adam and Eve fell from the presence of God and, in addition, fell from immortality to mortality. Thus, one of the prime purposes of the Atonement was to redeem men and women from the negative consequences of the Fall. The Savior did this in part by dying on the cross and subsequently bringing about the Resurrection for everyone. Paul so testified: “As in Adam all die, even so in Christ shall all be made alive” (1 Corinthians 15:22). In addition, the Savior suffered for everyone’s sins, as evidenced by His bleeding from every pore, which act brought about the condition of repentance. Through His stripes, we can be healed. So complete is this healing process that Isaiah taught, “Though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be white as snow” (Isaiah 1:18).

But there is yet another purpose of the Atonement—it is not just to redeem us (that is, to reconcile the Fall) but to perfect us. The Atonement was designed to do more than return us to the starting line, more than just wipe the slate clean, more than make us innocent. It was designed to provide us with heavenly endowments that would help us achieve godlike perfection. How is that accomplished? Because of the Atonement, we are cleansed in the waters of baptism. Because of that cleansing, we are eligible to receive the gift of the Holy Ghost; and with that gift, we are entitled to the gifts of the Spirit (that is, knowledge, patience, love, and so forth), each of which is an attribute of godliness. Thus, as we acquire the gifts of the Spirit, made possible by the cleansing powers of the Atonement, we acquire the attributes of God.
Because of its expansive and comprehensive nature, the Atonement was referred to by certain Book of Mormon prophets as an “infinite atonement” (2 Nephi 9:7; 2 Nephi 25:16; Alma 34:10, 12).

It was infinite in divineness in that it was performed by the Holy One, the Only Begotten Son of God, who possessed every divine and godly attribute in unbounded measure (see D&C 109:77).

It was infinite in power in that the Savior was the only one who possessed the three powers necessary to save and exalt us—namely, the power to resurrect us from the dead, the power to redeem us from our sins, and the power to endow us with godly attributes (see John 11:25; Alma 12:15; Moroni 10:32–33).

It was infinite in time, both prospectively and retroactively (see Alma 34). As declared by King Benjamin, “Whosoever should believe that Christ should come, the same might receive remission of their sins . . . even as though he had already come among them” (Mosiah 3:13).

It was infinite in coverage since it provided the resurrection for all living things and, in addition, the opportunity for redemption and perfection for every person of every world of which the Savior was the creator (see D&C 76:23–24, 40–43).

It was infinite in depth—not only in whom it covered but also in what it covered. The Savior “descended below all things” (D&C 88:6), meaning He descended beneath all our sins so that even the “vilest of sinners” (Mosiah 28:4) and the “most lost of all mankind” (Alma 24:11) could be redeemed by His mercy. Further, His sacrifice descended beneath the total human plight, even that which has no relation to sin. Therefore, He comprehends the loneliness of the widow; He understands the agonizing parental pain when children go astray; and He can empathize with the excruciating pain of cancer and every other debilitating illness of man. As difficult as it might be to conceive, He, a perfect man, understands the rejections and weaknesses of mortals. There is no temporal condition, however ugly or gruesome it may seem, that has escaped His grasp. No one will be able to say at the judgment bar, “You did not understand my unique plight”—because He does. He “comprehendeth all things” (Alma 26:35) because He “descended below all things” (D&C 88:6). He not only has an infinite reservoir of redeeming powers but also an infinite reservoir of remedial powers. He not only redeems us from our worst sins but also has the power to remedy our smallest hurt or most insignificant weakness. He is the Master Healer,
the Master Counselor, the Master Comforter. There is no hurt He
cannot soothe, no rejection He cannot assuage, no loneliness He
cannot console, and no weakness He cannot strengthen. Whatever
affliction the world casts at us, He has a remedy of superior heal-
ing power. His Atonement is infinite because it circumscribes and
ecompasses every finite condition known to mortals.

His Atonement is infinite in suffering. The Savior spoke of
that awful, bitter cup, “which suffering caused myself, even God,
the greatest of all, to tremble because of pain” (D&C 19:18). It
commenced in Gethsemane, where in agony He bled from every
pore, and concluded on Calvary, where He cried out, “My God, my
God, why hast thou forsaken me?” (Matthew 27:46). He bore it all
alone—the total human plight. His divine powers were not a shield
to His suffering—to the contrary, when the pinnacle of pain would
have triggered the release mechanism of death or unconsciousness
in a mere mortal, the Savior summoned His divine powers, not to
immunize Himself but to stay such relief mechanism until He had
suffered the pain endured by every person of every world. Only then
would He voluntarily lay down His life.

Finally, His Atonement was infinite in love—both the Son’s and
the Father’s. The human mind cannot fully grasp such love. This is
part of the sacredness and beauty of the event. It must be felt, not
just reasoned. Someday we will understand that divine disclosure:
“For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son”
(John 3:16). Then, every knee will bow and every tongue confess
that Jesus is the Christ.

The Savior is our only hope for salvation and exaltation. There
is no “backup” man, alternative way, or contingency plan. As King
Benjamin taught, “There shall be no other name given nor any other
way nor means whereby salvation can come unto the children of
men, only in and through the name of Christ, the Lord Omnipotent”
(Mosiah 3:17).

In the process of His supreme sacrifice, the Savior satisfied
every demand for justice and exercised every particle of mercy. He
paid the awful price, the infinite price, to redeem us and perfect us.
He is our Savior, our Redeemer, and our Exemplar.

The Atonement in a Spiritual Greenhouse

The doctrine of the Atonement is like a good seed planted in
the ground. If, however, the seed is not nourished and taught in
an atmosphere of spirituality, gratitude, and testimony, it will never bloom in the eye of the beholder. Sometimes the way we say something is as important as what we have to say. When the Savior completed the Sermon on the Mount, “the people were astonished at his doctrine,” and then the scriptures tell us why: “For he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes” (Matthew 7: 28–29). Nephi gave the same prescription for effective teaching: “When a man speaketh by the power of the Holy Ghost the power of the Holy Ghost carrieth it unto the hearts of the children of men” (2 Nephi 33:1).

Some teachers may be caretakers or clock watchers until the class hour is completed; some may be entertainers; others are dispensers of factual information; some are motivators; and some are those never-to-be-forgotten teachers who are spiritual catalysts—those who speak with a power that not only momentarily motivates us to do good works but also permanently causes a change in our hearts. The doctrine of the Atonement thrives in such a spiritual climate—it is both sun and water in a single medium. There is no substitute for the Spirit—no other compensatory teaching technique. For only by the Spirit can the atoning doctrine come to full life.

Expressions of loving gratitude add to the nourishing of the seed. They break down defenses, cause meaningful reflection, and engender an atmosphere of humility and receptiveness to the truth. Who could listen to the touching words of gratitude expressed by Elder McConkie in his farewell sermon and not feel a kinship with the Savior and an eternal gratitude for His incomparable sacrifice: “I am one of his witnesses, and in a coming day I shall feel the nail marks in his hands and in his feet and shall wet his feet with my tears.”

Again and again the doctrine of the Atonement is accompanied by the power of testimony. Amulek boldly declared: “I say unto you, that I do know that Christ shall come among the children of men, to take upon him the transgressions of his people and that he shall atone for the sins of the world; for the Lord God hath spoken it” (Alma 34:8). Nowhere, however, is testimony more powerful than that expressed by the Savior Himself: “I have drunk out of that bitter cup which the Father hath given me, and have glorified the Father in taking upon me the sins of the world, in the which I have suffered the will of the Father in all things from the beginning” (3 Nephi 11: 11). Testimonies such as these cause fire in our bones, cause our spirits to quake, and engrave the word of God upon our hearts.
In such an atmosphere as the foregoing, the prophets have issued life-changing challenges. It was Jacob who issued the towering challenge: “For why not speak of the atonement of Christ, and attain to a perfect knowledge of him?” (Jacob 4:12). As King Benjamin delivered his concluding sermon, he challenged his listeners: “If you believe all these things see that ye do them” (Mosiah 4:10). The response of his “spiritual students” was miraculous. They rejoiced “with such exceedingly great joy” and promised “we are willing to enter into a covenant with our God to do his will, and to be obedient to his commandments . . . all the remainder of our days” (Mosiah 5:4–5). What more could a teacher hope for?

Spirit, gratitude, testimony, and challenge—these are the nourishing agents of the spiritual greenhouse that allow the doctrine of the Atonement to thrive and blossom with radiant beauty. Teaching this doctrine requires the highest and best within us—our most creative powers, our most submissive spirit, and our finest intellectual faculties. For, in truth, it is the most profound, moving doctrine we will ever be privileged to teach.

Notes

1. This essay is a distillation of and reflection on Elder Tad R. Callister’s book, The Infinite Atonement (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2000).


As Elder Jeffrey R. Holland pointed out in the April 1998 general conference, the New Testament offers insight into what it means to be a truly inspired gospel teacher. On a late night, Nicodemus, a Pharisee and a ruler of the Jews, came to Jesus and made a powerful statement. Speaking in the plural (on behalf of other Pharisees and rulers), Nicodemus told the Master, “We know that thou art a teacher come from God: for no man can do these miracles that thou doest, except God be with him” (John 3:2; emphasis added).

Here an otherwise slow-to-understand Nicodemus offers a powerful truth. Indeed, a very real sign that follows those called of God to teach is the working of miracles. In my life, gospel teachers and their messages have been miraculous. As a boy growing up in a divorced and less-active family, I have experienced a long line of gospel teachers who have taught, inspired, and brought about life-changing miracles. Such experiences not only resulted in subsequent Church activity on my part but also instilled in me a strong desire to emulate these teachers—by being a gospel teacher myself.

Testimony of the Gospel and of the Consecrated Life

The high-school years were a crucial period in my life. Without The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints as an important part of my life, I focused most of my time and attention on the usual—girls and music! I felt these pursuits were to be my primary, lifelong
endeavors. It was always interesting to me that a man from the Church, a home teacher, visited my mother’s house every month without fail.

Over a long period of time, that home teacher and I became wonderful friends. We played guitar together and discussed a strong mutual interest in American history. The friendship lasted for years. I can vividly remember by my junior year becoming more and more interested in his messages of the Book of Mormon and the Restoration of the gospel through Joseph Smith. His visits became longer as I asked question after question about the things I was learning. It was not until some time later that I realized the years this faithful man spent visiting a less-active family and the hours he spent away from his own were sacrifices he made to discuss the word of God with a struggling seventeen-year-old. His diligence in his teaching responsibilities planted the seed that became a powerful testimony for me.

During my senior year, the miracle intensified. My best friend from school had been asking me questions about the church I was becoming interested in. I didn’t feel confident in my answers, so we contacted the missionaries and met with them in my home. As we went through the missionary discussions, my understanding of the plan of salvation grew; and for the first time, I began to feel the power of testimony at work in my life. As I look back today, the conversion seemed to take place overnight. Watching these two missionaries, not much older than I was, I came to a life-changing moment. I realized that if the things I was learning were true (and I was quickly learning they were)—that Joseph Smith is a prophet, Jesus Christ is our Savior, and the Church is the kingdom of God on the earth—then nothing else mattered.

During that important early period of my conversion, a personal motto began to develop from my association with these gospel teachers: “But seek ye first to build up the kingdom of God and to establish his righteousness” (JST, Matthew 6:38). Once the testimony came, my natural feelings were to devote my life to being like these teachers who had given up so much personal comfort and interest for my sake. Most of my plans changed (the girls and the music!), and I made a major decision. I decided to serve a full-time mission for the Church.

This late high-school period was a critical time for me. Without question, these dedicated teachers of the gospel were miracles themselves. Neither the home teacher nor the missionaries gave up on me
and my family. Their diligence and love of the Savior changed my life in a way I could not have known then. Their efforts, many of which at the time surely seemed futile, will remain a blessing for generations to come.

Love of Teaching and of Learning the Word of God

Following my mission to northern California, I moved from Chicago to Provo, Utah, to be with more members of the Church. Among the first things I did was to enroll in the Orem Utah Institute of Religion. Since I was working to save money at the time, I was able to take a variety of classes from wonderful Church Educational System teachers. These teachers played their part in a long line of influential factors in my life. Two examples in particular stand out.

One of the first teachers I became acquainted with taught a Book of Mormon class. This man was completely in love with the scriptures. But more than anything, it was obvious that his real love was teaching them to students. His entire life was dedicated to teaching others and helping them to build faith and testimony through the word of God. My mission had certainly taught me to love teaching the gospel, but this institute teacher gave me a greater perspective. He showed me in a powerful way the importance of teaching the gospel as a lifelong pursuit.

However, just as with the missionaries, I found myself wanting to be just like my teacher. So regardless of the high competition and pressure to get married, I made a decision to find a way to teach the scriptures in a religious setting, and I began to look into seminary teaching. Currently in the hiring process (and not married!), I am not sure where this path will lead. However, for me the important thing is the new mind-set I received from this powerful teacher. It is the teaching and resultant blessing of lives that continues to perform miracles. I am confident this outcome can be achieved regardless of what happens during the seminary hiring process.

Along with learning to love teaching, I was taught about the love of learning by another gospel teacher during the first year home from my mission. Also a teacher at the Orem institute, this man had a passion for learning the scriptures, particularly in the context of the ancient world. Quite at the sacrifice of other things to be done, he spent hours with me in his office. We discussed ancient temple symbolism, the ancient languages of the scriptural texts, the history of the ancient world, and, most importantly, the relationships of these
things to the restored gospel.

These hours dramatically changed my life. It seemed that teaching the gospel (which I was then doing at the Missionary Training Center and with Especially for Youth) was not enough. From then on, most of my time was spent intensively learning the historical background, languages, and symbols of the scriptures. This drive led me into Near Eastern Studies, a semester at the BYU Jerusalem Center for Near Eastern Studies, and a summer at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem—all for the reason of better learning the word of God.

As with the home teacher and the missionaries in high school, these Church Educational System teachers played a critical role in my life as a returned missionary. Their love for teaching and learning the gospel has produced a miracle whose final outcome I still cannot predict. Regardless of what opportunities the Lord has for me in these areas, my love for teaching and learning the gospel will forever be a blessing from these teachers.

The Gospel Life and the Zion Family

Having just recently returned from almost a year in the Middle East, I was able to associate closely with various faculty members and staff of the BYU Jerusalem Center. This summer while I was attending the Hebrew University, there were only a few Latter-day Saint students in the Holy Land and about the same number of BYU teachers and their families. This interesting situation allowed me to become close friends with a BYU teacher of ancient scripture and his family. Because this teacher is a top scholar in his field, I was looking forward to all the great things I hoped to learn from this close association. However, while I did indeed gain many of the scriptural insights I was hoping for, the real lessons I learned were about family.

Watching up close the love this teacher has for his wife and children—how he and his family live the gospel and how teaching and learning the scriptures are a way of life for them—I felt I had a clear idea of what I wanted for my own future family. Never before had I seen a husband and wife so unified in their desires. I was equally impressed with their relationships with their children. It seemed like years of traveling around the world in various teaching responsibilities brought this family close together. The children all had a deep interest in learning and were brilliant. Above all, this great master of
the scriptures and teacher loved his family. He often made remarks concerning his family as his “most valuable possessions.”

This experience changed my life in a profound way. I had thought that love of teaching and learning must be at the forefront of life in the Church. However, this man and his family gave me an even higher goal to aim for—the living of a gospel life and the rearing of a Zion family. In some ways, this instilled vision has become one of the greatest miracles of all. For the first time in my life, I was able to witness firsthand the joy of a family unified in a life of gospel living. For this family, teaching and learning the word of God is a way of life. I am sure that, after their example, my standards for a future family will be forever elevated.

In Tribute

Without question, one of the most powerful influences in my life has been teachers and their message of the gospel. From a boy in a divorced and less-active family to one desiring to dedicate my life to gospel living and teaching, I now understand it is the miracle of gospel teachers that has made all the difference. I will forever be grateful to a diligent home teacher who never gave up and who offered unconditional friendship. I will also never forget the missionaries who dedicated their lives to the work and taught me to seek first to build the kingdom. Since my mission, my love for teaching and learning the word of God is the result of wonderful teachers. Finally, I gained the vision of living the gospel and having a Zion family from a scholar and a teacher.

This series of associations with teachers, as well as experiences with countless others, has been a miracle in convincing me that these individuals are all “teachers come from God.” I am not sure whether the examples I mentioned have even an idea of what they have done for me and my future family. Too often such things do not get expressed. However, their examples and teaching will always serve as a guide and inspiration for me, and I hope to continue the work they started. God be thanked for such gospel teachers and their legacy of miracles.
Heinrich Hofmann (1824—1911) detail of the painting
Christ and the Rich Young Ruler

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The Great Commandment: Principle or Platitude?

Howard A. Christy

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“The first and second great commandments frame and prioritize life.”

All of us have occasionally shuddered at the evil that stalks the earth, and most of us have at some point felt helpless in the face of it. That evil has always been a dominating force in the world is repeatedly declared in the standard works; and God, seeing “that the wickedness of man was great in the earth” (Genesis 6:5), has more than once found it necessary to take drastic action. Classic examples are the destruction of all but a remnant of the Israelites and the total destruction of the Nephites. Nephi of old, nearly a thousand years before the annihilation of his people, lamented, “I . . . cannot say more; the Spirit stoppeth mine utterance, and I am left to mourn because of the unbelief, and the wickedness, and the ignorance, and the stiffneckedness of men; for they will not search knowledge, nor understand great knowledge, when it is given unto them in plainness, even as plain as word can be” (2 Nephi 32:7).

Does humankind today continue the ancient tendency to ignore “great knowledge” that is “plain as word can be”? It would seem so. But in our communities, we can, at least within our limited spheres of influence, see more clearly than that and, more importantly, do more about it. This essay focuses on what might be the most splen-
did element of that greater understanding.

The Great Commandment

All Christians are familiar with Jesus’ instruction in Matthew 22:35–40. It may be the most quoted passage in all of scripture. Yet it seems to have little impact as principle—to say nothing of whether or not it is an imperative. Rather than give it high priority as commandment, more often than not we give it no more notice than any other platitude addressing the nice things that nice people do. We must not overlook the great commandment; therefore, a closer examination might be useful.

The Preeminence of the Great Commandment

Recall that a lawyer representing the Pharisees, in an attempt to “entangle him in his talk,” asked Jesus, “Master, which is the great commandment in the law?” Jesus accommodated him by quoting from the law of Moses, but His answer was a combination of two commandments, both from the law—the first, “Thou shalt love the Lord thy God” from Deuteronomy 6:5, and the second, “Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself,” from Leviticus 19:18. In reporting so, He proved Himself a “master” of debate equal to the flattery with which he was addressed by giving His interrogator more than was asked for. Rather than provide the single “great” commandment requested, He went on to add another that was “like unto it”—both in kind and in gravity—and then proceeded to profoundly underscore the degree of greatness of the now twofold commandment by claiming that “on these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets” (Matthew 22:40), indicating that the great commandment was great to the point of being not only preeminent but also all-embracing.2

Further amplifying the all-embracing nature of the commandment, the words “thy neighbour” seem clearly meant to be used in the sense of fellowman or humankind—that is, to all persons, male or female, with whom we come in contact.3 Leviticus 19:18, Jesus’ law source for loving one’s neighbor, is part of what has been deemed the Lord’s “holiness code.” In verse 2, the Lord admonishes the people of Israel, “Ye shall be holy: for I the Lord your God am holy.” Then, beginning at verse 9, He sets forth counsel by way of commandment regarding the treatment of one’s neighbor that has no parallel anywhere else in scripture. Following is a paraphrase in
part:

You shall leave gleanings of grain and fruit for the poor and for strangers. You shall not steal, deal falsely with, lie, defraud, or rob your neighbour, or be a tale-bearer. You shall not hate your neighbour; rather you shall honestly call attention to his wrongdoings that he might be saved from sin. You shall not curse the deaf or put a stumbling block before the blind. You shall judge your neighbour righteously in all your dealings with him. You shall not avenge or bear any grudge; rather you shall love your neighbour as yourself. You shall honor the aged. You shall not vex a stranger or sojourner; rather you shall treat any stranger that dwells with you as if he was one born among you—and you shall love him as yourself. Remember, you were once strangers in the land of Egypt. (Leviticus 19:9–18, 32–34)

Note that God treats neighbors and strangers equally.4

The close linking of the two parts of the great commandment as set forth in Matthew is more strongly indicated in Luke’s account of what apparently is the same incident (see Luke 10:25–28). The accounts differ, however, as to time, place, nature of the question posed by the lawyer, and Jesus’ response. In Luke’s account, the lawyer asked Jesus, “Master, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?” Jesus responded with another question: “What is written in the law? How readest thou?” The lawyer answered, “Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy strength, and with all thy mind; and thy neighbour as thyself.” Jesus then responded to the lawyer’s closely linked double quotation from the law, “Thou hast answered right: this do, and thou shalt live.” Interestingly, in this scenario, it was the lawyer who provided the great commandment as the answer to his own question. Luke’s account is also splendidly instructive as to the meaning of “neighbour”; the lawyer immediately came back with the question “And who is my neighbour?” (verse 29), to which Jesus responded with the parable of the good Samaritan, the most elegant teaching in all of scripture regarding love and service—to brothers, neighbors, and strangers alike.5 Luke’s account also links the great commandment with the gospel of Jesus Christ more specifically since the lawyer’s initial question focuses on inheriting, or gaining, eternal life (salvation)—the ultimate objective of the gospel—rather than “mere” greatness of the law itself.

Luke 18:18–22 is another instance where Jesus was queried as to what a person must do to inherit eternal life. Jesus answered, “Do not commit adultery, Do not kill, Do not steal, Do not bear false
witness, Honour thy father and thy mother.” However, in the account of the same instance found at Matthew 19:16–22, Jesus responded to the query as to eternal life with the same elements of the Ten Commandments as found in Luke 18 but added importantly, “Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself.” Whether there is any direct relationship between the stories told in Luke 10:25–28 and Matthew 19:16–22, both Gospel writers, having quoted Jesus’ verbatim reference to Leviticus 19:18, at least strengthen the argument regarding the importance of the great commandment.

The account given at Mark 12:28–34, although quite similar to that in Matthew, differs in two interesting particulars. Rather than ask for the “great commandment in the law,” the lawyer (or scribe) asked Jesus, “Which is the first commandment of all?” The Savior responded with an apparently threefold answer: “The first of all the commandments is, Hear, O Israel; the Lord our God is one Lord: and thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy strength: this is the first commandment. And the second is like, namely this, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself. There is none other commandment greater than these.” That is, Mark’s account links the Shema, stated at Deuteronomy 6:4, which is so fundamental to Jewish faith and practice, with Deuteronomy 6:5 as “first” and then goes on to add love of neighbor as “second.”

Another significant reference to the great commandment is found in the Book of Mormon. Arguably the most complete exposition of the gospel of Jesus Christ anywhere in scripture is found at 2 Nephi 31. From the second verse to the end of that chapter, Nephi carefully introduced, enumerated, and discussed the gospel (or, as Nephi called it, “the doctrine of Christ”) element by element and then concluded at verse 21 with the powerful admonition that it was “the only and true doctrine of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, which is one God, without end.” The great commandment appears in that discussion as the central focus of what each of us must do throughout life once we have accomplished the first principles and ordinances of the gospel: “And now, my beloved brethren, after ye have gotten into this straight and narrow path, I would ask if all is done? Behold, I say unto you, Nay; for ye have not come thus far save it were by the word of Christ with unshaken faith in him, relying wholly upon the merits of him who is mighty to save. Wherefore, ye must press forward with a steadfastness in Christ, having a perfect brightness of hope, and a love of God and of all men. Wherefore, if ye shall press forward, feasting upon the word
of Christ, and endure to the end, behold, thus saith the Father: Ye shall have eternal life” (2 Nephi 31:19–20; emphasis added). Here, beyond being merely steadfast, Jesus seems to be closely linking acts of loving our neighbor with what He means by “enduring to the end.” 7

All these scriptural accounts complement each other and, read together, indicate powerfully that, in the first instance, Jesus was doing far more than merely responding to a single lawyer’s catch question on canon law. He rather seems to have been seizing the occasion first to clarify and then to nail down for the benefit of humankind the single, all-embracing principle of His gospel. 8 Its apparent intended impact is strongly reinforced by the fact that the essence of the story is repeated in all three synoptic Gospels. Even more important, nowhere else in the standard works is found a single commandment, or pair of commandments, claiming to encompass “all the law and the prophets,” stipulating that there are “none other . . . greater than these,” or stating that these are “more than all burnt offerings and sacrifices.” 9 That is, these ennoblements are used exclusively to describe either the twofold great commandment or the second part, loving one’s neighbor, alone. Regarding loving one’s neighbor, James noted that it would “fulfil the royal law” (James 2:8); and Paul, in his epistle to the Romans, stated that it was the “fulfilling of the law” (Romans 13:8–10). But Paul was even more emphatic in his epistle to the Galatians, where he asserted that “all the law is fulfilled in one word, even in this; Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself” (Galatians 5:14; emphasis added). 10

Jesus repeatedly builds on this theme. His admonition that “Therefore all things whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them: for this is the law and the prophets” (Matthew 7:12) is, in reality, the second part of the great commandment, though in different language. And His magnificent statement, “A new commandment I give unto you, That ye love one another; as I have loved you, that ye also love one another” (John 13:34), essentially restates the great commandment (with emphasis on loving one another), only in a different and perhaps more eloquent way. Although Jesus does not attach a “law and the prophets” caveat, extra importance is at least implied by His giving us a “new” commandment. Throughout the closing chapters of the book of John, loving one another—loving one’s neighbor—is the central focus of Jesus’ teaching. Reading those magnificent passages in the context of historical time—the last few hours before Jesus’ Crucifixion
and soon after His Resurrection—seems only to add to their importance.  

The Universality of the Great Commandment

The commandment to love one’s neighbor as oneself, along with its “do unto others” derivative, has come to be known as the maxim of the Golden Rule. Whether or not it has been taken seriously, it is arguably the most longstanding and universal principle known to humankind.

Corroboration of this is readily available. The book of Leviticus, one of the earliest-known written enunciations of the Golden Rule, has been dated as early as the seventh century EF  

Two centuries or more after Leviticus, but still five centuries before Jesus’ mortal sojourn on earth, Confucius, in the remote province of Lu in far-off China, was asked by one of his disciples, “Is there any one maxim which ought to be acted upon throughout one’s life?” Confucius replied, “Surely the maxim of charity is such: ‘Do not unto others what you would not they should do unto you.’”  

On a different occasion, another of Confucius’ disciples “inquired as to the meaning of true goodness.” Confucius said, “What you would not wish done to yourself, do not unto others.” These quotations are one of the best examples of the Golden Rule outside of Christianity—and indeed outside of religion itself—since Confucius was not a man of God and did not teach religion per se. Confucius’ application of the Golden Rule strongly influenced the great philosophy—and religious movement—that eventually developed from his teachings.

H. T. D. Rost, a scholar of the Baha’i faith, largely citing Bhagavân Dâs, another Eastern scholar, has found strong enunciations of the Golden Rule in virtually all the great religions of the world—including (in addition to Christianity and Confucianism) Hinduism, Jainism, Buddhism, Taoism, Zoroastrianism, Sikhism, Judaism, and Islam. If not stated in so many words in the primary scriptures of these faiths, the principle is clearly stated, or at least strongly implied, in the most important religious discourses on those scriptures. Equal to their agreement as to the near universal existence of the Golden Rule is Rost and Dâs’s determination that the maxim is also commonly claimed to be of fundamental importance wherever found. A compelling example is from Hinduism, a religion far removed from Christianity. One of that faith’s primary scriptural
texts, the Mahabharata, states: “Do not to others what ye do not wish Done to yourself; and wish for others too What ye desire and long for, for yourself—This is the whole of Dharma, heed it well.”

Yet another marvelous source is found in Judaism. In the Babylonian Talmud (at Shabbath 31a) is the story of a heathen (or gentile) who approached Shammai, one of Jerusalem’s two greatest rabbis during the period immediately prior to the birth of Jesus, and asked him to “make me a proselyte, on condition that you teach me the whole Torah while I stand on one foot.” Shammai “repulsed him.” The heathen then approached Hillel, the other great rabbi, with the same proposition. Hillel answered, “What is hateful to you, do not to your neighbor: that is the whole Torah, while the rest is the commentary thereof; go and learn it.” Jesus, when he responded to the lawyer’s question, may have purposely cited Hillel (regarding the overarching importance of the great commandment) as well as quoted from the law (Torah). Whatever the case may be, it is apparent that the Golden Rule (or the like) was an important tenet of Jewish faith before Jesus forthrightly stated it as a commandment. Else the lawyer (as set forth in Luke 10:27), without apparent further prompting by Jesus, would not have hastened to answer his own question in the manner he did.

Love

It is apparent that the commandment to love God with all our heart, soul, and mind (or might)—the first part of the twofold great commandment—strongly implies reciprocating in full God’s, and Jesus’, love for us. And, again, since the second part is linked to the first by the words “like unto it,” it is also apparent that we are intended to extend the same all-redeeming “pure love” to all with whom we closely share life here on earth. But what does this love mean? In his excellent essay in the International Standard Bible Dictionary, George A. Turner discusses the term in its several Hebrew and Greek derivations and then describes usage of those terms by the Synoptic Gospel writers, by Paul, and by John. According to Turner, love as found in Deuteronomy 6:5 and Leviticus 19:18, with which Jesus answered the lawyer, is hesed, the Hebrew word “denoting a deliberate choice of affection and kindness.” Turner further qualifies the term to mean “mercy” and “loving kindness,” in which acts toward others usually have the nature of being “unfailing” or “steadfast” and “reciprocal” or “covenantal.” In Matthew 22:37 and 39, the Greek agapao, routinely employed in the New Testament in
the same contexts, was used, one that Paul “raised . . . to the pinnacle of Christian graces” and that John claimed to be the “supreme badge of discipleship” (John 13:35). Further, it was love without which “no one can pretend to be a child of God” (1 John 3:14) and the possession of which or the lack thereof could mean the “difference between life and death.”19

M. Scott Peck, in The Road Less Traveled, defines this same kind of love not in a biblical sense but surely in a gospel sense as “the will to extend one’s self for the purpose of nurturing one’s own or another’s spiritual growth.”20 His definition is backed up by experience as a psychoanalyst and by well-developed argument in his book. Of particular value for the purposes of this essay is his convincing argument that the kind of love that nurtures spiritual growth requires commitment, action, and courage. He places special emphasis on the words extending and will:

The act of extending one’s limits implies effort. One extends one’s limits only by exceeding them, and exceeding limits requires effort. When we love someone our love becomes demonstrable or real only through our exertion—through the fact that for that
someone (or for ourself) we take an extra step or walk an extra mile. Love is not effortless. To the contrary, love is effortful. . . By use of the word “will” I have attempted to transcend the distinction between desire and action. Desire is not necessarily translated into action. Will is desire of sufficient intensity that it is translated into action. . . . Love is as love does.21

Peck's definition may offer a clue as to why mankind so often fails to be obedient to the great commandment: a large part of the failure may be owing to inattention and laziness—that is, we may be too weak-willed to extend ourselves sufficiently to nurture each other. In this same context, Peck suggests that laziness probably plays an important role in society's proclivity for stumbling into sin and evil (wickedness). He elaborates further on this theme:

Extension of ourselves or moving out against the inertia of laziness we call work. Moving out in the face of fear we call courage. Love, then, is a form of work or a form of courage. Specifically, it is work or courage directed toward the nurture of our own or another’s spiritual growth. We may work or exert courage in directions other than toward spiritual growth, and for this reason all work and all courage is not love. But since it requires the extension of ourselves, love is always either work or courage. If an act is not one of work or courage, then it is not an act of love. There are no exceptions.22

Beyond Platitude

Admittedly, loving both God and our neighbor with all our hearts is a tall order, and if Scott Peck is correct in relegating love to the realm of hard work, it is therefore appropriate to acknowledge that loving God and our neighbor is also hard work, perhaps too hard for most of us, especially if we look upon Jesus’ great commandment and His other admonishments along those lines as mere platitudes. Hard work or not, as a society, we have largely capitulated in this regard. We may have sought an easier way and in the process degraded the Lord’s great principle to nothing more than a glib, bland, meaningless evocation of the nice things that nice people do. By so doing, it also seems clear that in our general society, such a commandment as “Love thy neighbour as thyself,” whether we agree with it or not, is often shrugged off by such rationalizations as “After all, we have our agency,” or worse, “Oh well, boys will be boys,” and the like.

Such rationalizations hint more of laziness than truth, since
loving that can importantly nurture the spiritual growth of ourselves and others need not be as “effortful” as Peck implies. Even the simplest and easiest kindnesses and expressions of love can have an exceedingly beneficial, unforgettable impact on the lives of our neighbors, richly adding to the emotional and spiritual lifeblood that keeps us all alive and well. Additionally, the great commandment works anywhere and under all conditions—including the most unsafe kind, such as the many documented acts of loving-kindness on the battlefield—where one might expect that it could not possibly work with any real efficacy.

On the other hand, abuses of the great commandment, including the simplest and easiest, even to the extent of being entirely inadvertent or utterly devoid of harmful intent, can be immensely damaging. Such abuses, like viruses, can and often do follow us into the safest places, places such as the home and the church—safe havens where we should find solace amidst the harsh buffetings of the world. It is quite possible that all evils have small beginnings—in such places as our neighborhoods. In a Newsweek article, psychiatrist Robert I. Simon, Georgetown University School of Medicine, is quoted as saying, “There is a continuum of evil, of course, ranging from ‘trivial evils’ like cutting someone off in traffic, to greater evils like acts of prejudice, to massive evils. . . . But within us all are the roots of evil.” He goes on to say that “the unmistakable lesson is that ordinary, ‘good’ people, devoted to their families, their religion and their country, are capable of inflicting horrific harm.” Andrew Murr and Adam Rogers, authors of the article, then remind us of Hannah Arendt’s chilling observation that “it is the banality of evil that is so horrific.”23 Murr and Rogers—and Arendt—are speaking to each of us as individuals and as neighbors.

Most of us are more vulnerable than we think; and for whatever reason, we tend not to be mindful enough of our potential either to bless or harm our neighbors. The Lord has, however, given us a powerful principle by way of a commandment, “supreme above all others.”24 By its continual use, but never its abuse, it can save us, without exception and under all conditions—even in the valley of the shadow of death.

Two religious scholars have discussed the great commandment in terms of ethics:

[Jesus] sums up His teaching in supreme love to God and a love for fellow-man like that we hold for ourselves (Mark 12:29–31).
This supreme love to God is a complete oneness with Him in will, a will which is expressed in service to our fellow-men in the simplest and most natural relationship (Luke 10:25–37). Thus religion is ethical through and through, as God’s inner nature, expressed in forgiveness, mercy, righteousness and truth, is something not transcendental, but belongs to the realm of daily life. We become children of God and He our Father in virtue of a moral likeness (Matthew 5:43–48). . . . With this clearly understood, [we are] to live in implicit trust in the divine love, power, knowledge and forgiveness. Hence [we attain] salvation, being delivered from sin and fear and death, for the divine attributes are not ontological entities to be discussed and defined in the schools, but they are realities, entering into the practical daily life. Indeed they are to be repeated in us also, so that we are to forgive our brethren and ask to be forgiven (Matthew 6:12; Luke 11:4). . . . Religion thus becomes thoroughly ethical.25

The above scholars conclude that “yet shall the Christian life go on—the life which finds its deepest utterance in the words of Christ, ‘Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart and thy neighbor as thyself.’”

What is implied in all of this is the imperative, not the mere suggestion, that we all boldly, even heroically if needs be, make the ethical, or moral, decision to act—to make a strong commitment to follow Jesus’ commandment, backed up by His example, to first love God but then to actively love our neighbors and, with resolution, go about among them doing good. But also implied is the imperative to do no harm—ever—either in word or deed. Enunciating the great commandment, the Lord seems to have been teaching us that continually loving one another and serving one another, whether in the smallest and quietest ways or heroically, is implied in His appeal to “press forward, feasting upon the word of Christ, and endure to the end.” Further regarding the great commandment, is He not also warning us that “there is none other way . . . whereby [we] can be saved in the kingdom of God”? (2 Nephi 31:20–21).

Love is like the Polar Star.
In a changing world, it is a constant.
It is the very essence of the gospel.
It is the security of the home.
It is the safeguard of community life.
It is a beacon of hope in a world of distress.26
Notes


2. Since “law and the prophets” was the term commonly applied to the Old Testament in biblical times, Jesus was therefore stating that everything in the extant scriptures had its central focus in these two commandments.

3. John J. Hughes, in his article on the term neighbor in the International Standard Bible Encyclopedia (Geoffrey W. Bromiley, gen. ed., rev. ed., 4 vols. [Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans, 1986], 3:517–18, hereafter referred to as ISBE), states: “Most of the terms rendered by ‘neighbor’ in the [Old Testament] designate a fellow member of the community in covenant with Yahweh, i.e., one who shared in the rights and duties implied by membership in the covenant. All relations between members of the covenant community were sanctioned by divine law (cf. Job 16:21). So closely were God’s covenant people bound together that a neighbor was to be treated as a brother (cf. the frequent use of ‘brother’ and ‘neighbor’ as synonyms, e.g., Dt. 15:2ff., 12; Isa. 41:6; Jer. 31:34). In fact, one was to treat one’s brother as one treated oneself (Lev.19:18). . . . Jesus [in the New Testament] emphatically rejected the interpretation that limited one’s obligation to loving relatives and friends; He demanded love even for enemies, on the model of God’s love for all mankind (Mt. 5:43–48).” I am indebted to Richard L. Anderson for recommending the ISBE as a useful reference on such historical matters as these.

4. Daniel J. Silver, in A History of Judaism, 2 vols. (New York: Basic Books, 1974), 1:36, states: “Twenty-four times, whenever the Torah deals with the rights of persons, protection for the ‘stranger that is within your gates’ is insisted on. Why? ‘Because you were strangers in the land of Egypt.’ (Ex. 22:20, 23:9, etc.). In most aspects the Israelite law of persons corresponds to what we know of the class structure and family relationships of neighboring peoples, but no other law of the time and area shows a similar concern for the resident alien. He enjoyed the same rights as Israelites before the courts (Deut. 1:16). He could own land, share in the produce of the sabbatical year (Lev. 25:6), and even participate in the festivals (Deut. 16:1 ff.); indeed, ‘you shall love him as yourself, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt’ (Lev. 19:34).”

5. Hughes (in his article on neighbor cited in note 3 above) goes on to say that “Jesus’ teaching about loving others is presented graphically in His parable of the Good Samaritan. . . . The ongoing debate concerning the definition of neighbor lies behind the lawyer’s question, ‘And who is my neighbor?’ . . . Jesus’ parable was shocking in that it presented a despised outsider as the one who showed compassion. Jesus’ concluding question [‘Which now of these three, thinkest thou, was neighbour unto him that fell among the thieves?’] (v. 36), reshaped the lawyer’s question, focusing on the subject rather than the object of the love command. . . . As T. W. Manson stated, the lawyer’s question ‘is unanswerable, and ought not to be asked. . . . The point of the parable is that if a man has love in his heart, it will tell him who his neighbor is; and this is the only possible answer to the lawyer’s question’ (Sayings of Jesus [repr. 1979], 261 f.).” Ibid., 3:518.

7. Since the Luke and Mark accounts place more emphasis on the commandment’s being “first” rather than “great,” it is worthy of note that “first” could be seen to more appropriately fit the Luke account’s close linkage with the gospel of Jesus Christ in that the “first” commandment (a central element of the gospel’s “enduring to the end” [see 2 Nephi 31:20]) would fitly follow the gospel’s “first principles and ordinances.”

8. Hughes adds (again in his article on neighbor quoted in note 3 above) that “the command to love one’s neighbor as himself is the hallmark of [New Testament] ethics. . . . In Mt. 22:37–40 par. Mk. 12:29–31; Lk, 10:27 this command is combined with the command to love God above all (Dt. 6:5) to form a summary of the entire law.” ISBE, 3:518. Bruce R. McConkie strongly makes this point in his Doctrinal New Testament Commentary: Volume 1, The Gospels (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1974), 609: “One eternal command!—supreme above all others; comprehending all lesser requirements; embracing the whole law of the whole gospel; blazing forth like the sun with a brilliance beyond compare—one divine decree! ‘Thou shalt love thy God and thy neighbor.’”

9. “Law and the prophets” is mentioned in sixteen separate places in the Bible. In none of the five instances in the Old Testament does the term refer specifically to any particular commandment. Of the eleven references in the New Testament, two—Matthew 7:12 and 22:40—are specifically linked with the great commandment, and the other nine are not specific to any particular commandment.

10. However, Matthew 5:17 (“Think not that I am come to destroy the law, or the prophets: I am not come to destroy, but to fulfil”) can be said to be indirectly linked to all the commandments, the great commandment included. Regarding Jesus’ authorship of the law and the prophets, see 3 Nephi 12: 18–19: “For verily I say unto you, one jot nor one tittle hath not passed away from the law, but in me it hath all been fulfilled. And behold, I have given you the law and the commandments of my Father, that ye shall believe in me, and that ye shall repent of your sins, and come unto me with a broken heart and a contrite spirit. Behold, ye have the commandments before you, and the law is fulfilled.” This important passage is arguably an exception to the claim that all scriptural references to fulfillment of the law in the context of the commandments are specific to the great commandment alone. Since the 3 Nephi 12 passage, which, like most of the New Testament references, directly quotes Jesus Himself, it can be assumed, for purposes of this analysis, that He might have purposely contradicted Himself. Whatever the merits of such a criticism, in several scriptural accounts, Jesus is cited as having specified the twofold great commandment as being the fulfillment of the law. That He also states that He Himself and all He has commanded is the fulfillment of the law can be argued to be a contradiction or not, depending upon the context (see also Matthew 5:17–18).

11. See also Matthew 19:19, John 15:12–14, 1 John 3:23, and 2 John 1: 4–6. I am indebted to John W. Welch for both his insights and for pointing out further valuable discourse on the importance of the great commandment. See, for example, E. P. Sanders, Jewish Law from Jesus to the Mishnah: Five

Regarding context as to place and time, according to the accounts in Matthew and Mark, when the lawyer confronted Jesus, it was in Jerusalem and only a few days or hours before Jesus was crucified. Indeed, the lawyer’s question was the last such attempt to entice Jesus into making a statement that might legitimately have been used against him in ecclesiastical court. Soon thereafter, in the upper room and immediately following the Last Supper, Jesus made His magnificent gesture of love and service to His Apostles by washing their feet (see John 13:4–15). Then, almost as if He felt the need to further elaborate on an already splendidly (and powerfully) well-made point, soon after the Resurrection, Jesus returned to make still another magnificent gesture of love and service at the lakeshore (see John 21). Whether Jesus’ enunciation of the great commandment was just before His Crucifixion can be questioned by Bible scholars. Still, placement as to time of that commandment in Mark and Matthew, regardless of historicity, is significant, in my opinion.

12. The book may have been written at this time, but important passages, including the holiness code set forth in an important part in chapter 19, could well have been in existence as part of the orally transmitted law as early as the time of Moses—that is, circa 1200 EF

13. This selection is quoted from Lionel Giles, The Analects of Confucius: Translated from the Chinese, with an Introduction and Notes, collector’s ed. (Norwalk, Connecticut: Easton Press, 1976), 37, originally published by the Limited Editions Club of New York in 1933. In a footnote to the word charity, which was translated from the Chinese shu, Giles states that “[James] Legge translates shu ‘reciprocity,’ apparently for no other reason than to explain the maxim that follows. But it really stands for something higher than the strict utilitarian principle of do ut des. Both here and in another famous passage . . . it is almost equivalent to jen, goodness of heart, only with the idea of altruism more explicitly brought out. It connotes sympathetic consideration for others, and hence the best rendering would seem to be ‘loving-kindness’ or ‘charity.’ The concluding maxim is really nothing more nor less than the Golden Rule of Christ, though less familiar to us in its negative form.” (Ibid.) See also Jeffrey Wattles, The Golden Rule (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), chap. 2, for a fine discussion of the Golden Rule in Confucian thought.


from which Rost draws much of his argument regarding the universal importance of the Golden Rule.

16. Dãs, Essential Unity of All Religions, 272; emphasis added. Dãs comments that the Golden Rule is “stated repeatedly in positive as well as negative form, in the Vedic scriptures.” Ibid.


Dãs, in his discussion of both the preeminence and universal importance of the Golden Rule worldwide, also quotes from highly important Islamic discourse. Muhammad states, in the Hadis (or Hadith, the Sayings of Muhammad): “Noblest religion this—that thou shouldst like for others what thou likest for thyself; and what thou feellest painful for thyself, hold that as painful for all others too.” Dãs goes on to explain: “Stating the golden rule, Muhammad says, ‘This is the noblest religion’; Christ describes it as ‘This is the law and the prophets’; Vyasa, in Maha- bharata, laying it down, says, ‘This is the whole of Dharma.’” Dãs, The Essential Unity of All Religions, 273. To this can be added that Confucius’ enunciation of the Golden Rule was in response to questions posed by disciples as to “any one maxim” and the “meaning of true goodness” (emphasis added). See Giles, Analects, 19–20, 29, and 106–7. I am indebted to James Toronto for providing the following reference to the Hadith. Professor Toronto quotes from al-Arba‘un al-Nawawiyya, An-Nawawi’s Forty Hadith, trans. Ezzeddin Ibrahim and Denys Johnson-Davies (Damascus: The Holy Koran Publishing House, 1976) that Mohammed states that “None of you [truly] believes until he wishes for his brother what he wishes for himself” (Hadith No. 13, p. 56). Toronto goes on to say that “according to Nawawi, each of the forty is one of the ‘great precepts of religion’ [that] are classified as ‘sound’ in the canonical Hadith collection and ‘every person wishing to attain the Hereafter should know these Hadith because of the important matters they contain’ (pp. 23–24).”

19. Ibid., 3:175–76.


22. Ibid., 120. See also ibid., 81, 82, 116, 118, 131.

Elder James E. Talmage (1862—1933), Quorum of the Twelve Apostles
“How Long, Oh Lord, How Long?”
James E. Talmage and the Great War

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What is it that is happening? A war greater in area and scale and more fearful in carnage, than any that has ever been since life on the round world began. Five months—no more—have passed since the first gun was fired, and already the list of men who were strong, healthy, capable, keen, five short months ago, and who are now stark in death, outnumbers anything of its kind in human history. And to reckon up the load of sheer blank sorrow in innumerable homes, and the actual but incidental war sufferings, short of death, or possibly worse than death, would baffle the power of any man. Put thus bluntly, it is all horrible beyond words.

So spoke Randall Thomas Davidson, archbishop of Canterbury, in a sermon he delivered at St. Paul’s Cathedral in London on 3 January 1915. Lest we forget, more than nine million men in uniform and legions of civilians died on the battlefields, battleships, and bombed-out byways of the First World War. Another twenty-one million were scarred and disfigured. Whatever the causes of the conflict, they have long been overshadowed by the “sickening mists of slaughter” that, like a plague, hung over the world for four and a half years. The battles of the Marne, Ypres, Verdun, the Somme, Vimy Ridge, Jutland, Passchendaele, and Gallipoli—these and many more are synonymous with unmitigated human slaughter in what some have described as a nineteenth-century war fought with twentieth-century technology. This conflict brought the awful stalemate of
protracted trench warfare and hand-to-hand combat and introduced, on a wide scale, submarine warfare, chemical gas mass killings, and tank attacks and aerial bombings. Yet what should have been the “war to end all wars” became the catalyst for an even deadlier conflict a generation later.

The Great War was likewise an assault on faith, particularly Christian faith, in ways scholars continue to debate. As damaging, perhaps, to Christian thought as are the theories of scientific determinism and of higher criticism and its questioning of biblical authority, the war’s cold clash of death struck deep into the conscience of established Christianity. As one religious leader put it: “How is it with the Christian religion at the Front? . . . All verdicts must be rough in war. . . . War is a muddy business, encasing the body in dirt and caking over the soul. . . . It forms hard surfaces over the centres of sensitiveness.”

Though Church leaders had much to say about the war, the focus of this article is restricted to a study of the ruminations and writings of Elder James E. Talmage, the English-born Apostle, scientist, seasoned scholar, and trusted Latter-day Saint theologian. The author of such seminal studies as the life and mission of Christ, the Articles of Faith, the place and purpose of the temple, and the Great Apostasy, Elder Talmage was asked to make a nationwide speaking tour to explain the Latter-day Saint view of the war. His private journals and public sermons offer a unique vantage point from which to view how a modern Apostle interpreted, on behalf of his church, the tumultuous times associated with World War I.

Like many others, Elder Talmage was surprised at the sudden outbreak of the war, triggered as it was by the assassination of Austria’s archduke Francis Ferdinand and his wife by a Serbian nationalist in late June 1914. “One of the surprising features is the suddenness with which the storm of war has broken,” he recorded on 5 August, one day after Great Britain had declared war on Germany. “The war situation in Europe has grown more formidable with the passage of days,” he wrote two weeks later, concluding that “Austria’s insistent demands on Serbia formed rather the excuse than the cause of what has developed into the greatest war of all history.”

A Witness to Suffering

For much of the forepart of the war, Elder Talmage spoke little
of blame and much of suffering attendant to the war. He was deeply troubled by the scale of human suffering. “Every day brings news of the progress of the terrible conflict in Europe,” he wrote at the end of August 1914. “All the news that comes is censored, and it is certain that we do not get the whole truth . . . [but] if the despatches are at all reliable, there are today under arms over 10,000,000 men, and the dead already reported number many scores of thousands, and the end is not yet in sight.”

A peace-loving man, Elder Talmage was shocked and dismayed by the unfolding drama of death and prayed for a speedy termination. In one entry of his journal, representative of scores of others, he wrote: “The war news becomes more terrible with the days. . . . The fatalities and other casualties are horrible to contemplate.”

Very early on, Elder Talmage formulated his views of the war—views that would, for the most part, remain remarkably consistent over the next four years, albeit with some modifications. Speaking at the general conference of the Church on 6 October 1914, the fifty-two-year-old leader staked out the following positions: (1) God, our Heavenly Father, is not responsible for the war; (2) the war is a fulfillment of prophecy; (3) on a grander scale, the war is a continuation of a premortal struggle between good and evil; (4) the war is a remarkable sign of the imminent return of Christ; (5) though man is entirely at fault, God will redeem it all for good; and finally, (6) ours is neither to condemn the aggressors nor to take sides (the one view he would modify over time).

The Role of God in War

As to the role of Providence, the war was neither God’s doing nor, for that matter, Satan’s alone. “Some go so far as to say that the hand of God being in all things, God Himself is responsible for all that is, and for all that takes place. I have heard it taught by advocates of a frivolous theology that whatever is, is in accordance with the will of God. My whole soul revolts against such conceptions as that.” Ever the advocate of the agency of man, this strict antideterminist went on to describe as “absurd” the belief that God’s infinite foreknowledge “determines what shall take place.” “Let us be men and be willing to take the blame for our evil acts, if we have chosen the evil,” he said. Nor was the war, strictly speaking, the devil’s own doing. “If Satan and his hosts were bound today and no longer able to work personally upon the earth, evil would go on for a very long time, because he has very able representatives in the
Man is his own agent and brings upon himself many of his greatest sufferings—sufferings that are in his power to avoid and ameliorate.

The War as Fulfillment of Prophecy

As to the fulfilling of prophecy, Elder Talmage was a staunch advocate of the uniquely Latter-day Saint view that the Prophet Joseph Smith had predicted such a tragedy more than seventy years before. “Terrible as is the conflict, it was foretold by prophetic voice and it marks the fulfillment of prophecies depicting conditions of the last days preparatory to the coming of the Son of Man.”

Quoting from the Doctrine and Covenants, he often read the prophecy that tells of the Southern states dividing against the Northern states in the Civil War of 1861–65, after which Great Britain would “call upon other nations” to defend itself “and then war shall be poured out upon all nations” (D&C 87:1–3). To Elder Talmage, divine prophecy, though absolutely certain, could never be construed as a divine imposition upon the agency and affairs of humankind.

On various occasions during and after the war, Elder Talmage took delight in recounting the story of listening to a leading scholar of the age, Dr. David Stan Jordan, who, in speaking at the Mormon Tabernacle just before the outbreak of the war, had stressed the impossibility of such a conflagration. Said Elder Talmage:

I spoke with the gentleman here in this stand, at the conclusion of his address, in substance to this effect: “I wish I could believe you, Doctor.” “You don’t?” “I do not.” “What is wrong with my deductions?” “They may be logically drawn, but your premises are wrong. You have failed to take into account certain essential factors; you have discarded and ignored the predictions of the prophets; and on such a question as this I shall accept the word of the prophet rather than the conclusion of the academician.” . . .

Within a short span of months after that time, several of the most powerful nations of the world were locked in the death-grapple, which has been tightening with the passage of the years. So, as I read the words of the prophet that war should be poured out upon all nations, and that in this day and dispensation, in which we live, this the land of Zion should be the only land wherein safety might be found.

Though a believer in prophecy, Elder Talmage was never a fatalist. People could change and repent and bring about an end to suffering and conflict. An advocate of national days of prayer, he
prayed for peace and counseled others to do the same. “We may all fervently pray that the year now about to dawn [1915] shall witness a cessation of slaughter and the establishment of suitable conditions of peace.”

A Continuation of the War in Heaven

Elder Talmage later offered yet another interpretation—that the Great War was but a continuation of the titanic struggles in the premortal existence between Lucifer and the Almighty God as spoken of in both ancient and modern scripture. "And now, in these last days, immediately precedent to the return of Christ, who shall come to rule in righteousness on the earth," he wrote much later in the war, “the arch-fiend is making desperate effort to enthral mankind under the autocracy of hell. The conflict under which the earth has been made to groan was a repetition of the pre-mundane war, whereby the free agency of spirits was vindicated; and the eventual issue of the later struggle was equally assured.”

Further insight into this uniquely Latter-day Saint view of the war can be found in his book Jesus the Christ. Though the genesis for this much-celebrated work was a series of lectures Elder Talmage had presented in 1904 and 1905 on the life of Christ, this classic work was an outgrowth, if not in part an interpretation, of the war. Certainly Elder Talmage wrote it with news of the war very much in mind.

On 14 September 1914, one month after hostilities began, he received a “written appointment from the First Presidency [of the Church] to embody the lectures in a book to be published for the use of the Church in general.” Provided special accommodation in the Salt Lake Temple where he could think and write without the interruptions of a busy office, Elder Talmage was “asked to prepare the matter for the book with as little delay as possible.”

Over the next eight months, with the battles of the Marne and Ypres thundering in the background, Elder Talmage devoted “every spare hour” to the labor “reading aloud finished chapters to his brethren of the Twelve for their approval.”

That the war was a chief concern at this time may be gleaned from the following entries juxtaposed in his journals:

For 30 September 1914: “Since I began my work on the life of Christ I have devoted every possible hour to the labor, oft-time working in the Temple until a late hour at night.” He then observed, “The
war condition in Europe apparently grows worse with the days as reckoned in terms of slaughter and destruction. The unprecedented struggle is still in progress, and the end is seemingly yet far off.”

And for Sunday, 28 February 1915, five months later: “Spent greater part of the day in [the] temple as I have spent every day on which I have been free from appointments for months past.” He then commented, “The month ends with the usual dreadful reports from the seat of war. Every day brings word of slaughter on land, attacks by air ships, and the sinking of vessels at sea. The condition of the armies in the field during the winter season must have been distressing in the extreme.”

Elder Talmage completed his masterpiece on 19 April 1915, and the work immediately went into its first printing of five thousand copies that came off the press in August of that same year. Several other much-larger printings followed throughout the course of the war. Unlike any other serious Christian study of the life of Christ, Elder Talmage’s account begins with the war in heaven between the forces of evil and of good—a topic not covered in his earlier lectures. To what extent this foundation chapter owes itself to the war is difficult to determine. This much, however, is certain: Elder Talmage’s message of a living Christ, His Resurrection, and His ultimate victory over death all brought faith, hope, and peace to Latter-day Saint readers everywhere at a perilous time of anguish, uncertainty, and fear.

**A Sign of the Last Days**

Sprinkled like seasoning throughout his sermons and writings is a “premillenialist” interpretation of world events, a certain expectation that the war was heralding the almost imminent Second Coming of the Lord Jesus Christ. Speaking even before the outbreak of the war, Elder Talmage, then only a freshman member of the Quorum of the Twelve, declared to the Latter-day Saints: “Let me say, there is no time for us to lose, no time for us to waste, if we are in need of individual repentance, reformation, setting in order and better doing: and to those who have not yet accepted the word of the gospel, not yet bowed in obedience to the laws and ordinances of the gospel, permit me to say that there is no time to be lost, no time to be wasted, for the coming of the Christ is near at hand.”

Speaking at a conference of the Pioneer Stake in October 1916, right after the dreadful battle of the Somme, in which over a million lives were lost, Elder Talmage said, “We were living in a most impor-
tant age of the world’s history. It was an age replete with significant events and presaged the near approach of the long expected day when Christ should come and reign among men as King of Kings and Lord of Lords. Just when he would come no man knew; but the signs of the times pointed to the fact that this day was not as distant as some supposed.”

Later, with America’s entry into the war, he returned to this same theme. “In our assurance that the Lord shall come, and that His coming is very near, let us beware of those who undertake to set dates, to designate months and years; for the Lord hath positively declared that that shall not be given to man to know, nor even to the angels. . . . But,” he continued, “certain signs are specified, and those signs are today ripening like the fruit in autumn tide, when the fulness of summer is past. Who can doubt the imminence of this event, which shall be known as the consummation of the ages?”

Two events in particular reinforced his conviction in the near return of Christ. One was the short-term emancipation of Russia from Czarist domination, and the other was the British recovery of Jerusalem from Muslim control. Speaking of the former, he saw the possible emancipation of the Jews and a wonderful new opportunity for many Jews to return to their homeland. “Verily the purposes of the Lord are ripening fast,” he confided in his diary in March 1917.

And as for the British conquest of Jerusalem, he said: “Let us hope that this development in the great war is a step toward the restoration of the Jewish nation and the return of the Jews to their ancient home. One cannot but feel tonight that the portentous prophecies relating to the rehabilitation of the Jews have entered upon their literal fulfillment.”

Elder Talmage went on to predict the near return of the lost tribes of Israel, heralding the coming of Christ. Said he: “The tribes shall come; they are not lost unto the Lord; they shall be brought forth as hath been predicted; and I say unto you there are those now living—a ye s, some here present—who shall live to read the records of the Lost Tribes of Israel.”

A Shift from Neutrality

The one view that shifted dramatically, as with many of the most conservative religious leaders of the day, was his political interpretation. At the start of the war, he was virtually neutral (though sympathetic to the Allied cause) and cautioned against condemning one
side or the other. “The warring nations are severally voicing prayers to God, prayers for what? For the right? No, for triumph, for the success of their arms whether they be fighting on the side of right or on the side of wrong. . . . We are striving not only in a national capacity, but in the capacity of individuals, for triumph rather than for truth, for selfish success, rather than for the vindication of the right.”  

However, news of the German U-boat sinking of the British steamship liner S.S. Lusitania and with the resulting loss of twelve hundred men, women, and children turned Elder Talmage, as it did many other Americans, decidedly against Germany for the first time.  In fact, the deadly success of German submarine warfare was repugnant to him. “This appears to be one of the most barbarous developments of the European War,” he said of the Lusitania disaster, and although he acknowledged that the ship may have been carrying munitions of war, he concluded that “such conditions, however, cannot mitigate the horror of Germany’s attack. . . . Whatever technical or so-called legal defense Germany may have put forth, the fact that her Emperor and government have stained their hands with innocent blood never to be washed away is very generally recognized. Surely this is a day of horrors.”  

As the war escalated and as America’s interests became increasingly threatened, Elder Talmage, a Republican, nevertheless found himself praying for Democratic president Woodrow Wilson. “In every Latter-day Saint home prayer should be made for the president of the United States, for his cabinet, for all other officers of this nation, that they may be led to do that which shall further the purposes of God in the advancement of this people,” he declared in an October 1915 address. “I pray for him though I have never professed membership in the political party to which he belongs. He is to me no member of a political party but the president of the nation and he requires the assistance and direction and inspiration of the Lord that he may accomplish the purposes which God intends to have accomplished in leading this nation to its glorious destiny.”  

Ever the American patriot, Elder Talmage became even more patriotic as the drumbeat of war increased. By the time America entered the fray in April 1917, there was no more room for neutrality in his mind. Calling Wilson’s declaration of war “a masterly presentation of facts and a plain indication of our duty as a nation,” Elder Talmage viewed the decision as inevitable, a move “forced upon us by the utterly ruthless and indefensible course of Germany in her inhuman course of submarine warfare.” With a tone of relief mixed
with regret, he concluded that the only way to lasting peace was through American involvement to tilt the balance of power toward an Allied victory. “Let us hope that the participation by our nation in this great world conflict,” he wrote early in April 1917, “will hasten the day of the cessation of ruthless slaughter.”  

From this point on, his condemnation of the kaiser and of German autocracy took on a more strident tone. For the first time, the tentacles of war began to reach into his own personal life as his two sons, Paul and Karl, enlisted in the United States Army and his son-in-law in the Canadian Army. His 4 July 1917 speech in Lester Park in Ogden, Utah, reflected the enthusiasm of a nation going to fight for a righteous cause. Germany he described as “the arch tyrant,” the “knell of despotism,” and “the voracious dragon of autocracy.” Much more than having a baneful form of government, Germany represented the “Kultur of Hell,” a common term of the time denigrating German philosophy and anti-Christian thought. “Germany is the black sheep in the human family, the recreant, lawless member, the trouble breeder, the blatant outcast, and as such must be restrained and disciplined.” In vivid contrast, America’s cause was just, needful, and righteous—“to make the world safe for democracy.”

By early 1918, there remained “absolutely no shadow of doubt that the prime purpose of Germany in precipitating this awful struggle upon the world was the lust for world dominion.” Comparing that nation to the cause of evil, he continued: “The fallen Son of the Morning, who suffered defeat and expulsion in these latter days to force tyranny and autocratic rule on the embodied spirits who in their antemortal status fought against him. The right must eventually prevail, and the rights of man be vindicated. Under the awful stress of this struggle it is difficult to repress the agonized appeal to the Throne of God—How long, O Lord, how long!”

Though “that government is making itself hated of the rest of mankind,” Elder Talmage could hardly conceal his begrudging respect for its war capacity: “Her powers of endurance are marvelous; her resources are yet far from being exhausted.”

Despite such fervent words, in the quiet of his den, Elder Talmage hoped that the war would not strike tragedy into his own home. “With all our patriotic approval and cooperation,” he confided in a later journal entry, “we cannot resist the underlying thought and hope that the right kind of peace may be attained before our loved ones reach the battle”—a hope realized by subsequent events.
Writing to his son Paul, then in field training, Elder Talmage prayed for more than his personal safety and well-being. “We constantly pray, my boy, that you and your brother may be preserved from evil, from the temptations and sins to which it is so easy to yield amidst the unavoidable abandon of military life. But we rely on Divine assistance and determination you will both be able to keep yourselves clean. Next to this we pray that you may be among those who are spared to come home in safety and with credit for having contributed to the victory we so confidently count on.”

An Advocate for the Church

In the spring of 1918, with the outcome of the war still very much in doubt, Elder Talmage was dispatched by the First Presidency on a cross-country speaking tour for at least two reasons: (1) to promote the image of the Church of Jesus Christ as a loyal supporter of the enlistment process and of the government’s Liberty Bond Drive and (2) to explain the Latter-day Saint philosophy of war. Speaking in scores of cities and writing syndicated columns for major newspapers all across America, Elder Talmage reiterated those views that he had held throughout the war as presented above. Stressing the call of duty for Latter-day Saints to take up arms, Elder Talmage identified the mission of the Church with that of the Western world, a point not made before. “We have particular concern in the outcome of the great conflict,” he said over and over again, “for we solemnly proclaim that to this church has been given the Divine appointment to preach the restored gospel of Jesus Christ in all the world; and the discharge of this high commission is possible in its entirety only as free speech, liberty of conscience, and a free press are insured among the nations.”

With the signing of the Armistice on 11 November 1918, Elder Talmage joined with others worldwide in celebrating the long-sought-for end of the war. Official word reached Salt Lake City at 12:45 DP. Notwithstanding the late hour and the curfews because of the influenza plague, Elder Talmage reported that “this city seemed to spring into life. Bells were tolled, whistles blown, and within an incredibly short time hundreds of automobiles were dashing about the streets, most of them having tin cans, sheet iron utensils and other racket-making appendages attached to the rear.” The next day, he reported that “flags and bunting appeared in abundance everywhere, tons of confetti were thrown from the tops of high buildings, every available band was pressed into service, and during the afternoon and well
on into the night dancing was indulged in on Main Street. . . . Such a day as this has never before been witnessed in the world’s history.” As to his views on the peace process, while he hoped it would result in nothing less than “the complete subjugation of militarism as a ruling and compelling power in the affairs of any nation,” he deplored any act of vengeance. “Personally I trust that no gun will be fired, not a single bomb dropped, and not one paragraph be written into the peace document, in the spirit or interest of vengeance. If ever the ancient scripture had special application it has now: ‘vengeance is mine; I will repay, saith the Lord’ (Romans 12:19). The conquered peoples will suffer enough through what we may call the natural, that is the inevitable, consequences of their assault on civilization and their diabolical efforts to subjugate the world.”

With respect to Woodrow Wilson’s initiatives to conclude the war with his proposed Covenant of Peace and a League of Nations to prevent any further such horrors, Elder Talmage responded with guarded optimism. The League of Nations became a very divisive issue for Latter-day Saint leadership, with Heber J. Grant supporting it and others, like J. Reuben Clark and David O. McKay, in opposition. However, Elder Talmage saw in Wilson’s initiatives, though flawed, an unparalleled opportunity for peace.

“Though the League be not a perfect device,” he admitted in remarks given at a 1919 Independence Day celebration in Salt Lake City’s Liberty Park,

its creation is of significant import. . . . If future wars shall come, let us see to it that they come, not because of our efforts to prevent but in spite of the best safeguards we can establish.

The forming of a League of Nations is a great stride on the road of real advancement; and I verily and reverently believe that it is a human response to the promptings of the Divine Spirit . . . but to those who violently assail and seek to destroy the league at its birth, the words of Gamaliel apply: “If this counsel or this work be of men it will come to naught: but if it be of God, ye cannot overthrow it; lest haply ye be found even to fight against God.”

When news arrived that the Republican-controlled United States Senate had voted down Wilson’s initiatives, thereby blocking America’s involvement in the League, Elder Talmage recorded the following in a spirit of quiet resignation:

It is greatly to be regretted that the question of the League of
Nations was made a partisan issue, but Woodrow Wilson was determined to make it an issue. The answer is very decisive; for President-elect Harding gave no promise of adoption of the League Covenant. In my judgment, the U.S. will have to take a stand with the other great nations of this world. . . . However, the voice of the people has been heard in the land. . . . My prayer has been that the Lord so overrule the affairs of men as to bring about the election of those best suited to the carrying out of His purposes. . . . Until I learn otherwise, I shall try to believe that the supplication has been in large measure answered.

The Redemption of the World

As to the lingering question of the impact of the war upon Christianity and perhaps, by extension, upon the Church, Elder Talmage wrote little. But from what he did say, it seemed no threat. In his mind, though the war was an outgrowth of an apostate world, God would redeem it for good.

Millions of men have been killed on the battlefields, and other millions—not alone of men but of tender women and innocent children—have given up their lives to feed the ever hungry maw of the demon War.

Critics with distorted vision, and skeptics with poisoned minds, have blatantly proclaimed the dread conditions of current times as evidence that Christianity has failed. The conclusion is unwarranted; it would be more reasonable to say that the world has never yet tried what Christianity can do. What we have come to call Civilization has seemingly failed; for if the present conflict be a part of civilization, God give us the simple savagery of the past.

Whether such a response would have been different if it had been Latter-day Saints killing one another in overwhelming numbers rather than Protestants, Catholics, and Muslims dying on the world’s battlefields is impossible to say. What effect future wars in the twenty-first century may have upon a worldwide membership and upon a worldwide church must await future historians. The ugliness of war, however, cannot detract from the gospel message of peace or, as Elder Talmage put it in one stake conference: “From the Mormon point of view, there can be no question as to the divinity of Jesus Christ. . . . It is this that the Gospel offers shelter to those who might be shaken by the rude war of modern indifference and unbelief.”

What Elder Talmage did see springing phoenix-like out of the ashes of the war was the increased opportunity for the spreading of
the gospel message. “The missionary work will become more needed
and greater,” he said at a conference of the Summit Stake in August
1916. “There will be a greater call for missionaries. There must be a
revival among us, should be less frivolity, to prepare for the develop-
ment in store by the Lord.”

Put another
way, and in geological metaphors he, as a scientist, well understood,
God would redeem it all for good. “Out of it all He can cause to rise
the principles of truth. As the crystal forms in the brine, He can cause
the principles of righteousness to crystallize out from the gory magma
which is presented to us by this terrible conflict.”

It would be a terrible omission to conclude this study without
reference to Elder Talmage’s fundamental and repeated response to
the horrors of the Great War. For all the hell of battle, the shattered
dreams, the snuffed-out lives, and the waste and worry and weariness
of war, there stood above it all, like the rising sun above a declining
world, the certainty of the Redemption and Resurrection of Christ and
of all mankind everywhere. To minimize this point is to misrepresent
the man. Such a view may be best captured with an excerpt from a
talk he gave during the height of the awful slaughter of Verdun, in
which over a million men were killed: “Ye sons and daughters of the
living God, we are eternal beings. We shall live though the experience
of death . . . must come unto each of us; but victory over the grave has
been inaugurated, and shall be carried to a glorious consummation,
through and by the Lord Jesus Christ, for he is the Redeemer, as well
as the Savior of mankind.”

Notes

1. Randall Thomas Davidson, The Testing of a Nation (London: Macmillan
Company, 1919), 17–18.

2. Ibid., 128–29. A noted Canadian scholar of religious history has recently
argued that Canadian soldiers were ill-prepared for the war by mainline Christian
churches in Canada. “We as a church advised our youth to join the army,” one
soldier reported. “Not anywhere in my three years of army life have I heard of or
come into contact with, a great spiritual leader or moral leader. . . . There was no
note of leadership in the church that found an echo in the heart.” David B. Marshall,
Secularizing the Faith—Canadian Protestant Clergy and the Crisis of Belief, 1850–
1940 (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992), 74. Marshall argued that the war
contributed much to the secularizing of Canadian Protestantism.

For an excellent study of the American churches’ response to war, see The
3. James E. Talmage was born 21 September 1862 at Hungerford, Berks, England. He became a member of the Church at the age of ten and was ordained an elder in 1880 in Utah. A geologist by profession, he became an instructor at the Brigham Young Academy and later served as president of the LDS College from 1888 to 1892. He later served as president of the University of Utah. For more biographical information, see John R. Talmage, The Talmage Story: Life of James E. Talmage—Educator, Scientist, Apostle (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1972). The best published collection of Talmage's seminal talks and sermons is James Harris, ed., The Essential James E. Talmage (Salt Lake City: Signature, 1997), number five in the Classics in Mormon Thought series.

4. Some of the other classic works of James E. Talmage include The Articles of Faith: A Series of Lectures on the Principal Doctrines of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Salt Lake City: Deseret News, 1901), The Great Apostasy: Considered in the Light of Scriptural and Secular History (Portland, Oregon: Northwestern States Mission of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1909), Jesus the Christ: A Study of the Messiah and His Mission According to Holy Scriptures Both Ancient and Modern (Salt Lake City: Deseret News, 1915), and The House of the Lord—A Study of Holy Sanctuaries, Ancient and Modern (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1962). These works are still in print and very much relied upon by Latter-day Saint readers as reliable and inspiring doctrinal works.

5. The primary sources used for this paper are the private journals and public sermons of Elder Talmage that are available in the James E. Talmage Collection in the Special Collections Department of the Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah; hereafter cited as Talmage Collection. I wish to thank the staff members at Special Collections for their assistance in accessing these materials. I also wish to thank Ron Watt of the Historical Department of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints for his assistance in locating key talks of Elder Talmage in wards, stakes, and missions during the war-time period. Talmage's official Church correspondence was not available for research. I wish also to thank my research assistant, Keith Erekson, for his invaluable assistance in studying these sources.

6. James E. Talmage journals, 5 August 1914; hereafter referred to as the JET journals.

7. JET journals, 18 August 1914.

8. Ibid., 31 August 1914.

9. Ibid., 8 September 1914.


11. JET journals, 28 November 1914.


13. JET journals, 31 December 1914. Wrote Elder Talmage on a later occasion:
“We can but hope and pray for Divine interposition in the interests of peace, so far as the greater purposes of God may be served thereby.” JET journals, 29 July 1915.

14. The scriptures he most often referred to are in the book of Abraham in the Pearl of Great Price.

15. From an article entitled “There Was War in Heaven,” 1917/18, Talmage Collection.

16. JET journals, 14 September 1914.

17. Ibid., 30 September 1914 and 28 February 1915.

18. James E. Talmage, Jesus the Christ. Since 1915, the book has gone through numerous editions and is still in print.

19. In a promotional article announcing the publication of the new work, attention was given this very point: “The chapter devoted to the antemortal Godship of Christ presents in concise and convincing array the scriptural proofs of our Lord’s station, power, and authority before the world was prepared for the habitation of man. It is made plain that Jesus Christ was the Word Or Power through whom and by whom the worlds were created.” From an article entitled “A New Church Work Just Issued from the Press of the Deseret News, ‘Jesus the Christ.’” See JET journals, 11 September 1915.


21. Minutes of the Pioneer Stake Conference, 29 October 1916, as extracted by the Church Historical Department staff, Church Historical Department, Salt Lake City, Utah.

22. James E. Talmage, in Conference Report, April 1917, 68.

23. JET journals, 23 March 1917. Elder Talmage was bitterly disappointed to learn of the counterrevolution in Russia and the entrenchment of Communist rule. “The Russian nation has been betrayed by self-constituted leaders, notably Trotsky and Lenin, who succeeded in starting a counter-revolution to that by which the last Czar was dethroned, and, who, while pretending to work for the good of their people, have been playing into the hands of Germany and Austria.” JET journals, 8 March 1918.

24. JET journals, 8 December 1917. Elder Talmage, of course, was not alone in this interpretation. Conservative Christians and other premillenialist evangelicals saw in the fall of Jerusalem the hand of God. For example, see George M. Marsden, Fundamentalism and American Culture—The Shaping of Twentieth-Century Evangelicalism: 1870–1925 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), 150.


26. James T. Talmage, in Conference Report, October 1914, 101. Further to this
Arnold Friberg (b. 1913) painting,
Brother of Jared Seeing the Finger of the Lord
Seventeenth-century artists employed a technique called chiaroscuro in which the extreme contrasts between light and darkness are highlighted to achieve dramatic and emotional effect and to create depth. Because Rembrandt first painted his canvas backgrounds black, the contrasting lighter colors shimmered and stood out more. Similarly, the light of the restored gospel is all the more brilliant when painted across the darker landscape of the world. There is a great need for a creative community of Latter-day Saints whose works reflect gospel light and radiate with the Spirit. The Restoration is both a declaration of light as well as a refutation of darkness. Teachers of youth play a major role in preparing the hearts and minds of their students to rise up and become latter-day lights whose works will shine in the darkness.

The everlasting covenant has been sent into the world as a standard, as a light for people to seek after, and as a messenger to prepare the way for the coming of the Lord (see D&C 45:9). But before the “kingdom of heaven may come,” the kingdom of God must “go forth” across the earth (see D&C 65:2, 6). The Lord’s arm will continue to be made bare in the eyes of all nations, and He will continue to bring His restored gospel “out of obscurity and out of darkness” (D&C 1:30). The same can also be true of our students—individual talents can be brought out of obscurity and out of darkness to enlighten the world. We live in the promised day...
when God said He would pour out His Spirit “upon all flesh” and when many young men and young women would “dream dreams” and “see visions” (Joel 2:28). “Verily I say unto you all,” the Savior declared to those living in the latter days, “arise and shine forth, that thy light may be a standard for the nations” (D&C 115:5).

Where are our great writers? Where are our stellar actors and actresses? Where are our great artists and advertisers? Where are our musicians who will master what might possibly be the most powerful tool of communication ever revealed? Where are our computer programmers whose creativity will instruct as well as inspire? Have all the great artisans already come and gone? No, these creative members of the kingdom are sitting in our classes. We believe the greatest contributions have yet to be made. Elder Orson F. Whitney noted: “We will yet have Miltons and Shakespeares of our own. God’s ammunition is not exhausted. His brightest spirits are held in reserve for the latter times. In God’s name and by his help we will build up a literature whose top shall touch heaven, though its foundations may now be low in earth.”

If our students are going to produce creative works “whose top shall touch heaven,” they first need to be inspired. To those who teach, I offer the following twelve suggestions about what we can do to help inspire the rising generation to greatness.

1. Teach them who they are and give them hope.

As I approached my first institute class, in which I set out to instruct college students for the first time, I was worried and humbled. It was an introductory Book of Mormon course, and I had a lesson prepared, but I sincerely wanted to touch my students’ hearts. I had prayed for that ability, worked hard on the lesson, and was now heading to meet my students. In the hallway, I passed two prominent faculty members. They were both giants in the classroom. I had observed them both. Their teaching styles were as polar as could be imagined, but they were both highly successful. As I walked near them, they glanced up and smiled. “I’m headed to my first class,” I said, “what should I teach?” I was hoping one of them would have a readiness suggestion or a get-to-know-you idea—something to help me get the class started on the right foot. Without hesitation, the first blurted out, “Teach them who they are!” and the second chimed in, “And give them hope!”

The Spirit fell over the three of us. It happened so quickly and so unexpectedly that we were all surprised. I thanked them both,
and as I walked to class, I knew that what they had said was true. I realized that in addition to hearing the words of the scriptures and of the living prophets in the classroom, students need to “know who they are” and “have hope” that they can do their Heavenly Father’s will.

That brief, unanticipated experience has been a guidepost to me for every class since. When students come to know who they are and when they have hope, they can achieve great things. President Gordon B. Hinckley has reminded the youth on several occasions, “You are a great generation. . . . I think you are the best generation who have ever lived in this Church.”

Edifying teaching inspires and builds. It strengthens and motivates. When truths are taught and the Spirit is felt, “he that preacheth and he that receiveth, understand one another, and both are edified and rejoice together” (D&C 50:22).

To help students remember who they are, I like to read with them what the Savior declared to President Joseph F. Smith (see D&C 138:53–56). He was told that the students we teach are part of a generation of “choice spirits” who were “reserved” to come forth at this hour of earth’s history, who were taught by prophets before they were born, and who were “prepared to come forth” so they could “labor in His vineyard for the salvation of souls” in these latter days.

1. Teach students to exercise the Spirit.

When students are taught to remember who they are, eternally speaking, then they can create the proper circumstances in their mortal lives that will enable them to enjoy the Spirit as abundantly as before they were born. Of all the aptitudes we could develop in the premortal life, spirituality is the greatest. Elder Bruce R. McConkie wrote: “Men are not born equal. They enter this life with the talents and capacities developed in preexistence.” He further noted that “the talent of greatest worth was that of spirituality, for it enables us to hearken to the Holy Spirit and accept that gospel which prepares us for eternal life.” On another occasion, he wrote: “Above all talents—greater than any other capacities, chief among all endowments—stands the talent for spirituality. Those so endowed find it easy to believe the truth in this life.”

Obviously, our students come to us with a great familiarity of the Spirit. In this second estate, we all need to regain our premortal ability to communicate in what the Prophet Joseph Smith called “the language of inspiration,” or, as President John Taylor said, be
“taught, instructed and directed by the spirit of revelation proceeding from the Almighty”⁶ with which we were once very familiar.

By our teaching students to recognize and follow the promptings of the Spirit, they will be guided to do what is right (see Isaiah 30:21). There are many ways the Holy Ghost can communicate with us, but the most frequent way is through the still, small-voice whisperings that come to us as thoughts planted in our minds and feelings stirred in our hearts (see D&C 8:2–3). As the Prophet Joseph Smith taught, thoughts that occupy our minds and feelings that press themselves upon us the strongest are promptings from the Spirit (see D&C 128:1).

The more in tune our students are with the Spirit, the more “anchored” they will be, enabling them to produce “good works” that “glorify God” (see Ether 12:4). Commenting on the importance of having the Spirit while working on creative works, President Boyd K. Packer said: “I mentioned earlier that the greatest hymns and anthems have not been composed, nor have the greatest illustrations been set down, nor the poems written, nor the paintings finished. When they are produced, who will produce them? Will it be the most talented and the most highly trained among us? I rather think it will not. They will be produced by those who are the most inspired among us. Inspiration can come to those whose talents are barely adequate, and their contribution will be felt for generations; and the Church and kingdom of God will move forward just a little more easily because they have been here.”⁷

3. Teach students to view life from an eternal, latter-day perspective.

This is such a great day in which to live. Prophecies are coming to pass as the gospel of Jesus Christ goes to every nation and people. But ours is also a day of distractions. It is easy for our students to become distracted from doing things that really matter most or to become discouraged and think their contributions may not matter at all. At a time when the Prophet Moroni was feeling hopeless in trying to oppose the swelling tide of evil among the Nephites, his father, Mormon, wrote him these inspiring words: “And now, my beloved son, notwithstanding their hardness, let us labor diligently; for if we should cease to labor, we should be brought under condemnation; for we have a labor to perform whilst in this tabernacle of clay, that we may conquer the enemy of all righteousness, and rest our souls in the kingdom of God” (Moroni 9:6).
Our students, too, have an important role to play in these latter days. As Dr. Hugh Nibley once observed:

On the last night of a play the whole cast and stage crew stay in the theater until the small or not-so-small hours of the morning striking the old set. If there is to be a new opening soon, as the economy of the theater requires, it is important that the new set should be in place and ready for the opening night; all the while the old set was finishing its usefulness and then being taken down, the new set was rising in splendor to be ready for the drama that would immediately follow. So it is with this world. It is not our business to tear down the old set—the agencies that do that are already hard at work and very efficient—the set is coming down all around us with spectacular effect. Our business is to see to it that the new set is well on the way for what is to come—and that means a different kind of [culture], beyond the scope of the tragedy that is now playing its closing night. We are preparing for the establishment of Zion.

Students need to be reassured that they were foreknown and forecalled to help build up Zion in these latter days in anticipation of the Savior’s return when He will become the great power here on this earth. When the “curtain of heaven [is] unfolded” and the Author of the play comes on stage (see D&C 88:95), Zion has to be ready to make its global debut. Our students are part of the great vanguard company that has been sent to prepare the way.

4. Teach students to understand they are children of the covenant.

Father Abraham was promised that through his descendants, all the families of the earth would one day be blessed (3 Nephi 20:25). Nephi foresaw that the Abrahamic covenant would be fulfilled in the latter days (1 Nephi 15:18). “The . . . promise that Abraham’s posterity would bless the earth, has found fulfillment in many, many ways. . . . Through the centuries, Abraham’s descendants have made major contributions to world civilization through their advances and discoveries in government, philosophy, science, commerce, arts and letters and many other areas of our life.” As children of the covenant, our students will increasingly be involved in blessing the families of the earth through their creative works.

In a mission presidents’ seminar, President Gordon B. Hinckley said, “Our message is so imperative, when you stop to think that the salvation, the eternal salvation of the world, rests upon the shoulders of this church. When all is said and done, if the world is going to be saved, we have to do it. There is no escaping from that. No other
people in the history of the world have received the kind of mandate that we have received. We are responsible for all who have lived on this earth. That involves our family history and temple work. We are responsible for all who now live upon the earth, and that involves missionary work. And we are going to be responsible for all who will yet live upon the earth.”

5. Teach students to find ways to use their talents to bless others.

The talents our students have were not given solely to bless themselves or the Latter-day Saints. Our Heavenly Father has given them these gifts “that all may be profited thereby” (D&C 46:12). God loves all His children, and they need the blessings of the spiritual gifts that our students have been given.

If your students love to create, write, paint, dance, build, and so forth, they need to be encouraged to go out into the world and “do it.” President John Taylor declared: “We must not forget that we owe a duty to the world. The Lord has given to us the light of eternity; and we are commanded not to conceal our light under a bushel. . . . We want men [and women] full of the Holy Ghost and the power of God that they may go forth . . . bearing precious seed and sowing the seeds of eternal life, and then returning with gladness, bringing their sheaves with them.”

President Spencer W. Kimball said, “Let us get our instruments tightly strung and our melodies sweetly sung. Let us not die with our music still in us. Let us rather use this precious mortal probation to move confidently and gloriously upward toward the eternal life which God our Father gives to those who keep His commandments.”

Several times in recent years, the First Presidency has called on Latter-day Saints to become more involved in serving mankind by rendering increased civic service and becoming more involved in good causes. We can encourage our students to step out more into community circles and make positive contributions.

6. Remind students that people are attracted to light and good works.

People naturally resonate with great themes such as passion, drama, prophecy, dynamic tension, redemption, and moving stories that ring true or touch the inner soul. The entire concept of the Restoration is intertwined around all these great themes. When we make bold but gracious moves in our chosen fields with the themes of the Restoration in mind, and do so with the Spirit, people will respond. For example, as many of the published reviews claimed,
a recent popular movie was better than the book. Why? Could it be because one Latter-day Saint artist had the courage to suggest that immorality be written out of the script and his suggestion was taken?

People will choose goodness; they are motivated to do good things when moved by the power of uplifting drama, literature, and artistic works of quality. People want what is beautiful, true, and full of life. People want story-driven drama and human connections—but with higher values than the current fare du jour!

Satan has convinced the world that there is no glamour in goodness. We live in the day Isaiah foresaw, when people would “call evil good, and good evil; . . . put darkness for light, and light for darkness; [and] put bitter for sweet, and sweet for bitter!” (Isaiah 5:20). Babylon is a cultural wilderness, and people are starving for culture and beauty. Latter-day artists who will contribute most will need to commit themselves to seek beauty in all they create. “If there is anything virtuous, lovely, or of good report or praiseworthy, we seek after these things” (thirteenth article of faith). And our students need to be encouraged to create all these things!

As a student at BYU, Elder James E. Talmage once shared an experience that taught him an important lesson about letting the gospel light shine for others to see. He owned a small oil-burning study lamp. Because he depended upon it so much, he took excellent care of it, cleaning and trimming it daily. Elder Talmage related:

One summer evening I sat musing studiously and withal restfully in the open air outside the door of the room in which I lodged and studied. A stranger approached. I noticed that he carried a satchel. He was affable and entertaining. I brought another chair from within, and we chatted together till the twilight had deepened into dusk, the dusk into darkness.

Then he said: “You are a student, and doubtless have much work to do o’nights. What kind of lamp do you use?” And without waiting for a reply he continued: “I have a superior lamp I should like to show you, a lamp designed and constructed according to the latest achievements of applied science, far surpassing anything heretofore produced as a means of artificial lighting.”

I replied with confidence, and I confess not without some exultation: “My friend, I have a lamp, one that has been tested and proved. It has been to me a companion through many a long night. It is an Argand lamp, and one of the best. I have trimmed and cleaned it today; it is ready for the lighting. Step inside; I will...
show you my lamp, then you may tell me whether yours can possibly be better."

We entered my study room, and with a feeling which I assume is akin to that of the athlete about to enter a contest with one whom he regards as a pitifully inferior opponent, I put the match to my well-trimmed Argand.

My visitor was voluble in his praise. It was the best lamp of its kind he said. He averred that he had never seen a lamp in better trim. He turned the wick up and down and pronounced the adjustment perfect. He declared that never before had he realized how satisfactory a student lamp could be.

I liked the man; he seemed to me wise, and he assuredly was ingratiating. . . .

"Now," said he, "with your permission I'll light my lamp." He took from his satchel a lamp then known as the "Rochester." It had a chimney which, compared with mine, was as a factory smoke-stack alongside a house flue. Its hollow wick was wide enough to admit my four fingers. Its light made bright the remotest corner of my room. In its brilliant blaze my own little Argand wick burned a weak, pale yellow. Until that moment of convincing demonstration I had never known the dim obscurity in which I had lived and labored, studied and struggled.

"I'll buy your lamp," said I; "you need neither explain nor argue further." I took my new acquisition to the laboratory that same night, and determined its capacity. It turned at over forty-eight candle power—fully four times the intensity of my student lamp.

Two days after purchasing, I met the lamp-peddler on the street, about noontime. To my inquiry he replied that business was good; the demand for his lamps was greater than the factory supply. "But," said I, "you are not working today?" His rejoinder was a lesson: "Do you think that I would be so foolish as to go around trying to sell lamps in the daytime? Would you have bought one if I had lighted it for you when the sun was shining? I chose the time to show the superiority of my lamp over yours; and you were eager to own the better one I offered, were you not?"

Such is the story. Now consider the application of a part, a very small part, thereof.

"Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father, which is in heaven."

The man who would sell me a lamp did not disparage mine.
He placed his greater light alongside my feeble flame, and I hasted to obtain the better.

The [members] of the Church of Jesus Christ today are sent forth, not to assail or ridicule the beliefs of man, but to set before the world a superior light, by which the smoky dimness of the flickering flames of man-made [works] shall be apparent. The work of the Church is constructive, not destructive.  

7. Teach students that our Heavenly Father and His Beloved Son are, themselves, creative.

Many have noted the declining standards in artistic expression. Movie critic Michael Medved observed, “Everywhere around us, in every realm of artistic endeavor, we see evidence of the rejection of traditional standards of beauty and worth. In the visual arts, in literature, in film, in music of both popular and classical variety, ugliness has been enshrined as a new standard, as we accept the ability to shock as a replacement for the old ability to inspire.”

The Savior could step in and correct everything by Himself, but He chooses instead to help us in another way. “Behold, I am from above,” He declared, “and my power lieth beneath” (D&C 63:59). That is, He exercises His power through us. Elder Russell M. Nelson said, “The Master could overwhelm us with His supernal knowledge, but He does not. He honors our agency. He allows us the joy of discovery.”

God’s creative ability never runs dry. He still has creative energy. He can inspire latter-day artists as well as He did ancient artists. The first verb in the Bible is created. God brought new light into the world, and so can we. “God gave you such extraordinary gifts; how could you possibly expect to have an ordinary life?” (from the movie Little Women, 1994). Artistic and creative works by those who have the companionship of the Holy Spirit can do what God’s creations do—please the eye and gladden the heart (see D&C 59:18).

All through history, God has raised up unique individuals at different times with specific artistic gifts to be a blessing and benefit to all mankind. These gifts came from God and, when perfected by the individual artisans, were called on by the Lord to further His purposes:

And the Lord spake unto Moses, saying,

See, I have called by name Bezaleel the son of Uri, the son of Hur, of the tribe of Judah:
And I have filled him with the spirit of God, in wisdom, and in understanding, and in knowledge, and in all manner of workmanship,

To devise cunning works, to work in gold, and in silver, and in brass,

And in cutting of stones, to set them, and in carving of timber, to work in all manner of workmanship.

And I, behold, I have given with him Aholiab, the son of Ahisamach, of the tribe of Dan: and in the hearts of all that are wise hearted I have put wisdom, that they may make all that I have commanded thee. (Exodus 31:1–6; emphasis added)

The invitation from God to become more creative, as well as an example of how God inspires and nurtures us in our creative abilities, is nowhere better illustrated than in the Book of Mormon. When the brother of Jared was commanded to build eight seaworthy vessels capable of carrying the Jaredites across the world to the promised land, he encountered problems he did not know how to solve—no light, no air, and no way to steer! He approached the Lord in prayer, wondering what to do next. The Lord told him how to modify the barges to get air and said that He personally would steer them with the winds and the waves. But when it came to the light, He asked the brother of Jared, “What will ye that I should do that ye may have light in your vessels? For behold, ye cannot have windows, for they will be dashed in pieces; neither shall ye take fire with you, for ye shall not go by the light of fire. . . . Therefore what will ye that I should prepare for you that ye may have light when ye are swallowed up in the depths of the sea?” (Ether 2:23, 25).

The Lord—whose knowledge is infinite (2 Nephi 9:20), who comprehends all things (D&C 88:41), who sees the end from the beginning and everything in between (Abraham 2:8), whose intellect is keener than all mankind combined (Abraham 3:19)—asked the brother of Jared what he thought should be done. Can you imagine God asking you that question?

God could overwhelm us with His creativity and brilliance; instead, He graciously invites us to participate in the creative process. He not only extends us the invitation but also holds out the expectation that we will be “anxiously engaged in a good cause, and do many things of [our] own free will, and bring to pass much righteousness; for the power is in [us]” (D&C 58:27–28).

Because we are His children, God has endowed us with a portion of His creative ability. He invites us to become “even as [He
That refers to the way as well as to the end result. He encourages us to “Do as I have done” (John 13:15) and “Come, follow me” (Luke 18:22). “Therefore,” the Savior said, “hold up your light that it may shine unto the world. Behold I am the light which ye shall hold up—that which ye have seen me do” (3 Nephi 18:24; emphasis added). He has reassured us that, with faith in Him, we can make great contributions: “Verily, verily, I say unto you, He that believeth on me, the works that I do shall he do also; and greater works than these shall he do” (John 14:12). President Boyd K. Packer made the following request of Latter-day Saint artists: “Artists, don’t let your work become corrupted. Create beauty, follow the example of Jesus Christ. He was the ultimate creator.”

The brother of Jared exercised his agency, which resulted in his people being saved from a corrupt culture and being guided to a promised land with greater light than they could have had on their own: “And thus the Lord caused stones to shine in darkness, to give light unto men, women, and children, that they might not cross the great waters in darkness” (Ether 6:3). He has never left us without light!

8. Teach students to allow the Lord to enliven their creative gifts.

The Lord, who is the same yesterday and forever, can do the same for us, just as He did for the brother of Jared. Mankind is crossing the great deep in darkness, but the Lord is willing, even anxious, to cause our creative gifts to shine in darkness and to give light to every man, woman, and child. Help students understand that they can take their gifts and talents to the Lord and let Him touch them. He can take the works of our hands and enhance them so they will shine and “give light” to others. He can cause anything He touches to live, give light and life, and become a blessing! (see Ezekiel 47:9). And isn’t that, ultimately, what Latter-day Saint artists want to have happen with their creative works? Latter-day Saint artisans who desire their works to shine like a light must allow the “Light and Life of the World” to touch them.

Nephi had a similar experience. He learned that the works of our hands, touched by the Spirit of God, far exceed anything we can achieve on our own:

And it came to pass that they did worship the Lord, and did go forth with me; and we did work timbers [creative works] of curious workmanship. And the Lord did show me from time to time after what manner I should work the timbers [creative works] of
the ship [my profession].

Now I, Nephi, did not work the timbers [creative works] after the manner which was learned by men, neither did I build the ship [my profession] after the manner of men; but I did build it [my profession] after the manner which the Lord had shown unto me; wherefore, it was not after the manner of men.

And I, Nephi, did go into the mount oft, and I did pray oft unto the Lord; wherefore the Lord showed unto me great things.

And it came to pass that after I had finished the ship [profession], according to the word of the Lord, my brethren beheld that it was good, and that the workmanship thereof was exceedingly fine. (1 Nephi 18:1–4)

The word substitutions help us see how we can approach God and receive His help in our professional pursuits, whether they be building ships, writing plays, sculpting, composing, performing, painting, speaking, and so forth.

9. Teach students that perspiration precedes inspiration.

The brother of Jared had to ponder deeply what to do. Similarly, today’s creative geniuses have to think deeply to discover inspired ideas. The Prophet Joseph Smith said that “the things of God are of deep import; and time, and experience, and careful and ponderous and solemn thoughts can only find them out. . . . How much more dignified and noble are the thoughts of God, than the vain imaginations of the human heart!”18

Great ideas sometimes come as sudden strokes of genius. But most often, those sudden flashes of inspiration are preceded by a lot of focused thought. God has promised He will inspire us with thoughts that occupy our minds and feelings that press themselves the strongest in our hearts (see D&C 8:2–3). This is the spirit of revelation. This is how revelations are received.

“Meditation,” President David O. McKay said, “is the language of the soul . . . consisting in deep, continued reflection. . . . Meditation is one of the most secret, most sacred doors through which we pass into the presence of the Lord.”19

William W. Phelps, a gifted poet and one of the most versatile hymn writers of this dispensation,20 learned firsthand the rewards of pondering spiritual things. While in Kirtland, Ohio, Phelps was living in the Prophet Joseph Smith’s home. It was at this time that Joseph asked Brother Phelps to assist in preparing an appropriate and reverent sacrament service for the soon-to-be-completed
temple. Joseph observed to his friend that the setting for a sacrament service “called for a religious beauty.” Brother Phelps spent a lot of time walking alone and pondering the observance of the Lord’s Supper in this first temple of the Church. After deep meditation, Brother Phelps penned the sacred lines to “O God, the Eternal Father.” He continued to write with inspiration. Three of his hymns were sung at the dedicatory services for the Kirtland Temple, and one of them—“The Spirit of God”—has been sung at the dedication of every temple since. Today, fifteen of Brother Phelps’s hymns are in our present hymnal, several of which are Latter-day Saint favorites.

The brother of Jared also had to work hard. It was no easy task to “molten out of a rock sixteen small stones . . . [that] were white and clear, even as transparent as glass” (Ether 3:1). Concerning the work involved in the creative process, President Boyd K. Packer noted, “LDS artists must earn inspiration, just as other artists have. . . . It doesn’t come just because artists are members of the LDS church, they still must work for it.”

10. Teach students to turn to the scriptures for inspiration.

The brother of Jared turned to the scriptures for inspiration. Where would he have gotten the idea to prepare molten stones out of the mountain and ask God to touch them so they might give off light? We are never told precisely how the idea came to him, but it is interesting that the scriptures describe a similar episode when a man was commanded to build an ark to save his family. Noah was told to build an ark with a lower, second, and third story. How would the lower two stories get light? The Lord answered Noah and told him, “A window shalt thou make to the ark” (Genesis 6:16). The footnote in the Latter-day Saint edition of the Bible for the word window in this verse indicates that it is translated from the Hebrew word tsohar (meaning “shiner,” “illuminator,” “bright as noonday light”) and that some rabbis believed it was a precious stone that shone in the ark (see Genesis 6:16, footnote a). Could it be that the Lord did not answer the brother of Jared’s question about how to provide light in his barges because He had already revealed the answer to that question to Noah and that the answer could be found in the scriptures?

Regarding the importance of scripture study, Elder McConkie testified: “I think that people who study the scriptures get a dimension to their life that nobody else gets and that can’t be gained in
any way except by studying the scriptures. There’s an increase in faith and a desire to do what’s right and a feeling of inspiration and understanding that comes to people who study the gospel—meaning particularly the Standard Works—and who ponder the principles, that can’t come in any other way.”

Students need to know they can turn to the scriptures to find answers to life’s challenges and problems. Pondering the word of the Lord has been a source of inspiration to many. From Handel’s Messiah to Michelangelo’s Moses, the scriptures have inspired some of the world’s most magnificent works of art.

11. Teach students to be worthy to receive inspiration.

The brother of Jared’s personal righteousness was so great that he literally drew the Lord through the veil. He “could not be kept from beholding within the veil. . . . He could not be kept from within the veil” (Ether 3:19–20). The Lord said to him, “Because of thy faith thou hast seen . . . and never has man come before me with such exceeding faith as thou hast” (Ether 3:9). And when he wrote the things he saw, they were filled with power, as Moroni noted in a prayer to God: “Behold, thou hast not made us mighty in writing like unto the brother of Jared, for thou madest him that the things which he wrote were mighty even as thou art, unto the overpowering of man to read them” (Ether 12:24).

Elder M. Russell Ballard wisely counseled, “If we are going to fill the world with goodness and truth, then we must be worthy to receive inspiration so we can bless the lives of our Heavenly Father’s children.”

Students need to be taught that they can pray for this kind of inspiration and help. The words that appear most often throughout the brother of Jared’s story are “cried unto the Lord,” “called upon the name of the Lord,” and so forth (see Ether 2–3). Prayer plays a critical role in receiving divine help with creative works. Expressing appreciation in prayer, giving frank recognition of God’s hand in our gifts, and voicing gratitude for His help bring tremendous blessings: “Let him that is ignorant learn wisdom by humbling himself and calling upon the Lord his God, that his eyes may be opened that he may see, and his ears opened that he may hear; for my Spirit is sent forth into the world to enlighten the humble and contrite” (D&C 136: 32–33).

Moses observed, “It was given unto as many as called upon God to write by the spirit of inspiration” (Moses 6:5). Elder Orson F.
Whitney learned this valuable lesson about the immediacy of prayer while serving as editor of the Millennial Star in Liverpool, England:

I found myself in an overworked, run-down condition, manifesting a decided lack of physical and mental vigor. . . . One morning I was endeavoring to write the usual editorial, but could make no headway, and wore out the whole day in a vain attempt to produce something worth reading. At last I threw down my pen and burst into tears of vexation.

Just then the Good Spirit whispered: “Why don’t you pray? . . .

I was praying five times a day—secret prayers, morning, noon and night; and vocal prayers, with the rest of the household, at breakfast and dinner time. “I do pray—why can’t I get some help?” I asked, almost petulantly, for I was heartsick and half-discouraged.

“Pray now,” said the Spirit, “and ask for what you want.”

I saw the point. It was a special not a general prayer that was needed. I knelt and sobbed out a few simple words. I did not pray for the return of the Ten Tribes nor for the building of the New Jerusalem. I asked the Lord in the name of Jesus Christ to help me write. . . . I then arose, seated myself, and began to write. . . . All I needed came as fast as I could set it down—every thought, every word in place. In a short time the article was completed to my entire satisfaction.26

12. Teach students that their works can rise above the mediocre.

The brother of Jared took his creation to the Lord and asked Him to touch it. Numerous other artists have done the same. Elder Ballard said:

God’s purpose for the artist is to inspire, to give us visions of ourselves that we might not otherwise see, to make us better than we would have been. The world is better for the arts and righteous artists in it. . . .

With so many choices for viewers and listeners, the artistic works of the Latter-day Saint not only need to be uplifting, they must be excellent, to set them apart from the worldly and the mediocre. People deserve alternatives of quality, the kind that Latter-day Saints are capable of providing through the influence of the Holy Spirit.

We call upon all members, those in the arts and those seeking to appreciate the message of good art, to expand their vision of what can be done.27
In 1977, President Kimball looked through a window into the future and invited us to gaze at the possibilities of creating uplifting and excellent works that are set apart from the mediocre and the worldly:

In our world, there have risen brilliant stars in drama, music, literature, sculpture, painting, science, and all the graces. For long years I have had a vision of members of the Church greatly increasing their already strong positions of excellence till the eyes of all the world will be upon us. . . .

We are proud of the artistic heritage that the Church has brought to us from its earliest beginnings, but the full story of Mormonism has never yet been written nor painted nor sculpted nor spoken. It remains for inspired hearts and talented fingers yet to reveal themselves. They must be faithful, inspired, active Church members to give life and feeling and true perspective to a subject so worthy. Such masterpieces should run for months in every movie center, cover every part of the globe in the tongues of the people, written by great artists, purified by the best critics.

Our writers, our motion picture specialists, with the inspiration of heaven, should tomorrow be able to produce a masterpiece which would live forever. Our own talent, obsessed with dynamism from a CAUSE, could put into such a story life and heartbeats and emotions and love and pathos, drama, suffering, fear, courage; and they could put into it the great leader, the mighty modern Moses who led a people farther than from Egypt to Jericho, who knew miracles as great as the stream from the rock at Horeb, manna in the desert, giant grapes, rain when needed, battles won against great odds.

Conclusion

Many Latter-day Saints have used their gifts and talents to make creative contributions in the world. But this is our day in the history of the kingdom of God on the earth. Now it is our turn to go forward with faith and build up an artistic culture worthy of the title of “Zion.” This can be done only with heaven’s help and only if we are willing to take our gifts to the Lord and let His Spirit touch them, “that they may shine forth in [the] darkness” (Ether 3:4).

The Prophet Joseph Smith prayed at the dedication of the Kirtland Temple that one day a Zion environment would be created in which the Savior would be pleased to dwell. He also prayed that the Saints would ready themselves, and the world around them, for that day: “Remember all thy church, O Lord, with all their families, and all their immediate connections, . . . that the kingdom, which thou hast set up
without hands, may become a great mountain and fill the whole earth; that thy church may come forth out of the wilderness of darkness, and shine forth fair as the moon, clear as the sun, and terrible as an army with banners; and be adorned as a bride for that day when thou shalt unveil the heavens, . . . that thy glory may fill the earth” (D&C 109: 72–74).

As members of the Church, we declare, “We believe . . . that Zion . . . will be built” (tenth article of faith; emphasis added). May we, as teachers, be inspired to know what to say and how to say it so that our students will be filled with the desire to create and compose those things that will take us all to a higher level.

Notes

Church Educational System teachers should heed this wise counsel: “Your essential and all but sole duty, is to teach the gospel of Jesus Christ.”
The Focus of Teaching: Principles and Doctrines

Robb Jones

Teachers of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints naturally seek assistance in knowing not only what to teach but also how to teach it. Answers to those issues are especially relevant to teachers in the Church Educational System (CES).¹

Stay on Safe Ground

When teachers teach in any capacity in the Church, particularly in CES, they have a responsibility to avoid teaching false doctrines, the philosophies of the world, and personal opinions. In 1938, President J. Reuben Clark Jr., speaking for the First Presidency, gave this charge to teachers: “You are not . . . to intrude into your work your own peculiar philosophy, no matter what its source or how pleasing or rational it seems to you. . . . You are not . . . 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.”²

This counsel has not changed over the years. More recently, President Harold B. Lee stated, “You’re to teach the old doctrines, not so plainly that they can just understand, but you must teach the doctrines of the Church so plainly that no one can misunderstand.”³

How can teachers be sure they are teaching correct principles and doctrines? President Clark answered this question when he
stated: “Your essential and all but sole duty, is to teach the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ. . . . 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.” Elder M. Russell Ballard counseled teachers that they “can stay on safe ground when they use the standard works, the approved manuals, and the writings of the General Authorities.”

Use the Scriptures as the Source

More recently, in the objectives of religious education in CES, teachers are told that the “source” for teaching students the gospel of Jesus Christ is “found in the standard works and the words of the prophets.” To complement the teaching of the scriptures, teachers are told to use as their “resource” the approved CES materials. These materials include the teacher resource manual, the student study guide, and the institute student manual.

Extensive effort has gone into preparing these resources. They have been approved and correlated by CES. They will be a great benefit for both lesson preparation and lesson presentation and should be used by all CES teachers. However, teachers should be
careful that the “resource” materials do not become the “source” of their teaching. Some teachers skim through the scriptures once and then spend most of their time studying the resource materials. This procedure will short-circuit the process of becoming confident and excited about the scriptures.

On page 19 of the Teaching the Gospel handbook, teachers are reminded of the power that comes from the word of God. “The prophet Alma said that the word has a more powerful effect upon the mind ‘than the sword, or anything else’ (Alma 31:5). The word of God ‘healeth the wounded soul’ (Jacob 2:8) and ‘will tell you all things what ye should do’ (2 Nephi 32:3). The scriptures can give the youth the power to resist the ‘fiery darts of the adversary’ (1 Nephi 15:24) and help them become ‘thoroughly furnished unto all good works’ (2 Timothy 3:17).”

Focus on Principles and Doctrines

The scriptures and the words of the prophets should be the source for teaching in the Church Educational System. But what should be the focus? “The Church has always taught the importance of education and learning in many fields, but in the Church the primary concern is to teach the saving principles of the gospel.”8 Speaking of principles, President Marion G. Romney stated that “scriptures have been written to preserve principles for our benefit.”9 Elder Bruce R. McConkie said: “Our divine commission is to teach the principles of the gospel as they are found in the standard works. . . . Our commission—and there is none greater—deals with the doctrines of the gospel.”10 In a recent CES conference, Elder Henry B. Eyring exhorted teachers that “it would be better if you simply taught with unshakable faith the simple doctrine taught so well in the Book of Mormon.”11 The scriptures and words of the prophets make it clear that the primary focus when teachers teach the scriptures should be the principles and doctrines of the gospel.

View Principles and Doctrines as Truths

Principles and doctrines are statements of truth. Some principles and doctrines suggest something teachers can do. Elder Richard G. Scott said that “principles are concentrated truth packaged for application.”12 President Boyd K. Packer stated that a “principle is an enduring truth, a law, a rule you can adopt to guide you in making decisions.”13 Notice how the following statements suggest an
application or guide teachers in making a decision:

Follow the prophet.
Keep the commandments.
Pay your tithing.
Stand in holy places.

Principles and doctrines may have a greater influence on students if stated with a promise or consequence. For example, teachers might say:

If we follow the prophet, we will have peace of mind.
If we pay our tithing, the Lord will open the windows of heaven.

Other principles and doctrines declare the truth about the plan of salvation:
The Father has a body of flesh and bones.
All men and women will die; all men and women will be resurrected.
The Atonement is infinite and eternal.

Identify Stated and Implied Principles and Doctrines

Some principles and doctrines are easy to identify because the scripture writer points them out with phrases such as “thus we see,” “thus,” “therefore,” “for whosoever,” and “behold”:

And thus we see that by small means the Lord can bring about great things (1 Nephi 16:29).
For whosoever will save his life shall lose it (Matthew 16:25).
Behold, he who has repented of his sins, the same is forgiven (D&C 58:42).

Other principles and doctrines are not stated in the verses but are implied from the content. They lie hidden within the events of the scriptures. They need to be mined like diamonds. The following principles could be inferred from the story of King David and Bathsheba in 2 Samuel 11:1–4:

If we are in the wrong place, we may get in trouble.
If we see something inappropriate, we should turn away.

Use Principles and Doctrines to Bridge the Gap

The scriptures reveal a religious past that is full of customs, traditions, literary expressions, and symbols that may seem unusual and different to the reader in the present. This difference can create a gap that makes it difficult for the modern reader to relate to events
in the scriptures. Principles and doctrines can play an important role in bridging the gap between what happened many years ago and what is happening today.

For example, suppose a teacher is teaching Acts 12. In this chapter, Peter is falsely accused and put in prison. The Saints pray for his release. The Lord sends an angel and miraculously releases Peter. After his release, missionary work and the growth of the Church continue.

Students usually have a difficult time relating this story to their lives. Most students have never been falsely accused, put in prison, and then released by an angel. Elder Scott suggests that we pull principles out of the details of the scriptures. He said: “As you seek spiritual knowledge, search for principles. Carefully separate them from the detail used to explain them.”

For example, teachers could help students separate the following principles and doctrines from the details in Acts 12:

- The combined prayers of many righteous Saints can bring about a miracle.
- Although we may go through trials and difficulties, nobody can stop God’s work.
- Today’s students can relate to these principles and doctrines because they have experienced them in their lives or because they know of other Latter-day Saints who have experienced them. The power of principles and doctrines is that they can be related to a wide variety of circumstances in a wide variety of times. Although students may have difficulties relating the events in the scriptures to their lives, they can relate principles and doctrines derived from those events. Elder Scott stated, “Help your students find the diamonds of truth that sometimes must be carefully mined from the pages of scriptures.”

Understand the Power of Principles and Doctrines
Principles and doctrines can have a powerful effect on teachers’ lives and on the lives of students. President Packer said that principles help make decisions, and Elder Scott noted that principles help us make decisions during difficult times: “A true principle makes decisions clear even under the most confusing and compelling circumstances.”

Another benefit of teaching principles and doctrines is that they can lead students to obey God. President Packer refers to the effect doctrines can have in helping students be obedient. He said that true doctrines, when understood, change attitudes and behavior. “The study of the doctrines of the gospel will improve behavior quicker than a study of behavior will improve behavior. . . . That is why we stress so forcefully the study of the doctrines of the gospel.”

Principles and doctrines of the gospel can help students make correct decisions and obey God. Teachers should not only look for principles and doctrines in their scripture study and lesson preparation but also make principles and doctrines the focus of their teaching. “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).

Notes

1. This article is the first in a series of eight that give counsel to all teachers of the restored gospel, but especially to CES teachers, about what to teach and how to teach it.


7. Ibid., 21.

8. Ibid., 2.


The book of Moses is an extract from Joseph Smith’s New Translation of the Bible. It was revealed to the Prophet in 1830 and in early 1831, not long after the organization of the Church. This article is a brief introduction to the origin of the book of Moses and the Bible translation from which it derives.¹

Beginning in June 1830, Joseph Smith began a careful reading of the Bible to revise and make corrections in accordance with the inspiration he would receive. The result was the revelation of many important truths and the restoration of many of the “precious things” that Nephi had foretold would be taken from the Bible (see 1 Nephi 13:23–29). In a process that took about three years, the Prophet made changes, additions, and corrections as were given him by divine inspiration while he filled his calling to provide a more correct translation for the Church.² Collectively, these are called the “Joseph Smith Translation” (JST) or, as Joseph Smith referred to it, the “New Translation.”³ The title Inspired Version refers to the edited, printed edition, published in Independence, Missouri, by the Community of Christ (formerly the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints). The book of Moses in the Pearl of Great Price is the very beginning of the New Translation, corresponding to Genesis 1:1–6:13 in the Bible.

The Translation

The first revelation of the JST was what we now have as Moses
1. It is the preface to the book of Genesis. It begins the earliest manuscript of the New Translation, designated Old Testament Manuscript 1 (OT1).\(^4\) Serving as scribes for what is now in the book of Moses were

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Scribe</th>
<th>Book</th>
<th>Date</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Oliver Cowdery</td>
<td>Moses 1:1–5:43</td>
<td>Beginning June 1830</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>John Whitmer</td>
<td>Moses 5:43–6:18</td>
<td>21 October, 30 November 1830</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emma Smith</td>
<td>Moses 6:19–52</td>
<td>1 December 1830</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>John Whitmer</td>
<td>Moses 6:52–7:1</td>
<td>December 1830</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sidney Rigdon</td>
<td>Moses 7:2–8:30</td>
<td>December 1830, February 1831</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Dictating the text of the New Translation to these scribes, the Prophet progressed to Genesis 24:41, when he set aside Genesis to begin translating the New Testament as he was instructed by the Lord on 7 March 1831 (see D&C 45:60–62). He and his scribes worked on the New Testament until it was finished in July 1832, when they returned to work on the Old Testament.\(^5\)

A second Old Testament manuscript, designated Old Testament Manuscript 2 (OT2), started as a copy of the first manuscript (OT1). John Whitmer had made the copy in March 1831 when Joseph Smith and Sidney Rigdon began working on the New Testament. After OT2 was started, it became the manuscript of the continuing translation through the rest of the Old Testament. The earlier manuscript (OT1) remained essentially unused, as a backup copy. The translation of the Old Testament began anew in July 1832 and continued for about a year. At the end of the Old Testament manuscript, after the book of Malachi, the following words are written in large letters: “Finished on the 2d day of July 1833” (OT2, p. 119). That same day the Prophet wrote to Church members in Missouri and told them, “We this day finished the translating of the Scriptures for which we returned gratitude to our heavenly father.”\(^6\)

During the course of the Prophet’s work with the Bible, changes were made in about thirteen hundred Old Testament verses and in about twenty-one hundred verses in the New Testament.\(^7\) Most of the changes are rewordings of the existing King James Version. But other changes involve the addition of new material—in some cases substantial amounts. Presumably, every book in the Bible was examined, but no changes were made in thirteen of them (Esther, Ecclesiastes, Song of Solomon, Lamentations, Obadiah,
Moses 1:1—19, on Old Testament Manuscript 1, page 1, "A Revelation given to Joseph the Revelator." This is the beginning of Joseph Smith’s New Translation of the Bible. Dated June 1830, in Oliver Cowdery’s handwriting.

Courtesy Community of Christ Archives, Independence, Missouri.
Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Malachi, 2 John, and 3 John). The books with no corrections are identified on the manuscripts with brief notations like “Micah—Correct” (OT2, p. 118). Ecclesiastes is the only book not mentioned at all. Regarding another book, the manuscript notes, “The Songs of Solomon are not Inspired writings” (OT2, p. 97).

Most passages in the New Translation were revealed in clarity the first time and show little need for later refining. But some passages show that the Prophet struggled with the wording until he was satisfied it was acceptable to the Lord. His careful effort was in harmony with the instruction he had received previously that we should “study it out in [our] mind” as we listen to the Spirit and apply our best efforts, after which a confirmation will come if it is correct (see D&C 9:7–9).

On many of the manuscript pages, there are revisions that were made sometime after the original dictation. These are of two types: (1) Some are simply mechanical, such as the insertion of punctuation, verse numbering, or changes to upper or lowercase. It is likely that these revisions were made as the manuscript was being prepared for publication. (2) In many other cases, words were added to the text or existing wording was revised. Some of these changes simply correct errors in the original recording, such as when the Prophet’s eyes skipped words while he was dictating or when his scribe recorded words incorrectly. But some insertions revise the writing or add words or phrases to produce new meanings not recorded in the original dictation. Many important revisions were made to the book of Moses material in this process. We do not know when the Prophet made these later changes. It is believed by some that he worked on the translation periodically through the rest of his life. But the evidence suggests that most or all of Joseph Smith’s final revisions were in place by the summer of 1833 or not long thereafter.

Was the translation finished? Despite the common view to the contrary, the translation was generally finished. The Bible, even in its purest and fullest form, never contained the complete records of those who are mentioned in it. The book of Genesis, for example, was a revelation to Moses that provided mere summaries of important lives and events. Certainly there are other truths that could have been revealed in the New Translation and other additions that could have been inserted to make it more complete. But from July 1833 on, Joseph Smith seems to have considered it finished. He no lon-
ger spoke of translating the Bible but of printing it, which he wanted and intended to accomplish as soon as possible. He sought to find the means to publish it as a book, and he and other Church leaders repeatedly encouraged the Saints to donate money to make the publication possible. But because of a lack of funds and the Saints’ other priorities, it was never printed in his lifetime. Excerpts were published in the Church’s newspapers and elsewhere, so some sections of it were available for early Church members. Still, when Joseph Smith was martyred in 1844, he had not seen the realization of his desire to have the entire New Translation appear in print.

In the decades after the Prophet’s death, Latter-day Saints in Utah lacked access to the manuscripts of the New Translation and had only limited knowledge about how it was produced. None of the participants in the translation process were with the Church when the Saints moved west in 1846. This, and related circumstances, resulted in many misconceptions about it that eventually made their way into our culture. Among those misconceptions are the beliefs that the Prophet did not finish the translation and that it was not intended to be published in his lifetime. Careful research by BYU professor Robert J. Matthews shows that these ideas are refuted in Joseph Smith’s own words. But was the New Translation ready to go to press the day Joseph Smith died? Matthews has pointed out, “The basic conclusion seems to be that the work of translation was acceptable as far as the Lord required it of the Prophet at that time, but the manuscript was not fully prepared for the press.”

Much work still needed to be done to refine the verse divisions and to provide consistent spelling and punctuation. And some of the individual changes had resulted in uneven wording that had not yet been smoothed out. In short, while the inspired work of translating had been completed by Joseph Smith, the text was still in need of a good editing when he died.

Types of Changes

Joseph Smith had the authority to make changes in the Bible as God directed. In one revelation, he is called “a seer, a revelator, a translator” (D&C 107:92), and in several other Doctrine and Covenants passages, his work with the translation is endorsed by the Lord (D&C 35:20; 43:12–13; 73:3–4; 90:13; 93:53; 94:10). The Prophet called his Bible revision a “translation,” though it did not involve creating a new rendering from Hebrew or Greek manuscripts. So far as the translation of the Bible is concerned, he never
claimed to have consulted any text other than his English Bible, but he “translated” it in the sense of conveying it in a new form.

It appears that several different kinds of changes were involved in the process, but it is difficult to know with certainty the nature or origin of any particular change. I propose the following categories of revisions:

1. Restoration of original text. Because Nephi tells us that “many plain and precious things” would be “taken away” from the Bible (1 Nephi 13:28), we can be certain that the JST includes the restoration of content that was once in original manuscripts. To Moses, the Lord foretold the removal of material from his record and its restoration in the latter days: “Thou shalt write the things which I shall speak. And in a day when the children of men shall esteem my words as naught and take many of them from the book which thou shalt write, behold, I will raise up another like unto thee; and they shall be had again among the children of men—among as many as shall believe” (Moses 1:40–41). Joseph Smith was the man like Moses whom the Lord raised up to restore lost material from the writings of Moses, as well as lost material from the words of other Bible writers. But Joseph Smith did not restore the very words of lost texts because they were in Hebrew or Greek (or other ancient languages) and because the New Translation was to be in English. Thus, his translation, in the English idiom of his own day, would restore the meaning and the message of original passages but not necessarily the words and the literary trappings that accompanied them when they were first put to writing. This is why the work can be called a “translation.” Parts of the book of Moses—including Moses’ vision in chapter 1 and Enoch’s visions in chapters 6 and 7—have no counterparts in the Bible. It is likely that these passages are restoration of material that was once in ancient manuscripts.

2. Restoration of what was once said or done but was never in the Bible. Joseph Smith stated, “From what we can draw from the scriptures relative to the teachings of heaven we are induced to think, that much instruction has been given to man since the beginning which we have not.” Perhaps the JST includes teachings or events in the ministries of prophets, apostles, or Jesus Himself that were never recorded anciently. The JST may include material of which the biblical writers were unaware, which they chose not to include, or which they neglected to include (cf. 3 Nephi 23:6–13).

3. Editing to make the Bible more understandable for modern readers. Many of the individual JST changes fall into this category.
There are numerous instances in which the Prophet rearranged word order to make a text read more easily or modernized its language. Examples of modernization of language include the many changes from wot to know, from an to a before words that begin with h, from saith to said, from that and which to who, and from ye and thee to you. In many instances, Joseph Smith added short expansions to make the text less ambiguous. For example, there are several places where the word he is replaced by a personal name, thus making the meaning more clear, as in Genesis 14:20 (KJV “And he gave” = JST “And Abram gave”), and in Genesis 18:32 (KJV “And he said. . . . And he said” = JST “And Abraham said. . . . And the Lord said.”

4. Editing to bring biblical wording into harmony with truth found in other revelations or elsewhere in the Bible. Joseph Smith said, “[There are] many things in the Bible which do not, as they now stand, accord with the revelation of the Holy Ghost to me.” Where there were inaccuracies in the Bible, regardless of their source, it was well within the scope of the Prophet’s calling to change what needed to be changed. Where modern revelation had given a clearer view of a doctrine preserved less adequately in the Bible, it was appropriate for Joseph Smith to add a correction—whether or not that correction reflects what was on the ancient original manuscripts. The Prophet also had authority to make changes when a passage was inconsistent with information elsewhere in the Bible itself. Perhaps the following example will illustrate this kind of correction: The Gospel of John records the statement, “No man hath seen God at any time” (John 1:18), which contradicts the experience of Joseph Smith (JS—H 1:17–20) as well as several examples in the Bible itself of prophets seeing God (e.g., Exodus 24:9–11; 33:11; Numbers 12:6–8; Isaiah 6:1; Amos 9:1). The JST change at John 1:18 clarifies the text and makes it consistent with what we know from other revealed sources.

Later History

When Joseph Smith died, the manuscripts of the New Translation were not in the possession of the Church but of his family, who remained in Illinois when the leaders of the Church and the majority of the Saints moved to the West. In 1867, the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints published the New Translation under the title, The Holy Scriptures, Translated and Corrected by the Spirit of Revelation, By Joseph Smith, Jr., the Seer. The name
Inspired Version, by which it is commonly known, was added in an edition of 1936, but it is not inappropriate to refer to it by that name since its first publication in 1867. At the time of Joseph Smith’s death, the punctuation and verse numbering on the manuscripts were still in need of refinement. The punctuation and versification of the printed Inspired Version were supplied by the RLDS publication committee in 1866–67.

In 1851, Elder Franklin D. Richards of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles was serving as president of the British mission in Liverpool. Sensing a need to make available for the British Saints some of Joseph Smith’s revelations that had been published already in America, he compiled a mission pamphlet entitled The Pearl of Great Price.19 His intent was that his “little collection of precious truths” would “increase [the Saints’] ability to maintain and to defend the holy faith.”20 In it he included, among other important texts, excerpts from the Prophet’s New Translation of the Bible that had been published already in Church periodicals and elsewhere: the first five and a half chapters of Genesis and Matthew 24. Elder Richards did not have access to the original manuscripts of the JST, and the RLDS Inspired Version had not yet been published. For the Genesis chapters, he took the text primarily from excerpts that had been published in Church newspapers in the 1830s and 1840s. But those excerpts had come from OT1 and did not include Joseph Smith’s final revisions that were recorded on OT2. The Genesis material was in two sections: “Extracts from the Prophecy of Enoch . . .” (Moses 6: 43–7:69) and “The Words of God, which He Spake unto Moses . . .” (Moses 1:1–5:16, 19–40; 8:13–30).

Over the course of time, the Pearl of Great Price became a popular item of literature among members of the Church. Since the majority of the British Saints eventually immigrated to America, so also did the popularity of the Pearl of Great Price. In the 1870s, the decision was made to prepare it for Churchwide distribution at Church headquarters in Salt Lake City. Elder Orson Pratt of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles was assigned to prepare the edition, which was published in 1878. Knowing that Joseph Smith had made later corrections to the New Translation, Elder Pratt drew the Genesis chapters not from the original Liverpool Pearl of Great Price but from the printed RLDS Inspired Version, which he copied exactly for the book of Moses. Again, the material was in two sections, this time called “Visions of Moses” (Moses 1) and “Writings of Moses” (Moses 2–8).
Unfortunately, the Genesis text in the 1867 Inspired Version was not always consistent with Joseph Smith’s intentions. The RLDS publication committee apparently did not understand the relationship between OT1 and OT2 and excluded a significant number of the Prophet’s corrections from the Inspired Version. As a result, our book of Moses today still lacks important corrections that were made by Joseph Smith.21

In the October 1880 general conference, the new Pearl of Great Price was presented to the assembled membership for a sustaining vote and was canonized as scripture and accepted as binding on the Church. Since then, the Pearl of Great Price has been one of the standard works, and the few chapters of the Joseph Smith Translation in it (the book of Moses and Joseph Smith—Matthew) have been recognized not only as divine revelation—which they always were—but also as integral parts of our scripture and doctrine.

Later editions of the Pearl of Great Price made slight changes to the Genesis material. The 1902 edition was the first to use the name “The Book of Moses,” and it was the first to add chapters, verses, and cross-reference footnotes. Some small revisions were made in the text. The 1921 edition was the first to be printed in double-column pages. The current name, “Selections from the Book of Moses,” was added in the edition of 1981. This name acknowledges that the Pearl of Great Price contains only part of Moses’ record.

Because the Saints in Utah knew little about the Joseph Smith Translation and did not have access to its original documents, it was not widely used within the Church, except for the excerpts that are part of the Pearl of Great Price. During the 1960s and 1970s, Professor Robert Matthews conducted exhaustive research on the manuscripts.22 His study confirmed the general integrity of the printed Inspired Version and taught us many things about the New Translation and how it was produced.23 In the process, Professor Matthews brought the JST to the attention of members of the Church.24

In 1979, when the Church published a Latter-day Saint edition of the Bible in the English language, it included generous amounts of material from the New Translation in footnotes and in an appendix. In subsequent years, JST excerpts were included in the “Guide to the Scriptures,” a combination concordance–Bible dictionary published with the LDS scriptures in languages other than English. A significant aspect of these publications is the fact that they have
made the JST accessible to an extent that it never had been before. Now General Authorities, curriculum writers, scholars, and students can draw freely from it in their research and writing, bringing the JST to its rightful place alongside the other great revelations of the Prophet Joseph Smith. Latter-day Saints know that Joseph Smith was appointed by God to provide a corrected translation of the Bible (see D&C 76:15). God endorsed it in strong language: “And the scriptures shall be given, even as they are in mine own bosom, to the salvation of mine own elect” (D&C 35:20). The New Translation is, as Elder Dallin H. Oaks of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles observed, “a member of the royal family of scripture” that “should be noticed and honored on any occasion when it is present.”

Notes


4. All of the JST manuscripts are located in the archives of the Community of Christ in Independence, Missouri. Note that in Matthews, “A Plainer Translation,” and in many other publications, an old archival numbering system is used for the manuscripts, resulting from an early misunderstanding of the order in which the manuscripts were written. OT1 was previously designated OT2, and OT2 was previously designated OT3. Matthews was the first to question the accuracy of the numbering system. See Matthews, “A Plainer Translation,” 67–72; Richard P. Howard, Restoration Scriptures: A Study of Their Textual Development, rev. and enl. (Independence, Missouri: Herald, 1995), 63 n. 1.

5. In a letter dated 31 July 1832, the Prophet stated: “We have finished the translation of the New testament . . . , we are making rapid strides in the old book [Old Testament] and in the strength of God we can do all things according to his will.” Joseph Smith to W. W. Phelps, 31 July 1832, Ms. 155, Box 2 folder 3, Joseph Smith Collection, Church Archives, The Church of Jesus Christ of
Latter-day Saints. Published in Dean C. Jessee, ed., The Personal Writings of Joseph Smith (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1984), 248.

6. Sidney Rigdon, Joseph Smith, and Frederick G. Williams to the Brethren in Zion, 2 July 1833, Joseph Smith Letter Book 1, 51 (Ms. 155, Box 2 folder 1), Joseph Smith Collection, Church Archives, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Published in Joseph Smith, History of the Church, 1:368.


8. Some of these insertions required more room than was available between the lines of the text and were written on small pieces of paper and attached in place with straight pins—the nineteenth-century equivalent of paper clips or staples.


12. Joseph Smith (died 1844), Oliver Cowdery (excommunicated 1838), John Whitmer (excommunicated 1838), Emma Smith (did not go west), Sidney Rigdon (excommunicated 1844), and Frederick G. Williams (excommunicated 1839, died 1842).

13. See Matthews, “Joseph Smith’s Efforts.”

14. Ibid., 64; emphasis in original.

15. The Evening and the Morning Star 2, no. 18 (March 1834): 143.

16. The manuscript at Exodus 32:1 revises wot to know with a note that know “should be in the place of ‘wot’ in all places.”

17. These changes are not universally consistent in the manuscripts.


19. The Pearl of Great Price: Being a Choice Selection from the Revelations, Translations, and Narrations of Joseph Smith, First Prophet, Seer, and Revelator to the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Liverpool: F. D. Richards, 1851).

20. Preface, 1851 Pearl of Great Price (page [v]).

21. Some of these are noted in Matthews, “A Plainer Translation,” 145–61; and Matthews, “What Is the Book of Moses?” in Robert L. Millet and Kent P. Jackson, eds., Studies in Scripture, Vol. 2: The Pearl of Great Price (Salt Lake City: Randall, 1985), 35–36. Recent research has enabled us to understand the process better than was possible in the past.