The Divine Nature and Destiny of Women

Elder Glenn L. Pace
On the cover:
Lawn Daisy, or Bellis perennis, in Portland, Oregon.

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A Reason for the Hope

The strength of this Church lies not alone in the powerful witnesses of the fifteen men we sustain as prophets, seers, and revelators but also in the deep reassurance and resolve that rest in the souls of individual Latter-day Saints from Alabama to Zanzibar. A testimony—a witness of the truth—is, however, a dynamic matter; indeed, our testimony today may not be our testimony tomorrow. Our testimony is, as someone has wisely noted, as delicate as an orchid, as elusive as a moonbeam. President Joseph F. Smith proclaimed soberly that “the voicing of one's testimony, however eloquently phrased or beautifully expressed, is no fit or acceptable substitute for the needed discourse of instruction and counsel expected in a general gathering of the people. The man who professes a testimony as herein described, and who assumes that his testimony embraces all the knowledge he needs, and who therefore lives in indolence and ignorance shall surely discover his error to his own cost and loss” (Gospel Doctrine, 5th ed. [Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1971], 206).

We reinforce and undergird our testimonies through a lifetime of study, thereby providing a reason for the hope within us (see 1 Peter 3:15), a conviction that proves as strengthening and stretching to the mind as it is settling and soothing to the heart. Competent disciples are those who not only know the gospel is true but are also striving diligently to know the gospel.

The Religious Studies Center (RSC) at Brigham Young University was established in 1975 to assist members of the Church in their continued pursuit of knowledge and understanding, background and context, implications and ramifications of the revelations and teachings of the restored gospel. This is not merely an academic endeavor or an intellectual enterprise for Latter-day Saints but also a central feature of our theology, for we know that life and love and learning are forever: “The glory of God is intelligence or, in other words, light and truth” (D&C 93:36), and “Whatever principle of intelligence we attain unto in this life, it will rise with us in the resurrection” (D&C 130:18). Those of us who work in the RSC are pleased to do what we can to make available to the Saints the results of recent study, research, and reflections of many of our colleagues throughout the Church. Our hope is that this issue will broaden your base of learning and bless your life.

Robert L. Millet
Editor
## Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Page</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Author(s)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>The Divine Nature and Destiny of Women</td>
<td>Elder Glenn L. Pace</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>“Judge Not, That Ye Be Not Judged”: An Approach to Teaching Matthew 7</td>
<td>Terry B. Ball</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21</td>
<td>The Sermon on the Mount in the Light of the Temple</td>
<td>John W. Welch and Alan Taylor Farnes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>39</td>
<td>The Merits, Mercy, and Grace of Jesus Christ</td>
<td>P. Scott Ferguson</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>53</td>
<td>In My Mortal Wanderings</td>
<td>P. Scott Ferguson and Daniel Kerr</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>73</td>
<td>Quiet Slumber: Revelation through Dreams</td>
<td>Ryan C. Jenkins</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>91</td>
<td>Every Experience Can Become a Redemptive Experience</td>
<td>Allan D. Rau</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
105  |  Helping Students Act as a Result of Classroom Lessons  
|-----------------------------------------------|
| JOHN HILTON III AND BRANDON B. GUNNELL

119  |  The Myth of Coverage  
|-----------------------------------------------|
| SCOTT H. KNECHT

127  |  Icebergs, Point Guards, Waves, and Softballs: 
The Power of Good Questions and Discussions  
|-----------------------------------------------|
| STEVEN T. LINFORD

151  |  Becoming Master Teachers  
|-----------------------------------------------|
| JOSEPH FIELDING MCCONKIE AND 
RICHARD NEITZEL HOLZAPFEL

165  |  A Seeker’s Guide to the Historical 
Accounts of Joseph Smith’s First Vision  
|-----------------------------------------------|
| STEVEN C. HARPER

177  |  New Publications  

182  |  Upcoming Events  

185  |  Staff Spotlight
The Family: A Proclamation to the World” states: “All human beings—male and female—are created in the image of God. Each is a beloved spirit son or daughter of heavenly parents, and, as such, each has a divine nature and destiny. Gender is an essential characteristic of individual premortal, mortal, and eternal identity and purpose.”

My focus this morning will be on the divine nature and destiny of women and the sacred role they play in the sanctification and purification of men. I’m going to start by giving you two exclusive scoops. First, males and females are different. Second, those differences are more than physical.

I developed a love and appreciation for womanhood in my childhood. My mother, sisters, grandmas, aunts, and female cousins and friends brought immeasurable love into my young life. This set the stage for the adult relationships I have with my wife, daughters, and granddaughters. All of the above have contributed to my feelings of reverence, adoration, and even veneration of righteous women. In pondering the effect women have had on my life, I have concluded that there has been a metamorphosis of my spirit that could not have taken place without these relationships.
Mothers
Of course, the first woman in my life was my mother. How can I describe the impact of my mother’s love? A lullaby, being tucked in bed, “Are you warm enough?” a kiss goodnight, “Glenn, you’d better get up, you don’t want to be late for school,” a kiss good morning, “You are such a special boy,” “Oh honey, how I love you,” “I made some chocolate chip cookies,” “I want to take your picture,” “I’m so proud of you,” “I know you can do it,” “Are you going to go on a mission?” “You are going to go on a mission,” “I miss you so much,” frequent love notes, “Let’s go look at the roses,” “Did you see the full moon?” “Aren’t the mountains beautiful today?” the love in her eyes, her touch, her smell, her elegance, her tender heart, her sensitivity, her femininity.

That was just a blink in a lifetime of nurturing.

Sisters
In addition to the loving care I received from my mother, I received similar nurturing from my big sister, who was my mentor and protector. When I was old enough to enter kindergarten, I was worried sick. I had watched my sister do her homework and was concerned by the fact that I didn’t know how to read or do arithmetic. The night before school started, my apprehension must have shown because she came into the bedroom and started talking to me about school. I explained my concerns, and she immediately began to allay my fears. She told me about recess. I could handle that. Then she explained that I would be taught to read one word at a time, and she assured me that I was smart and wouldn’t have any trouble.

Now, how would a brother handle a situation like that? “Wow, you’re in big trouble! You may never graduate from kindergarten. But I’ll tell you what I’m going to do. If you will give me your allowance, I’ll help you.”

As I mentioned earlier, men and women are different.

Daughters
My appreciation for women rose to a whole new dimension when our two daughters came into our lives. There is something angelic about daughters—at least in the eyes of their fathers. I have sometimes lamented that I wasn’t born with the perspective that my daughters brought into my life. If a man could be born with that insight, his respect for and treatment of a young woman during his dating years would improve significantly.
I remember a time when my oldest daughter was just six or seven years old. I was struggling with saying my personal prayers on a consistent basis. I remember walking into her bedroom one night to listen to her say her prayers. Her room felt so peaceful, innocent, and pure that I felt like praying. I explained as best I could that I’d like to get into the habit of saying my prayers and asked if I could pray at her bedside. She looked a little puzzled but agreed. On the second or third night, as I began my silent prayer, I felt her little hand on my head. She then turned on her side and with both hands began running her fingers through my hair. I felt touched by an angel. I must admit, it felt so good that my prayers became longer. To this day, whenever there is a family gathering, I will eventually work my way over to the couch or chair where she is located, sit on the floor, and wait for her to run her fingers through my hair.

From the time my second daughter was a baby through her early grade-school years, I would rock her to sleep at night and carry her to bed. I always knew when she was asleep because tiny beads of perspiration would appear on her little nose. I would look at her angelic face and wonder if heaven could feel any better than this. I concluded it must be a great comfort to her to fall asleep in her father’s arms. Now I realize the peace and comfort she transmitted to me was possibly even greater.

I have always been impressed with the love and respect our Savior bestowed upon the women in His life. As we read about these associations, our focus is generally on what He taught them and the love and understanding He gave them. Have you ever considered the possibility that these women provided immense comfort to His burdened soul? It is my belief that He needed them as He journeyed toward living a perfect life so He could provide the ultimate sacrifice.

I repeat that my associations and interplay with the righteous women in my life have created a metamorphosis of my spirit and have been purifying and sanctifying.

Adam and Eve

I’d now like to turn to the more intimate relationship of husband and wife and the impact that relationship has on our exaltation. You are all familiar with the story of the Creation. I’m going to pick up the account where Adam was placed on the earth. Please pay particular attention to the sequence of events leading up to the introduction of Eve.
And the Gods formed man from the dust of the ground, and took his spirit (that is, the man’s spirit), and put it into him; and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and man became a living soul.

And the Gods planted a garden, eastward in Eden, and there they put the man, whose spirit they had put into the body which they had formed.

And out of the ground made the Gods to grow every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food; the tree of life, also, in the midst of the garden, and the tree of knowledge of good and evil. (Abraham 5:7–9)

Thus far there is no mention of Eve.

And out of the ground I, the Lord God, formed every beast of the field, and every fowl of the air; and commanded that they should come unto Adam, to see what he would call them; and they were also living souls; for I, God, breathed into them the breath of life, and commanded that whatsoever Adam called every living creature, that should be the name thereof.

And Adam gave names to all cattle, and to the fowl of the air, and to every beast of the field; but as for Adam, there was not found an help meet for him. (Moses 3:19–20)

In summary, before Eve appeared, the world had been created, Adam had been placed in the Garden of Eden, and he had named and associated with all of the animals. He was enjoying a utopia in physical surroundings as well as open communication with God. What more could he ask for? What more could he need?

As President J. Reuben Clark put it:

Adam wandered alone in the glorious Garden in Eden, which he had dressed and adorned—the Garden of Eden with its stately trees, its lovely flowers heavy with sweet odors, its grassy swards, its magnificent vistas with the far reaches of its placid rivers, with its gaily plumed birds, its lordly and graceful beasts, all at peace, for sin was not yet in the world. Through all this magnificence Adam wandered, lonely, unsolaced, unaccompanied, the only being of his kind in the whole world, his life unshared in a solitude of exquisite elegance, and, what was of far greater moment, his mission, as he knew it to be, impossible of fulfillment, except the Father gave him an helpmeet.

I’d like to share a perspective from John Milton’s *Paradise Lost* that fully resonates with my soul. Much like President Clark, Milton describes the beauty of the garden and the variety of animals. However, he goes into more detail on his perception of Adam’s frustration and loneliness. In his account, Adam watches the interplay between the animals and communicates with them as best he can. However, Adam concludes something is drastically amiss. Milton wrote:
They rejoice
Each with their kind, lion with lioness;
So fitly them in pairs thou hast combin’d;
Much less can bird with beast, or fish with fowl
So well converse, nor with the ox the ape;
Worse then can man with beast, and least of all.³

In other words, Adam is saying, “What’s wrong with this picture?” Milton goes on to suggest that God delayed the introduction of Eve until Adam could fully appreciate her. Seeing that Adam is now ready for the introduction of Eve, God describes what is going to happen next. I love Milton’s description of what Eve would mean to Adam:

What next I bring shall please thee, be assur’d,
Thy likeness, thy fit help, thy other self,
Thy wish exactly to thy heart’s desire.⁴

“Thy fit help”? No, this doesn’t mean she would be in good shape. It means she would be a match, a complement, a counterpart, even his “other self.”

Finally, Eve stood before him, and she exceeded his highest expectations. He had never seen anything like her in the garden. Milton continues:

Under his forming hands a creature grew,
Manlike, but different sex, so lovely fair,
That what seem’d fair in all the world, seem’d now
Mean, or in her summ’d up, in her contain’d,
And in her looks, which from that time infus’d
Sweetness into my heart, unfelt before.⁵

I hope Milton will forgive me for adding my opinion that the “sweetness” Adam felt, which was “unfelt before,” was much more than that which was generated by Eve’s physical appearance. Those feelings flowing into him had as their source her wellspring. His feelings were the direct result of standing in front of one of the daughters of heavenly parents who had a divine nature different from, but complementary to, his own divine nature.

I believe the Father’s statement “It is not good that the man should be alone” (Genesis 2:18) had a much more profound meaning than the obvious biological implications. It also went further than providing Adam with company. Adam’s ability to obtain the purification necessary to get back into the presence of God was dependent upon his continuous association with Eve.

Remember what Adam said when Eve stood beside him for the first time: “Therefore shall a man leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave
unto his wife, and they shall be one flesh” (Abraham 5:18). Many years after the creation of Adam and Eve, Paul said, “Nevertheless neither is the man without the woman, neither the woman without the man, in the Lord” (1 Corinthians 11:11).

**Completion of Our Nature**

In the Doctrine and Covenants we read, “In the celestial glory there are three heavens or degrees; and in order to obtain the highest, a man must enter into this order of the priesthood [meaning the new and everlasting covenant of marriage]; and if he does not, he cannot obtain it” (D&C 131:1–3). Why can’t he obtain it? It’s not just because he didn’t obey a celestial commandment. It’s because he didn’t become a celestial being. There is a limit to our spiritual development as long as we are single. There is a spiritual development that can only be obtained when a man and a woman join their incomplete selves into a complete couple. Just as conception requires the physical union of male and female, perfection requires the union of the very souls of male and female.

Elder Richard G. Scott has said, “In the Lord’s plan, it takes two—a man and a woman—to form a whole. Indeed, a husband and wife are not two identical halves, but a wondrous, divinely determined combination of complementary capacities and characteristics.”

Men and women can accomplish marvelous things alone. However, they are incomplete until united intellectually, emotionally, physically, and, most important, spiritually.

The world we live in has gone awry with its focus on the physical part of the male and female relationship. If there is too much focus on the physical, the vital areas of intellectual, emotional, and spiritual union are not being placed in an environment where they can flourish and grow. Our current society is so obsessed with “making love” that they are not developing a complete relationship that would enable them to “express love.”

Since melding our divine natures is a necessary element in bringing about perfection, we must guard against any deterioration of those natures. Sisters, keep in mind that anything that detracts from your divine nature should be avoided. You live in a time when you have more opportunities and options available to you than any other women have had throughout the history of mankind. Some of these options will complement your God-given natures. Others will chip away at it. Some things will make you strong. Others will
make you hard. Some will increase your spiritual sensitivity. Others will separate you from the Spirit. If the world keeps chipping away at the divine nature of women, it is probable that our relationships in marriage will not bring about the sanctification necessary for exaltation; or, as a minimum, the process will be delayed.

I express my love and appreciation to my wife. She is an example of one who has retained her eternal nature through forty-seven years of marriage, six children, twenty-nine grandchildren, and putting up with me. Wearing that eternal nature well, she has supported me as a General Authority for twenty-five years. I could not have served nor would I have been qualified to serve without her love and support. She has been the crucial key to the metamorphosis I desperately needed to become worthy and able to serve.

Her eternal nature and destiny was never clearer to me than at the temple marriage of our youngest son. I have had the sacred honor of performing the temple marriages of all six of our children, and they along with their spouses were worthy to be in attendance on this occasion.

Prior to the ceremony, as I spoke of sacred things, I looked at my wife, who was seated next to our son. My spiritual eyes were opened, and I saw her shining in all of her glory as she basked in the warmth of having joy and
rejoicing in her posterity. She was radiant. I saw before me a priestess, queen, and goddess. There is absolutely nothing the world can offer that could come close to the fulfillment she was feeling. There was no accomplishment in the world she could have attained that would have made me love her more or be more proud of her efforts. Her eternal nature was then and is now still intact.

We commonly hear the phrase “Men have the priesthood and women have been given the blessing of procreation.” Without perfection, neither assignment meets the full measure of its creation. After perfection comes the ultimate role of god or goddess. These are eternal roles in which one continues to complement the other throughout all eternity.

It is the marriage ceremony in the temple in which husband and wife receive the power to perfect their relationship and, thereby, obtain their exaltation.

Elder John A. Widtsoe put it this way:

Modern revelation sets forth the high destiny of those who are sealed for everlasting companionship. They will be given opportunity for a greater use of their powers. That means progress. They will attain more readily to their place in the presence of the Lord; they will increase more rapidly in every divine power; they will approach more nearly to the likeness of God; they will more completely realize their divine destiny. And this progress is not delayed until life after death. It begins here, today, for those who yield obedience to the law.

I emphasize that the power coming down from heaven on those married in the temple by the holy priesthood cannot alone bring about the progress mentioned by Elder Widtsoe. It takes the righteous interplay of male and female.

I like the Quaker proverb “Thee lift me and I’ll lift thee and we’ll both ascend together.”

What will happen when we finally “ascend together”? I can put it no better than did one of the great women in our history, Eliza R. Snow, who said:

When I leave this frail existence,
When I lay this mortal by,
Father, Mother, may I meet you
In your royal courts on high?
Then, at length, when I’ve completed
All you sent me forth to do,
With your mutual approbation
Let me come and dwell with you.

Sisters, I testify that when you stand in front of your heavenly parents in those royal courts on high and look into Her eyes and behold Her
countenance, any question you ever had about the role of women in the king-
dom will evaporate into the rich celestial air, because at that moment you will 
see standing directly in front of you, your divine nature and destiny.

Notes

5. Milton, Paradise Lost, 253; book 8, lines 470–75.
Those who want to judge righteously regularly seek inspiration through prayer.
Krino is a widely nuanced Greek verb. Depending on the context, it can be variously translated as *select, prefer, pass judgment, express an opinion, criticize, condemn, think, consider, decide, propose, or intend*.

All these meanings share the common denominator of exercising agency, with the making of decisions, either mentally or judicially. In the King James Version of the Sermon on the Mount, the verb is translated simply as “judge” in the Savior’s commandment “judge not, that ye be not judged” (Matthew 7:1). In light of the varied meanings of *krino*, the Savior’s admonition to the multitude gathered to hear his Sermon on the Mount raises some provocative questions. Did our Lord mean to prohibit us from making any kind of judgment? Was he asking us to forgo the use of our precious agency, which has been afforded us at such a great cost and is so vital to our learning and progression? Or did he intend to proscribe only moral judgments or judging of others? In God’s eyes, do any of us have a right to judge?

Latter-day Saints are fortunate to be able to turn to the Joseph Smith Translation for better understanding of the commandment, for it clarifies, “Judge not unrighteously, that ye be not judged: but judge righteous judgment.”
(Joseph Smith Translation, Matthew 7:2; emphasis added). Thus we understand that the Savior was not asking us to be totally nonjudgmental or indecisive, but rather to let our judgments and decisions be based upon righteous principles—an observation that leads to another important question: what is the difference between a righteous and an unrighteous judgment or decision?

Inviting our students to carefully look for answers to that question in Matthew chapter 7 can be an effective approach to studying and teaching this important passage from the Sermon on the Mount. It can help them discover and consider the doctrines taught therein from a new perspective and in an insightful context. It can help them understand that rather than being a prohibition against judging, this portion of the Sermon on the Mount is a beautiful treatise on how to judge appropriately. Below, I present seven principles of righteous judgment that can be gleaned from the Savior’s teachings in Matthew 7 that a teacher may wish to include in such an approach.

**Principle 1: Judge with a Clear Eye**

Following his commandment to judge righteously, Jesus asked some instructive questions, “Why beholdest thou the mote that is in thy brother’s eye, but considerest not the beam that is in thine own eye? Or how wilt thou say to thy brother, Let me pull out the mote out of thine eye; and, behold, a beam is in thine own eye?” (Matthew 7:3–4). The imagery is graphic. How indeed can we see to remove a small twig or straw, a mote from another’s eye, if our own is impaled with a large timber?

Many vices can introduce tiny motes and even hefty beams into our judging eyes. Sin, jealousy, anger, pride, greed, prejudice, and selfishness are a few that can cloud our vision and distort our perspective, yielding unrighteous decisions and poor judgment. I recall a young father who once fell into such a trap. He had just asked his toddler to stop some annoying behavior. Deciding to explore the limits of defiance, as young children occasionally do, the youngster belligerently said, “No!” Upset by the response, the agitated father got hold of the child, pulled her face right up to his, and menacingly warned, “Don’t you ever, ever tell me no again!” and then added, “Do you want a spanking?”

Now what was the child to answer? In light of the threat, she certainly did not dare say no again, and the fear and tears on her face indicated she did not want to say yes either. The upset and irrational father had placed his
sobbing and confused child in an impossible predicament. Later, when he was in control of his emotions, he was embarrassed by how silly his heated words sounded and the way he had decided to handle the situation. He learned that we rarely make disciplinary decisions appropriately or righteously with the beam of anger in our eyes.

The Savior gave simple counsel to help us avoid such mistakes. He reasoned, “Thou hypocrite, first cast out the beam out of thine own eye; and then shalt thou see clearly to cast out the mote out of thy brother’s eye” (Matthew 7:5). His words invite us to reflect carefully and evaluate the clarity of our vision as we use our agency. He asks us to defer our decisions and conclusions until we have repented of sins that might impinge on our judgment, overcome our own anger, and conquered our pride, jealousy, and selfishness. As we remove such motes and beams, we make place for patience, empathy, charity, reason, and inspiration to inform our decisions. Judgments and decisions made under the influence of these virtues are far more likely to be righteous and in harmony with the will of our Heavenly Father. Elder Dallin H. Oaks summarizes the principle nicely: “A righteous judgment will be guided by the Spirit of the Lord, not by anger, revenge, jealousy, or self-interest.”

Principle 2: Consider Others

Christ next directed, “Give not that which is holy unto the dogs, neither cast ye your pearls before swine, lest they trample them under their feet, and turn again and rend you” (Matthew 7:6). Again the imagery is instructive. We can visualize the foolishness of one placing precious pearls before swine. We can imagine the swine curiously snuffling the treasure and, after discovering it had no value in satisfying their appetites, carelessly trampling the pearls into the mire. Christ further warned that the swine so disturbed might then turn to do harm to one who had bothered them with something they deemed worthless. We could hardly blame the ignorant pigs for their disregard or any damage done in such a case. Rather, the fault would belong to the one who unwisely cast the pearls without considering how they might be treated.

The Joseph Smith Translation indicates that the particular pearls to which Christ was referring in this dialogue are the “mysteries of the kingdom” (JST, Matthew 7:10). Accordingly, stewards of the mysteries—those who have been taught gospel truths by revelation, reason, and covenant—should carefully consider their audience in determining when, where, and how to
share their understanding. Missionaries teaching the gospel to investigators, parents discussing principles of morality with their children, and priesthood leaders serving as judges in Israel (see D&C 64:40; 107:65–75) are among those who should carefully consider the spiritual readiness, receptiveness, and worthiness of those they teach, judge, and counsel.

In a broader sense, the Savior’s teachings about properly sharing the pearls of our faith help us understand that righteous judgment is not selfish. Rather, those who use their agency properly take into consideration how others will understand or be affected by their choices. Most of us know someone who has sought license for making poor choices or who has tried to avoid censure for bad judgment by protesting, “It’s nobody’s business what I do! I am only hurting myself!” Those who understand that the basic unit of exaltation is the family (see D&C 131:1–4; 132:19–22) can readily see the spiritual myopia of such reasoning. Each of our choices affects those who love us and those whose eternal happiness is linked with our own. Righteous judgment considers others.

**Principle 3: Seek Inspiration**

Ignorance, inexperience, misunderstanding, and naïveté can lead us to make bad decisions. The Savior’s next words offer a remedy. He exhorts, “Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you” (Matthew 7:7). Wise individuals ask many questions of knowledgeable people before making decisions. Elder Oaks admonishes us to “refrain from judging until we have adequate knowledge of the facts.” Christ’s simple invitation reminds us that we need not make important choices without divine direction as well. When we face difficult decisions, we can receive inspiration, perspective, and knowledge from one who is omniscient if we will but discipline ourselves to ask and learn to recognize answers.

The scriptures contain many examples of poor choices made by good people simply because they did not bother to ask. Joshua was deceived by the Gibeonites because he “asked not counsel at the mouth of the Lord” (Joshua 9:14). Righteous King Hezekiah naively showed the wealth of his kingdom to greedy Babylonians because he did not first seek direction from the Lord’s prophet (see Isaiah 39:2–7). The Jaredites spent four years sitting on the beach because their prophet failed to “call upon the name of the Lord” (Ether 2:14).

Likewise, the scriptures contain many examples of righteous decisions and judgments that were made because people made the effort to ask of God.
Moses overcame his fears as he discussed his worries and concerns with the Lord (see Exodus 3:11–4:17). The Apostle Paul changed the course of his life because he asked, “Lord, what wilt thou have me to do?” (Acts 9:6). Lehi learned of the fate of Jerusalem and saved his family because he “prayed unto the Lord, yea, even with all his heart” (1 Nephi 1:5). Christ set a remarkable example for us as he counseled with God all night before choosing the twelve who were to be Apostles (see Luke 6:12–16).

As Jesus spoke on the mount, he promised, “Every one that asketh receiveth; and he that seeketh findeth; and to him that knocketh it shall be opened” (Matthew 7:8). He further reasoned that just as an earthly father is anxious to give to his children, our Heavenly Father will impart “to them that ask him” (Matthew 7:11). Those who judge righteously regularly seek such inspiration.

Principle 4: Judge with Empathy
The Savior captured the essence of empathy with the next principle of righteous judgment that he presented: “Therefore all things whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them” (Matthew 7:12). This “golden rule” instructs that as we make judgments and decisions, we should extend to others the same justice and mercy, the same punishment and reward, the same forgiveness and accountability that we would wish for ourselves. With the fatal words “Thou art the man,” the prophet Nathan taught the adulterous and murderous King David that God condemns those who would hold others to a higher standard of moral conduct than they are willing to live themselves (see 2 Samuel 12:1–14). Likewise, the unmerciful servant was delivered to the tormentors for his refusal to forgive a small debt of a fellow servant after pleading for and receiving forgiveness for a great one (Matthew 18:23–35).

Whether we are deciding whether to accept an apology, considering hiding a flaw in a home we are selling, or designing discipline for a wayward child, we must let empathy inform our choices if we wish to judge righteously. Christ explained how fundamental this practice is to his gospel as he declared, “For this is the law and the prophets” (Matthew 7:12).

Principle 5: Choose the Right
As a boy, I delighted to read the humorous billboards put up along the highway to advertise a particularly popular chain of service stations of that day.
The amusing quips the advertisements offered helped to break the monotony of long drives. One of my favorites read, “Lost? Keep going! You’re making good time anyway!” The absurdity of someone choosing to speed down the highway simply to make good time, even though they were likely traveling farther from their destination, always put a smile on my face. Centuries earlier, Jesus used similar imagery as he taught another principle of righteous decision making in the Sermon on the Mount. He admonished, “Enter ye in at the strait gate: for wide is the gate, and broad is the way, that leadeth to destruction, and many there be which go in thereat: because strait is the gate, and narrow is the way, which leadeth unto life, and few there be that find it” (Matthew 7:13–14).

The Savior’s counsel instructs us to consider carefully where the paths we choose to follow will lead us. It advises us to choose the right path, not the easiest. Just as it would be foolish to speed down a wrong road simply to make good time, so too is it foolish to persist in pursuing a wrong choice simply because it is the easy choice. Indeed, by God’s design, it seems the right paths to happiness are frequently not the easiest to follow. They often require effort and sacrifice to follow. It was easier for the man who received one talent to simply hide it rather than labor to increase it (see Matthew 25:14–30). It was easier for Jonah to attempt to flee from the Lord than deliver God’s message to Nineveh (see Jonah 1:1–15). It was easier for David to have Uriah murdered than to admit to adultery (see 2 Samuel 11). It was easier for Balaam to betray Israel than give up Balak’s promised reward (see Numbers 22:1–25:9; Revelation 2:14; 2 Peter 2:15). All these easy choices eventually led to rebuke and sorrow.

But Joseph made the hard choice to obey God rather than give in to the advances of Potiphar’s wife (see Genesis 39:7–20). Ruth made the hard choice to care for her widowed mother-in-law rather than abandon her and her newfound faith for an easier life (see Ruth 1:1–18). Daniel chose to face the lions’ den rather than surrender the privilege of prayer (see Daniel 6:4–28). Peter, James, John, and Andrew straightway left their nets, forsaking the security of their livelihoods to follow the Master. All these hard choices led to some trials and sacrifice, followed by great rewards and blessings. So too can we expect to find happiness at the end of our paths and often along the way if the question of what is right rather than what is easiest dictates our choices.
**Principle 6: Consider the Fruits**

As the Savior continued his teachings on the mount, he described how to identify false prophets and, in the process, presented another principle of righteous judgment:

> Beware of false prophets, which come to you in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly they are ravening wolves.
>
> Ye shall know them by their fruits. Do men gather grapes of thorns, or figs of thistles?
> Even so every good tree bringeth forth good fruit; but a corrupt tree bringeth forth evil fruit.
> A good tree cannot bring forth evil fruit, neither can a corrupt tree bring forth good fruit.
> Every tree that bringeth not forth good fruit is hewn down, and cast into the fire.
> Wherefore by their fruits ye shall know them. (Matthew 7:15–20)

In this context, fruits can be understood to be the works or offerings of a plant or a prophet—the product or results of their labors. Just as such fruits can be used to identify true and false prophets, so can they help us identify good and bad judgments or decisions.

Evaluating the fruits of our choices requires us to look far ahead to the likely outcomes of our decisions. If we fail to do so, we may make short-term decisions that undermine long-term goals. As the popular motivational speaker and author Zig Ziglar succinctly summarized, “The chief cause of failure and unhappiness is trading what you want most for what you want now.” So the hungry Esau sold his birthright for a meal of pottage, thereby trading his future inheritance for a handful of lentils (see Genesis 25:29–34). Ananias and Sapphira deceptively “kept back part of the price” of a sold possession rather than truthfully consecrating all as they had committed, thereby sacrificing their integrity on the altar of transitory wealth (see Acts 5:1–11; D&C 76:50–55; 84:37–38). Judas betrayed his Master and, in the process, traded his chance for exaltation to temporally hold thirty pieces of silver (see Matthew 27:3–5; John 17:12). By failing to consider the fruits of their choices, each, in their myopic stupor, traded what they wanted most for what they wanted at the moment.

In contrast, Joseph of Egypt looked ahead during the years of plenty and determined to prepare for the years of famine (see Genesis 41:46–57). Paul surrendered a life of relative comfort and prestige to follow the Savior, declaring, “I count all things but loss for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ
Jesus my Lord: for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and do count
them but dung, that I may win Christ” (Philippians 3:8; see also 2 Corinthians
11:24–28). Jesus condescended from his glory as Jehovah to assume the suffer-
ings of mortality that he might perform the infinite Atonement and redeem
us for eternity. Each understood the law of the harvest—if we sow good seed,
even when such sowing may require great sacrifice, we will eventually reap
precious fruit. Good decisions, righteous judgments, require that we consider
the culminating fruits of our choices.

Principle 7: Align with God’s Will

As he continued to teach about false prophets, Jesus explained, “Not every
one that saith unto me, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven;
but he that doeth the will of my Father which is in heaven” (Matthew 7:21).
From this caution we can gather another principle of righteous judgment. As
we make decisions, we must consider whether our choices are in harmony
with the Lord’s will and, if not, adjust accordingly. Indeed, Christ went on to
explain, even works that appear to be good may in fact be evil if they are not
done with God’s blessing or according to his plan. Jesus warned, “Many will
say to me in that day, Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in thy name? and in
thy name have cast out devils? and in thy name done many wonderful works?
And then will I profess unto them, I never knew you: depart from me, ye that
work iniquity” (Matthew 7:22–23). Apparently righteous judgments must
have righteous motives, the primary purpose of which must be to accomplish
the will of our Heavenly Father.

The Joseph Smith Translation of this passage adds another layer to our
understanding: “And many will say unto me in that day, Lord, Lord, have we
not prophesied in thy name; and in thy name cast out devils; and in thy name
done many wonderful works? And then will I say, Ye never knew me; depart
from me ye that work iniquity (JST, Matthew 7:32–33; emphasis added). The change from “I never knew you” to “ye never knew me” suggests that the
very process of doing works and making decisions that align with God’s will
helps us come to know him. In his beautiful intercessory prayer, Jesus taught
the eternal significance of knowing him. “And this is life eternal, that they
might know thee the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom thou hast sent”
(John 17:3). Thus learning to make righteous judgments—decisions that
help us know and become like Christ—is a vital part of our path to eternal life.
Conclusion

The Savior closed the Sermon on the Mount with a promise that inspires hope and a warning that demands our attention:

Therefore whosoever heareth these sayings of mine, and doeth them, I will liken him unto a wise man, which built his house upon a rock:

And the rain descended, and the floods came, and the winds blew, and beat upon that house; and it fell not: for it was founded upon a rock.

And every one that heareth these sayings of mine, and doeth them not, shall be likened unto a foolish man, which built his house upon the sand:

And the rain descended, and the floods came, and the winds blew, and beat upon that house; and it fell: and great was the fall of it. (Matthew 7:24–27)

Our students can find comfort in this assurance, knowing that as we not only hear but also follow Jesus’ teachings in the Sermon on the Mount, we will be able to weather the storms and floods of life. Among those anchoring teachings are the principles of righteous judgment he taught. Surely if we judge and make decisions with clear and empathetic eyes, seeking inspiration from God and aligning our will with his, considering the long-term fruits of our choices and how our decisions affect others, all while being willing to make difficult decisions if they are right, then we are building upon a sure foundation. We will make righteous judgments that will bless rather than condemn us. We will be using the precious gift of agency in the way God designed. Helping our students discover, understand, and apply such principles can be an effective, engaging, and exciting way to teach Matthew chapter 7.

Notes


2. The Book of Mormon account clarifies that this portion of the sermon was directed to the general multitude gathered to hear Christ’s words at the temple in Bountiful (see 3 Nephi 13:1–2), while the Joseph Smith Translation indicates that these are the words the Savior wanted his disciples to teach the people (JST, Matthew 7:1). In either instance, it is clear that the instructions were intended for all and thus can appropriately be understood as counsel to those who wish to follow Christ today as well.


The Sermon on the Mount orients us and redirects our attention.
The Sermon on the Mount in the Light of the Temple

ALAN TAYLOR FARNES AND JOHN W. WELCH

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Welch: Well, it is an interesting story how these two books are related. My first book about the Sermon at the Temple was published by Deseret Book and FARMS. Then in 1999, a paperback edition was published. I took the opportunity at that time to add enough new material, including a whole new chapter on ritual applications and study, that the book was given the expanded title of Illuminating the Sermon at the Temple and Sermon on the Mount. LDS interests in 3 Nephi are the dominant focus of those books. Out of them has grown the 2009 book, aimed mainly at scholars with more particular biblical interests and also at a wider, nondenominational readership. These have been steps in a long process of trying to get my hands around these wonderful scriptural texts.

Farnes: How long have you been working on the Sermon on the Mount?

Welch: The Sermon on the Mount has been one of my favorite texts for forty-five years. In 1966, when I was a young missionary in the LTM
I had an inspiring zone leader who challenged us and kept us as busy as possible. One day he walked up to me and said, in German, “On Thursday I would like you to memorize and pass off for me the entire Sermon on the Mount.” I did so, and thus began a lifelong interest for me in the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew chapters 5–7. Unfortunately, not everyone these days knows what the Sermon on the Mount is.

Farnes: What do most people think the sermon is?

Welch: Many people think of it as just the Beatitudes. Lots of people, of course, know the Lord’s Prayer, but many do not associate it in their minds with the Sermon on the Mount, even though it is embedded right in the middle of that text. Learning at a young age to appreciate the whole of the Sermon on the Mount was one of the best things I have ever done in my life. Having memorized this text, I used passages from it in Germany virtually every day of my mission.

Farnes: Could you give us a verse in German that you remember?

Welch: Sure. Selig sind die barmherzigen; denn sie werden Barmherzigkeit erlangen (Blessed are the merciful, for they shall gain mercy). That’s is the Luther translation of the fifth Beatitude. Memorizing this text made me really internalize its messages, knowing them not just mentally, but literally by heart.

Farnes: That must have influenced you every time you have read it since.

Welch: Yes, whenever I run across an echo or some kind of parallel in the scriptures or elsewhere, it jumps out at me, which has made research and discovery a lot more exciting and possible. Otherwise I might read over things and miss their connections with the Sermon on the Mount.

Farnes: What were some of the things you learned about the Sermon on the Mount right after your mission?

Welch: After I graduated from BYU in 1970, I studied at Oxford, where I focused on Greek philosophy but also took a number of courses and seminars on the New Testament, one in particular on the Greek manuscripts of the New Testament. And there, I learned a lot about the manuscript traditions of the Sermon on the Mount, partly again because I was already especially interested in that text. For example, I learned about the Greek texts of Matthew 5:22, about being angry with your brother “without a cause.” But the phrase translated as “without a cause” is just one word in the Greek, and that word is not present in some of the earliest manuscripts. Interestingly it’s not present in 3 Nephi 12 either. And I thought that was more than coincidence. I also
continued working on my chiasmus projects, and when I edited and published the book *Chiasmus in Antiquity*, one of the chapters was on chiasmus in the New Testament. I mention there the efforts by some people who have tried with varying degrees of success to argue that the Sermon on the Mount is chiastically structured. I do not think the idea works very well in that case, but this was another Sermon on the Mount issue that I worked on early in my academic pursuits. So I have been working on this text in various ways for quite a while.

**Farnes:** You coined the term “Sermon at the Temple,” which has been adopted by the Latter-day Saint community. What is it like to coin a term like that?

**Welch:** As Shakespeare asks, “What is in a name?” But actually the answer is, a lot. Labels are important. If we call something by the wrong name, it can convey a lot of the erroneous impressions. It has been very gratifying to me that this name has stuck, that it has been serviceable to people. Of course, neither the term “Sermon on the Mount” nor “Sermon at the Temple” is found in the text of Matthew or 3 Nephi, but it is now clear from 3 Nephi 11:1 that this material was delivered by Jesus at the temple, and that would seem to be an important fact. Thus, the name “Sermon at the Temple” encapsulates much of what this text is all about, and so it orients people and redirects their attention. It’s a little thing, but it’s a good thing that can help people see things they might otherwise not have noticed.

**Farnes:** When did you come up with the term?

**Welch:** The phrase “Sermon at the Temple” was first published in a FARMS update in March 1988, but the idea came when was when I was trying, a few weeks earlier, to solve some problems regarding the Sermon on the Mount. At that time I was director of Special Projects at the BYU Religious Studies Center, and I had an office in the basement of the old Joseph Smith Building. I loved that office: It had no telephone, so it was a good place to work without interruption. I began by slowly rereading 3 Nephi 11–14 in an effort to respond in a systematic, comprehensive way to some criticisms that people had raised against the Book of Mormon, because the Sermon on the Mount is so closely replicated there in 3 Nephi. Its appearance there could be a problem for Book of Mormon readers if the Sermon on the Mount was not written until long after the death of Jesus, as some have argued.

**Farnes:** How do people view the authorship of the Sermon on the Mount today?
Welch: Indeed, many New Testament scholars have thought that the material in Matthew 5–7 was compiled by Matthew as a collection of miscellaneous things that Jesus said on various occasions. Fortunately, several non-LDS scholars today are at least seeing it as a pre-Matthean text.

Farnes: Back to your reading of 3 Nephi 11–14. What was different that day in 1988?

Welch: The first thing I wanted to find was a way to approach this text. As I stepped back from the text, I asked myself the basic question, “How does one read this text?” And it was clear that one cannot answer this question until one knows what kind of a text it is. If it is a general conference talk, you read it one way. If it is a speech to the PTA, you read it another way. Rhetorically, the audience and the setting of any speech make a difference. What kind of a text is this so-called sermon? Is it a random collection of sayings that have been pulled together in some loose order? Or is there something stronger that holds it together? That day in the basement of the JSB was a rare day for me—it was a session of concentrated effort that went for about seven hours, from 9:00 in the morning until about 4:00 in the afternoon, with no interruptions and, actually, little consciousness of time. I wrestled with the Sermon on the Mount. When I finally heard a bell ring at four o’clock, I thought it was lunchtime, because I had been so absorbed in this text, outlining its details on my green-screened computer. (Believe it or not, we did have computers at that time.)

Farnes: What did you find as you outlined?

Welch: Well, the more I outlined, the more I saw temple themes and temple phraseology and patterns that we find in other temple texts and experiences. And then, like a bolt out of the blue, it dawned on me that this is a text that is given by Jesus at the temple. And that has made all of the difference. I decided right then no longer to call the sermon in the Book of Mormon the Sermon on the Mount but rather the Sermon at the Temple, because it was given there in a different setting to a different audience and involving other differences. I began looking at those differences in the light of a temple context, and in very subtle ways, everything worked out to see it in that context. That, in and of itself, was very exciting. At about 4:30 p.m., when I stumbled up the stairs to walk back over to my office at the Law School, a friend of mine, Professor Stephen Robinson, happened to walk out of the Joseph Smith Building with me. We started some casual conversation like “What have you been doing today?” So I told him the main ideas, and he was the
first to hear about this as we walked across campus. I think we both sensed the potential for the idea, but wondered if the idea could be sustained, supported, and substantiated. It was just the beginning of a lot of research, and that is what the last twenty-plus years have been about.

**Farnes:** So the groundbreaking part of the idea was the context.

**Welch:** That’s right. The people had gathered at the temple in Bountiful, and so I started wondering, “Why? Why were they there at the temple?” Men, women, and children. We aren’t told the answer to this question. Maybe the Book of Mormon gives us more credit than we deserve, assuming that we can figure this out without having to be told everything. But to me, it seems pretty obvious that all those faithful people had recently heard the words from the darkness during the three days of destruction and mists of blackness, when Jesus said: “Ye shall offer up unto me no more the shedding of blood” (3 Nephi 9:19). The old things had been done away, and the people had been told to offer only “a broken heart and a contrite spirit,” using a phrase from the Psalms that may have been familiar to them, which now superseded or transcended all the other parts of their former temple practice. But now the people must have been asking themselves, “How does this new law work? What are we to do in our temple now?” I even wonder if the high priest Nephi (who was the great-great-grandson of Alma the Younger, the first chief judge and also a high priest among the Nephites) had a sense that there would be new revelations given to him and his people, and so he had convened a solemn assembly with his people, and they faithfully came. Not all of them came, but a lot of them came. They were gathered, it would seem, hoping and maybe fasting for guidance. They must have been there early in the morning, because so much happened that day. With that background, it is clear that the temple is not a casual part of the narrative in 3 Nephi.

**Farnes:** What was it that motivated you in publishing your first book on the Sermon on the Mount?

**Welch:** A lot of the motivation and assurance came by the bright sparkles in people’s eyes, the “ah-ha” moment, when they first heard, even in a very brief explanation, why I was calling it the Sermon at the Temple. At that point in those early months and years, nothing had been published on it, and so it was something that I would bring up in a BYU class or in a Sunday School context or with my student ward where I was serving as bishop. To then watch people come up with their own development of that idea was very reassuring to me. If you go out drilling for oil, and you drill and do not strike oil, you go
and drill somewhere else. But if you keep striking oil every time you drill, you keep putting down another well, knowing there’s a lot of oil down there. And it was that kind of success and excitement that motivated me to keep working on this approach.

_Farnes:_ How have people accepted it?

_Welch:_ I have many people over the years tell me that this idea is one of the most impressive things they have learned about in a long time, because it changes the whole way they read this important text. Other people tell me that they now understand the temple better because they understand the Sermon on the Mount, and that they understand the Sermon on the Mount better because of the temple. All people can benefit a great deal from this perspective, and general audiences light up when they hear it explained. Shortly after I had begun putting this all together, Hugh Nibley had to take a trip and was going to miss five of his Book of Mormon classes; he asked me if I would substitute for him while he was gone. I said, “Where in the text will the class be when you are gone?” He said, “Right about 3 Nephi chapter 10.” I saw this as more than fortuitous. But that opportunity was also a real trial by fire because it was a large class and people expected a Nibley-kind of finished quality. It took those five full classes just to get through the basics of what would become the main chapter in the 1990 book, which goes through what I had identified as the forty-eight stages in the Sermon at the Temple in 3 Nephi 11–18. As we went through those steps, one at a time, it was evident from the reactions of the students that the coherence of the idea was really holding together.

_Farnes:_ When did you first present this to academia?

_Welch:_ The 1990 book was published locally by FARMS and Deseret Book. Soon I began wondering how I might possibly present the idea in a way that New Testament scholars would not ignore it or reject it out of hand. As I attended the annual meetings of the Society of Biblical Literature and the American Academy of Religion in the mid-1990s, I became aware of a new group that was formed in the AAR on ritual studies. At the same time, there was a section organized in the SBL on the social scientific study of the New Testament. As I attended, listened to papers, and saw a few scholars do a little bit on the Sermon on the Mount with ritual and social scientific studies, I thought that these avenues might provide a way to advance the idea of reading the Sermon on the Mount by looking at it as a ritual-based text—either as the actual performance of some kind of ritual or the preparation for entering into some kind of ritual.
**Farnes:** What type of ritual would that be?

**Welch:** At a minimum it would be a covenant-making ritual. Again, the key for this understanding is right there in the Book of Mormon. At the end of Jesus’ first day, he asked the people to enter into a covenant with him to keep the commandments which he had given them that very day. What he had taught them, especially in chapters 12 to 14, contained the commandments that they agreed, by way of covenant, in 3 Nephi 18, to obey. Now, if it is true in the Book of Mormon that the Sermon at the Temple is a covenant-making text, it seems logical to see the Sermon on the Mount in the Bible through a similar lens. It is easy to see how the Sermon on the Mount could have been used to prepare people, for example, for entering into the baptismal covenant. Indeed, from the latter part of the first century, we have a Christian text called the *Didache*, or the Teachings of the Twelve Apostles. There are lots of similarities between the Sermon on the Mount and the *Didache*, and we know that the *Didache* was used as a prebaptismal catechism. Or perhaps the Sermon on the Mount could have been used in preparation for receiving the oath connected with the Melchizedek priesthood (see Hebrew 7:20–21). It could have been connected with several kinds of covenant-making ordinances. In any event, I submitted a proposal to the SBL section putting forth the idea of reading the Sermon on the Mount in the light of ritual studies.

**Farnes:** Was it difficult transitioning into the new section?

**Welch:** Yes, I saw it as quite a challenge, and I wanted to do a good job. Since I have a law degree, I figured I might pass as a kind of social scientist, but I was venturing here outside of my comfort zone. I was very pleased when the proposal was accepted; the paper was presented at the SBL meeting in Boston in 1999. That was the first time that the idea was vetted by a rigorous selection process. The session was quite large. The four other people on the panel with me were people whose names were iconic in that field. They were among those who had created the field of social scientific study of the Bible. So I was pretty nervous about how they would accept my thesis. Fortunately, I had been able to find a place to quote one of them, favorably, in my presentation, and that never hurts. As I sat there waiting my turn for the first two hours of this session, I started getting pretty nauseous. I usually do not get very nervous, but I really felt like I was not going to make it through the
session. So I started taking deep breaths and saying prayers, and I was really wobbly. I almost fell when I walked up to the microphone, which happened to be on a riser which was really uneven. But I felt very blessed and fortunate. As I started speaking, everything went smoothly. I felt calm, and I could not have hoped for a better presentation.

Farnes: What was the reaction?

Welch: Well, since I was the last one in that session and I left some time for Q&A at the end, I was able to go on as long as people wanted to stay. The first reaction was that the moderator did not cut off the questions and answers, which is kind of unusual. It was an afternoon session, but there were lots of hands being raised, positive comments made, and people saying, “Have you read this?” “What about this?” Fortunately, I had read the things they were suggesting. Two main things are memorable to me even today. One is that there was a man who stood up toward the back, a young South African scholar named Jonathan Draper who was heavily involved in the social scientific study of the oral transmission of texts. Since rituals and ceremonies are in the oral mode, my paper was particularly interesting to him. Jonathan was really interested and made some very encouraging comments and wanted to communicate with me, and to this day he and I are still good friends.

Farnes: You cite him a couple of times in your book.

Welch: I do, indeed. One of his specialties is the Didache. So it was natural that he would take an interest in my work, and vice versa. More recently he invited me to present a related paper in his SBL Didache section. So there was that memorable thing. But the second memory is of a woman who came up to me after the session had ended. She looked like she was near retirement. She taught at a small college. She said, “I just want to thank you for your presentation. I have been coming to SBL meetings all my academic life, and this is the first time I have felt the Spirit in one of our meetings. Thank you for bringing the Spirit into this room.”

Farnes: That is an honor.

Welch: Yes, I felt very honored that she would share her feelings with me, a stranger to her. It made all the effort very worthwhile. Making the words of the Savior clear and understandable will always bring the Spirit to someone who is ready to listen.

Farnes: Going back to the Sermon at the Temple, in 3 Nephi, the group is all people who are prepared, who are righteous, who did not perish in the tribulation.
The audience in Matthew is quite different. In my mind, to impose this audience upon the other audience is a problem. How would you answer that?

Welch: Well, I would first ask, what makes you think that the audience in Matthew 5 is the general public? Matthew 5:1 begins by saying, “Seeing the multitudes, he went up into a mountain: and when he was set, his disciples came unto him.” When they came off the mountain, there were multitudes down below, but it was only his disciples who came down with him. I think that Jesus spoke on both of these occasions to groups of faithful, righteous people. We have a clue of this in the gospel of Matthew, who wants us to see Jesus as going up into the mountain. That is how the Greek reads in Matthew 5:1: eis to oros. And the parallel which I really did not appreciate until I was doing the 2009 book is with Moses who also went up into the mountain. Moses went up alone at first because the people said that they didn’t want to go up there, with all the thundering and lightning—they saw it as a frightening place. So Moses went up alone. But he comes down, and the second time he goes up with seventy elders, righteous Israelites, who there see God. And in Exodus 19:3, 20, and 24:9 we find the same words, eis to oros. I think that Matthew wants us to see Jesus doing the same thing with his group of disciples who are either already committed or close to being committed to following him and accepting him.

Earnes: With the “new Moses” motif running throughout the book of Matthew, is this something that Jesus wanted to get across, or something that Matthew was doing?

Welch: There are lots of ways to see Jesus. He can be seen as the “new Moses,” or the promised prophet-like-Moses (Deuteronomy 18:18), but Matthew also shows Jesus as the Son of David, and the Syrian Christians saw Jesus as an echo of Joseph sold into Egypt. And there is also the Passover typology that sees Jesus as the Pascal lamb and the messianic suffering servant typology from Isaiah 53. I think is a mistake to see any of the Gospel writers thinking that Jesus was only one of those. Matthew actually drops the Moses typology after chapter 10, so there are lots of things going on beyond the similarities between the lives of Moses and Jesus. But still, we know that as early as the trial of Stephen, Stephen testifies that Jesus was the prophet-like-Moses who was promised. So at a very early stage, the Christians saw Jesus fulfilling the mold of Moses. Something we do not really know is whether Jesus wanted to be seen that way or whether Matthew and the other disciples used it as a way to help their fellow Jews to recognize who Jesus was. The Moses-Jesus
typology is complex enough that the parallels are significant in showing the providential hand of God in the lives of Moses and Jesus. The conformity of the two was providentially meant to be.

**Farnes:** We have the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5–7. We have the Sermon on the Plain in Luke 6. Do you think these are accounts of two separate events, or how do you reconcile that one was on a mountain and one was on a plain?

**Welch:** As I have discussed in all three of these books, I see the Sermon on the Plain as being addressed to a Gentile audience; at least we know that the audience included Gentiles who were there. That speech was given down in the coasts near Sidon, and in that area on the western parts of Galilee there were lots of Gentiles (Luke 6:17; 7:1). And so for me, the Sermon on the Plain was a trimmed down, shortened version of the longer text in Matthew, and with some significant differences; and if you go through and take out of the Sermon on the Mount the things that are most sacred or holy, or the things that would pertain primarily to a covenant-making context, you essentially have Luke’s sermon. The strongest temple elements are not present in Luke 6, for some reason. So for example, Jesus in Matthew 7:6 tells people not to give “the holy thing” to the dogs, but he does not say that to the Gentiles in Luke 6, presumably because what he had given them had not yet included “the holy thing.” He has not given them the full covenantal relationship or instructions and insights that are not to be shared indiscriminately with all people. When he talks in Matthew 5 about how you should swear your oaths—saying, Do not swear by the heavens or earth, do not swear by your head, but just say yes or no—that instruction is relevant in a covenant-making context; it is not so relevant if you are talking to a general public audience, and it is not there in Luke 6. What this says to me is that Jesus probably gave the sermon, or parts of it, many times. I think that it is wrongheaded for people to go looking for the original text as if Jesus only gave the Sermon on the Mount once, that he set it in concrete in a first edition, and all we need to do is reconstruct a critical text that will get us back to what he said on that one occasion. Anybody who has been a missionary knows that you give the first missionary discussion a lot of times. And although they will have the same basic words and essential elements, each presentation is a little different as you work with people and prepare them personally for some kind of sacred experience. For many reasons, I think that it is unlikely that Jesus would have given the Sermon on the Mount only once. To me, that explains why careful New Testament scholars...
have rightly found that Matthew’s source seems to be independent from the source that Luke is using. And some New Testament scholars have concluded that both Q Matthew and Q Luke contained a speech of Jesus, but they were not necessarily the same, identical text. I have suggested that they both could have been original with Jesus.

**Farnes:** Would another example of that be the injunction in Matthew, “Be ye therefore perfect,” but in Luke, “Be ye therefore merciful”?

**Welch:** Exactly. That is a good point. The command to be perfect, to be *teleios*, is a word that fits in a temple and ritual setting. It does not mean to be perfect in a 100 percent kind of way, but it means to be finished or to be brought, as Moroni says, “to the finisher of their faith” (Moroni 6:4) and to be perfected in Christ. In a number of Greek texts, this word is used to refer to those going through the complete process of initiation into a religion. Now if Jesus is talking to one kind of a faithful group in Matthew 5, the use of this word in that context makes perfect sense, but, like you say, out on the plain he commands people, “Be ye therefore merciful” (Luke 6:36), a more general step of being kind, forgiving, and considerate.

**Farnes:** Tell us about the new book, which is a bit pricey, so it may not be on the bookshelf of every Latter-day Saint.

**Welch:** True enough. The new book is rather expensive, aimed as it is at an academic, non-Mormon audience, not for the bookshelf of every Latter-day Saint, especially since the 1999 book is now available free online on the Neal A. Maxwell Institute website (maxwellinstitute.byu.edu). But let me tell you the story of how this new book came about. A few years ago, Noel Reynolds brought Margaret Barker, a Methodist temple-studies scholar from England, to BYU to run a weeklong seminar for anyone who wanted to come and read her materials on temple theology and temple themes. She had published some of her most recent publications in that area, and it was a very stimulating seminar. Without agreeing with everything that Margaret Barker said, people saw lots of ways in which her insights, intuitions, and even inspiration helps us spot some significant themes that we have missed. As I was driving Margaret out to Thanksgiving Point for a dinner after one of those days of presentation, we got talking about her projects and how the seminar was going, and as we were driving up I-15, there on the right was Mount Timpanogos and the Mount Timpanogos Utah Temple. I started asking her what work she had done on temples, mountains, and theophanies, and she of course started going through a lot of the things about holy mountains that are
familiar to many people. After she had committed herself sufficiently to the idea that “the mountain” is always a symbol of the temple, I said, “Well, then what would you think about the idea of seeing the Sermon on the Mount as a temple-related text?” It took her a minute to catch her breath, but she said, “That is astonishing. I had never thought about that. That is amazing. What makes you think that?”

“Well,” I answered, “3 Nephi 11–14, for one thing,” and then I mentioned some of the things I had written. Since the Book of Mormon had come up on several occasions in her seminar that week, she understood quickly what I meant by this. We talked about the ideas in the 1999 Sermon at the Temple book all the rest of the way out to Thanksgiving Point. She expressed a great interest in reading that book, and I told her a little about my presentation at SBL and that it had been well received. I gave her the book the next morning. Before she left Utah, she had read enough of it that she pulled me aside and said, “Your book—you must write this book for the rest of us.” And I said, “Well, that will be hard because a lot of my evidence comes from the Book of Mormon. We do not have an explicit covenant-making context in Matthew. We do not have an explicit temple setting there.” She said, “You can make the case without the Book of Mormon.” And I said, “Well, that was what I tried to do in my SBL paper, where I primarily drew on ritual studies. What I have not done is to go back carefully through the Greek text of Matthew 5-7 to look at every word and every phrase with temple lenses on, to see how those words would have been understood by members of an audience who saw themselves in some kind of a temple context.” From that point forward, Margaret remained very supportive. We communicated back and forth, and I kept shooting her ideas, and she came back with others. We got together once at Cambridge to go over a lot of these new details. Out of all that came the 2009 book from Ashgate in England.

Farnes: So what new insights occurred to you in this most recent study that you had not previously thought of?

Welch: First, I needed to build a strong case about the mountain as the mountain of the Lord, namely the temple. There is a whole new chapter on this which emphasizes the Moses-Sinai connection with “the mountain” in Matthew 5:1 and also the same phrase in Psalm 2:4:3: “Who shall ascend into the hill of the Lord (tis anabēsetai eis to oros tou Kyriou)?” The Greek is the same used in Matthew 5:1: “he went up into a mountain (anebē eis to oros).” Ascending into a mountain is an allusion back to Moses, and all this is clearly
temple related. So my first task in the new book was to establish that a temple context was clearly in place, not just in 3 Nephi but also in Matthew.

As I looked at all the vocabulary of the Sermon on the Mount, I found that most of the interesting words in the Sermon on the Mount—not the ordinary, everyday words but the distinctive, interesting words—were also used in the Septuagint Greek version of the Old Testament, especially in temple contexts. In the end, I produced a chart that shows the most important of these temple themes or temple words in the Septuagint and also in the Sermon. Some of them may or may not be equally significant, but they all seemed worth noting.

Stage after stage in the Sermon, one finds temple vocabulary connections, such as in this verse: “Neither do men light a candle, and put it under a bushel, but on a candlestick” (Matthew 5:15). The Greek text actually reads “on the candlestick” (epi tên luchnian), but any trace of the “the” here got lost in the Latin (super candelabrum), because Latin uses neither definite nor indefinite articles. Well, the Greek word here for candlestick is luchnia. That word appears in the Greek Septuagint nine times, all nine of them being found in the instructions in Exodus 25 for the making of the menorah. The menorah is a temple symbol par excellence. And even if there is just a subtle allusion to the temple here, Jesus often would speak in double meanings. So this word can have an ordinary, household, ethical meaning that you should let your light shine before men; but it might at the same time have an esoteric meaning to anybody with ears to hear him saying, “Put your light on the menorah. Put your light together with the light of God on the tree of light and life. Bring your light and join it with the light other faithful people. And when they see all those good works, they will glorify God who is in heaven.” That is what it means, to let your light shine in such a way that when people see your good works they will glorify not you, but God. That won’t happen if you just put your candlestick out on a table in your home or at a town feast. But if your light is a part of the temple light, then who will they glorify? They glorify God.

Reading the text of the Sermon on the Mount this way, word by word, is something I do in the new book in much greater depth than I have ever done before.

**Farnes:** Has anyone done a study like this before?

**Welch:** I do not think anyone has ever done this before, let alone in such concentrated detail, especially focusing on connections with temple passages in the Greek Septuagint version of the Old Testament.
Farnes: If they haven’t seen the Sermon on the Mount as using temple vocabulary, what kind of text have they thought it to be?

Welch: Scholars have largely missed the boat by thinking that the Sermon on the Mount is a collection of proverbs in the genre of wisdom literature. There are some sayings in the sermon that sound a little bit like proverbs, such as “Whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them” (Matthew 7:12). But the book of Proverbs is never quoted in the Sermon on the Mount. This text is not just about some peasant, a folk preacher, out on a hillside giving out ordinary instructions on how to be a good Galilean farmer or villager. The Sermon on the Mount is filled with promises of eschatological rewards; dire statements about the consequences of disobedience; and directions about fasting, prayer, purification, and reconciliation with God and brethren. That does not sound like proverbial literature.

Farnes: Then where do the words in the sermon come from, if not from Proverbs?

Welch: It turns out that this text is loaded with words from the Psalms. Some of its words and phrases are direct quotes from the Psalms, from the beginning word in the Beatitudes to the end of the sermon. The first word in Psalm 1:1 is *makarios* (blessed, singular). The first word in the Sermon on the Mount is *makarioi* (blessed, plural). Toward the very end of the sermon Jesus says, “Depart from me, ye that work iniquity” (Matthew 7:23). That is a verbatim quote from Psalms 6:8. And there are plenty of others like these in between. What this says is that the temple, which was, after all, the dominant religious institution in Jesus’ world, is also the dominant rhetorical voice of the Sermon on the Mount, because the Psalms primarily, if not exclusively, had their home base in the temple. So I argue that this close affinity with the Psalms is a temple element that helps people to hear the words in this text with that temple register in mind. This book also makes an argument for the pervasiveness of this temple register, for every stage of the Sermon on the Mount can be understood this way. And the importance of that is that most people, in studying the Sermon on the Mount, cannot make all its pieces fit together. Understood otherwise, something always doesn’t fit. In fact, usually, following other lines of analysis, one cannot account for most of it. For example, you might have a theory that the Sermon on the Mount is an anti-Pharisaical document. But then what do you do with about 90 percent of the text that has nothing to do with Pharisaical behaviors or concerns? But the
temple analysis—or better said, the temple synthesis—of this text, brings a unity to the text that I think no other way of viewing it has been able to offer.

Farnes: This is one of the values of the book—to explain things that are opaque. From beginning to end, the sermon has a theme built on the temple. So what do you think will be the result of this book?

Welch: I hope that it will continue to bear good fruit. So far, my book only tries to explain and situate the Sermon on the Mount itself. The after-shocks of that, if that theory is accepted, will of course challenge a lot of the received wisdom about the sources that were used in writing the Gospels. I think we need to begin by rethinking the whole Gospel of Matthew as temple-related, not just Moses-related or Messiah-related, as we have more commonly seen it. People say that Matthew is preaching and writing to the Jews, but I think that all of the Gospels are written to Jewish people, one way or another. I think Matthew in particular offers a very interesting case study for seeing temple elements throughout what he has written. We know that Matthew was a Levite, although it is only Luke who tells us that. But that is, I think, a very significant disclosure, because, as a Levite, he would have worked in the temple at least two weeks a year, and probably more often.

Farnes: Many scholars say Matthew was a tax collector, a Roman publican. What are your thoughts on that?

Welch: Well, that is possible, but some people have argued that he could have been a collector of temple taxes, so he may have been a part of the temple financial administration, perhaps in addition to doing his regular Levitical duties. If that is so, then much of the Gospel of Matthew needs to be rethought. We might ask with each story he tells, “Why would a Levite be particularly interested in this particular story and the way in which it is presented?” For example, Matthew is the only one who tells us the story of the king who had a servant who owed him ten thousand talents and could not repay the debt and the king forgave him (see Matthew 18). And then the servant goes out and will not forgive a fellow servant who owes him one hundred denarii. In Jesus’ day, there was only one institution in all of Israel, if not all of the world, that had ten thousand talents in its treasury, and that was the Temple of Herod, according to Josephus. The subtext of the parable in Matthew 18, then, may very well be that the king (the Lord God) has a servant (the high priest) who owes him these ten thousand talents that ought to be used for proper purposes, and when they’re not, God is willing to forgive the high priest, but the high priest is not willing to forgive his fellow debtors. If that is something that
a Levite, as an underling servant in the temple, might have really resonated with, then there may be some political motivations for telling that story—a story that otherwise seems to be so exaggerated and hyperbolic that we struggle to take it seriously. Of course, the Greek phrase translated as to “forgive” someone their debts in Matthew 18 matches the phrase in the Lord’s Prayer, “forgive us our debts.” The end of the chapter about the unforgiving servant even ends with a direct paraphrase of the Sermon on the Mount, according to which God will only forgive you to the extent you forgive your fellowmen their trespasses (Matthew 18:35).

**Farnes:** So it ties it right back in with a temple-related principle.

**Welch:** Yes, so we need to look at these connections within the Gospel of Matthew and also beyond. For example, what does all this tell us for studying the Epistle of James, which is loaded with Sermon on the Mount similarities? The epistle of 1 Peter also has plenty. Paul uses words and phrases from the Sermon on the Mount. My thesis would say that the Sermon on the Mount was already “coin of the realm” among these earliest Christians, in some form or other. It doesn’t necessarily need to be Matthew’s exact version that is circulating in all places, but I think the pervasiveness of elements from the Sermon on the Mount not only in the New Testament but in texts such as the Shepherd of Hermas and the Didache means to me that this key text was used, from the beginning, as a foundational text, as a part of their baptismal preparation, their covenant making, and their definition of what it meant to live as a follower of Christ. But think of the consequences of that! This approach reworks much of the common understanding of first-century Christianity, which is a pretty significant thing to propose.

**Farnes:** Very significant.

**Welch:** Another thing that we can do is begin to ask, “Why have people missed this? Why have Protestant scholars not seen this?” Indeed, Protestant scholars are quite uncomfortable (many of them, anyway, and Luther certainly among them) with the Sermon on the Mount because it just seems to be too works oriented. Maybe that’s why James likes it so much. But Protestants don’t naturally gravitate toward priestly or temple ordinance kinds of things, because to them, it was essential in their protest against Catholicism to put distance between their understanding of Jesus and the practices of the Catholic Church. Because of that, I think they may have perhaps unwittingly downplayed the importance of the temple and its elements in the life of Jesus. Nibley does a famous job of showing that there was initially a Christian
envy of the temple, and that temple things were really important in early Christianity; but as with a lot of other important things, these fell out of favor and eventually off the table. I hope that my new book may help to bring some of that back on board and into focus.

**Farnes:** There definitely is a reaction to temple and ritual in Protestant theology and Protestant scholarship, which has identified some very interesting fields of study like, as you said, wisdom literature, which highlights the rhetorical skills of Paul and others; but if one goes down that road completely, yet gives up the ritual context, the results may have highlighted some interesting minor points but will have missed the bigger picture.

**Welch:** That’s right. Well said.

**Farnes:** Well, congratulations on this remarkable achievement. This is a great book, and it is amazing to see something like this bringing to bear insights that come out of the Restoration but without needing to rely exclusively on those LDS details.

**Welch:** I hope, above all, that this book shows that we, as Latter-day Saints, do have a lot to offer to the world at large. As I’ve worked with people of many different religious persuasions, I have found that if you are kind and sincere and interested in what they are doing, they reciprocate, wanting to know what you think and what your tradition has to offer. This may not have been so much the case fifty years ago, but I think we are blessed to live in a time when so many doors are open and things are available. I think there are people out there who want to know what a Latter-day Saint perspective would be on any number of subjects. As scholars, we are in a position to offer those kinds of explanations in academic terms. And as disciples of the Lord, I think we are all obligated to be able to answer and to give a reason for the hope that is in us. So I am very glad that we live in a time when we can do this. Having said that, I think that this makes it all the more incumbent upon us to read and listen to the things that others are publishing and to understand how and why they are saying what they are saying. We need not dismiss their comments with disdain. We may still see that some of it is wrong or inconsistent with things that we would have said, but I usually find that, even in a work that is antithetical to a lot of my beliefs and that is based upon assumptions that I do not share, I am forced to think things through that I would not otherwise have thought about, and in that process I usually learn something new and significant. RE
The divine trio of Christ’s merits, mercy, and grace enables humankind to condition and train for eternal life and endure to the end.
M any of the lessons I gleaned through ten years of training to run mara-
thons are now quite useful as I apply them to my pursuit of exaltation. My decision to be a marathon runner affected every aspect of my life—diet, exercise, work, and even my personal relationships. My first marathon goal was simply to finish, although secretly I hoped to run the 26.2 miles in four hours or less. My training began with a very difficult one-mile run. But one mile soon became two, and within a few weeks I was running three miles every other day and adding 10 percent to the distance of my longest run each week. Within a few short months, I was running twenty-five miles a week. Progress came quickly; I continued weekly mileage increases, including a long run each week. Within six months, I was ready to run my first marathon. The weekend for the run arrived, and I finished in three hours and fifty-nine min-
utes. I accomplished my goal. I was elated and ready to train for another.

As I trained for my second marathon, progress was much slower. This was due in part to replacing my goal of just finishing with a more rigorous goal of finishing in three hours and twenty minutes. I was determined to run this marathon forty minutes faster than the first. This new goal completely
changed the dynamics of my training, placing me in competition with myself. In addition to doubling weekly mileage, my new goal required speed and hill training. More than once I questioned if it was worth all the effort. With the first goal of just finishing, training injuries were not a problem. But the more I focused on speed training and increasing endurance by running hills, the more I struggled with injuries like pulled hamstrings and stress fractures. Increasing weekly mileage, speed training, and healing from injuries all contributed to slower progress. To be a competitive marathoner required commitment, devotion, and hard work. There was no reprieve to training.

As I reflect on my days of training for marathons, I see powerful corollaries to our quest for exaltation. The lofty goal of obtaining exaltation requires consistent, faithful effort. It isn’t enough to run the race for exaltation with a goal just to finish. We must focus on the quality of the daily run. There is no question that running to finish is part of the program, and there are many days of our mortal experience when we go to bed grateful for having just finished the day. But as we progress in our training, we move from the goal of trying to finish to the goal of finishing well. While perfection is a worthy goal, we should remember it is also a process that requires patience and training. In the Sermon on the Mount, the Savior taught, “Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect” (Matthew 5:48). The Greek word from which perfect is translated means “complete, finished, and fully developed” (Matthew 5:48, note). I sense a process in the words complete, finished, and fully developed.

Other similarities exist between training for a marathon and running the race for exaltation. Training the body to run a marathon takes commitment, hard work, and consistent effort. In the early stages of training for a marathon, results come quickly. The new runner sees immediate results of increased weekly mileage, faster miles, and longer distances. But soon there comes a point where visible results taper off as training expectations increase. The new member has access to the blessings of the Holy Ghost, priesthood, living prophets, and new scripture. As these gifts are received and magnified, expectations change. The focus now shifts to preparation for greater covenants and blessings found only in holy temples—the spiritual equivalent of hill and speed training—a more rigorous training indeed.

As expectations increase, we find ourselves nursing injuries before unknown. The need to just live a good life has been replaced with sacrifice and consecration. Before long, things can begin to feel a bit overwhelming. In the
early stages, our enthusiasm and excitement are often evident as we embrace gospel commitments found in new callings, serving missions, attending the temple, and many other church assignments. Early in our training, we discover gifts of the Spirit previously unknown, and evidence mounts that those gifts are at work in our lives.

By contrast, the longtime member who is enduring to the end may feel overwhelmed, burdened with injuries, and discouraged with the hard work of seeking his or her spiritual best. This paper is written to those of us who feel we are seeing smaller gains as we increasingly put forth greater effort to obtain exaltation. The Lord is committed to our success, as he said to Abraham: “There is nothing that the Lord thy God shall take in his heart to do but what he will do it” (Abraham 3:17).

Christ Is Our Mentor

We have direct access to a loving Savior who wants us to succeed. Lehi taught his sons, “There is no flesh that can dwell in the presence of God, save it be through the merits, and mercy, and grace of the Holy Messiah” (2 Nephi 2:8; emphasis added). Through these gifts we overcome our fallen natures, sin, temptation, and the devil. Through consistent training and awareness and appreciation for our incremental gains, we can eventually overcome. With Christ as our mentor, we can do it!

When feeling discouraged, we need to trust the one who does know and guides our training—Jesus, our perfect mentor. He was not
exempt from the conditioning required of each of us (see Hebrews 4:15). There were no shortcuts for him because he is the Son of God. From the Doctrine and Covenants we learn that Christ “received not of the fulness at first, but continued from grace to grace, until he received a fulness” (D&C 93:11).

He endured adversity and affliction perfectly according to his great capacity (see Mosiah 3:7; 15:1–5; Alma 7:11–14). As a result, he is able to mentor each of us perfectly because he knows our weakness and can show us how to gain strength (see Ether 12:27). Ultimately, he desires that we become like him (see 3 Nephi 27:27). If Christ obtained his fulness by progressing from grace to grace, can we expect to do so any differently? His fulness of glory and his merits, mercy, and grace create a divine tandem that uniquely qualifies him to show us the way. He is our personal mentor at each interval, mile, success, and defeat. Elder Jeffrey R. Holland taught: “He knows that because He has suffered ‘pains and afflictions and temptations of every kind . . . that he may know . . . how to succor his people according to their infirmities’ (Alma 7:11–12). To succor means ‘to run to’ . . . Christ will run to us, and is running even now, if we will but receive the extended arm of His mercy. When we stagger or stumble, He is there to steady and strengthen us. In the end He is there to save us, and for all this He gave His life.”

Eternal Life Is Possible through the Atonement of Jesus Christ

Overcoming our infirmities in order to be fully finished and fitted for exaltation requires a trimming down of the natural man. Speaking of the eternal exercise required to accomplish this trimming down, Elder Neal A. Maxwell observed: “Putting off the natural man . . . involves some arduous isometrics—the old man working against the new spiritual man. That natural man, as you know, will not go quietly or easily.” These “arduous isometrics” constitute the training required for eternity.

The divine trio of Christ’s merits, mercy, and grace enables humankind to condition and train for eternal life. Without his saving grace there is no agency, mortality, or salvation. In a real sense, we literally are saved by grace. Christ taught, “I am the vine, ye are the branches: . . . without me ye can do nothing” (John 15:5; emphasis added). Without Christ there is no opportunity for conditioning at all. And yet we are expected to train. Nephi declared, “We know that it is by grace that we are saved, after all we can do” (2 Nephi 25:23; emphasis added). Even so, our best efforts are possible only through Christ’s saving grace; without him we are powerless. Indeed, it is through
Christ’s perfect life, culminating at Gethsemane and Golgotha that we are even able to do anything at all. Our willingness to access his perfect contribution constitutes our effort. Christ’s contribution of merits, mercy, and grace makes exaltation possible (see diagram below).

What about those who are unwilling to try? Even in their present inclination to sin and discouragement at any efforts to train, Christ offers his grace: “If ye will come unto me ye shall have eternal life. Behold, mine arm of mercy is extended towards you, and whosoever will come, him will I receive” (3 Nephi 9:14). Christ ran the perfect race, and now the great trainer watches as many refuse to try. But he never stops inviting. Does this imply that we may resist his pleas without consequence? Certainly not. Agency dictates our complete sovereignty to choose to train for exaltation or to settle for something much less. Even when the ability to run or train vigorously is diminished, he simply says, “Hey, let’s go for a walk.”

**Merits, Mercy, and Grace**

What are we referring to when we talk about the merits, mercy, and grace of Jesus Christ? Is the phrase “merits, mercy, and grace” a Hebrew phrase coined by Lehi to capture the essence of the Atonement, or is this phrase referring to three separate processes at work that comprise the Atonement? Are Christ’s merits, mercy, and grace distinct from one another? Are Christ’s merits and mercy prerequisites to his grace? I propose that the merits, mercy, and grace of Christ are three distinct elements of the Savior’s power. His merits and mercy comprise his *saving and redeeming grace* and are primarily concerned
with the justification and redemption of mankind—“And we know that justi-
fication through the grace of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ is just and true” (D&C 20:30). His *enabling grace* makes possible sanctification and exalta-
tion—“And we know also, that sanctification through the grace of our Lord 
and Savior Jesus Christ is just and true” (D&C 20:31). Indeed, our ultimate 
goal is to be sanctified like God through the grace of his Son, Jesus Christ. 
We must be enabled to keep going, keep trying, keep seeking and reaching, 
to eventually possess a divine nature. Through the merits, mercy, and grace of 
Jesus Christ, all of us may be saved. Let’s look a little deeper at each of these 
three facets of the Atonement.

**Christ’s Merits—Suffering, Death, Blood, Sinless Life**

Christ is our judge, advocate, and intermediary with the Father (see 2 Nephi 
2:27–28; Hebrews 8:6). Because “all have sinned, and come short of the glory 
of God” (Romans 3:23), there is an ongoing need for reconciliation between 
us and our Father. It is to the great Mediator that we look for representa-
tion. We are warmed by Christ’s plea to the Father in our behalf: “Listen to 
him who is the advocate with the Father, who is pleading your cause before 
him—Saying: Father, behold the sufferings and death of him who did no sin, 
in whom thou wast well pleased; behold the blood of thy Son which was shed” 
(D&C 45:3–4).

From these verses it is easy to visualize councils on high where matters 
concerning this earth are continually discussed and resolved. Ultimately all 
matters concerning this earth will be decided by the Father (see John 8:28; 
John 13:3). Defending our cause in these councils is our advocate to the 
Father, our Savior, Jesus Christ. His defense on our behalf does not consist of 
the collective good of our Father’s children, for justice would require a similar 
list of misdeeds as well. Rather, in the modest third person, Christ declares 
his righteousness (see Romans 3:25–26) as he pleads our cause. Christ’s sin-
less life, selfless sufferings, and death compose his defense in our behalf. We 
should note by contrast, it is a selfish Satan who dissuades us from calling 
upon Christ’s merits, wanting us to be declared guilty and face the cold justice 
of the law. In celestial courts, Christ’s merits, not ours, save us.

Training for a marathon is an individual effort. By contrast, training for 
exaltation is a team effort—achievable only in and through Christ. Unlike 
training for a marathon where hard work and excellent training produce 
desired results, our very best efforts will fall short of what is required to
It is through Christ's suffering that we find joy when the eternal consequences of the law would dictate otherwise.
satisfy the demands of justice, as Aaron exclaimed: “Since man had fallen he
could not merit anything of himself” (Alma 22:14). And Nephi observes that
any progress we do make in our training is not of our own doing: “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” (2 Nephi
31:19). Our finest performances in training for eternity are marred by our
failings and injuries. Christ’s sinless life and perfect Atonement constitute his
merits which are mighty to save.

Christ’s Mercy

The law is just and unyielding. Alma reminds us, “There must be an atonement
made, or else all mankind must unavoidably perish” (Alma 34:9). Lehi taught
his sons, “The law is given unto men. And by the law no flesh is justified; or, by
the law men are cut off” (2 Nephi 2:5). We know that disobedience to the law
brings heartache, sorrow, and death. Between our present inability to obey
the law fully and our desire for joy resides Christ’s mercy for the repentant
sinner. Christ lived the law perfectly so that he could atone for our sins, thus
making joy possible. It is through Christ’s suffering that we find joy when the
eternal consequences of the law would dictate otherwise. He paid the price
of sin and broken laws, and he extends his mercy to each of us by allowing his
sacrifice to cover our shortcomings, if we repent.

Through sincere repentance, we are reconciled to the Father, but such
reconciliation does not pay for the injuries that result from breaking the law.
We are never better off for sinning. Only Christ through the Atonement can
make right what we have broken and cannot fix. Our training for exaltation
will inevitably result in disobedience and injuries. And to a degree, this is what
mortality is all about—using our agency to learn how to act appropriately
and become Christlike. In our first estate we qualified for the opportunity to
come to earth, receive a body, and experience mortality. Having succeeded
in our “first lessons” in the world of spirits (see D&C 138:55–56) and hav-
ing been taught by perfect parents, we are now prepared to receive the last
lessons of the second, or mortal, estate. The celestial classroom has been
downgraded to an imperfect telestial classroom, and perfectly consistent
heavenly parents have been replaced with inconsistent mortal parents. This
change of venue allows for unique hands-on training where veiled memories
of premortal accomplishment and preparation must now compete with in-
your-face mortal moments that grow out of our carnal, sensual, and devilish
natures. Through the combined efforts and mercy of the Godhead, memories
are enlarged and we are reminded, taught, and encouraged to live “a more
excellent way” (1 Corinthians 12:31). “But the Comforter, which is the Holy
Ghost, whom the Father will send in my name, he shall teach you all things,
and bring all things to your remembrance, whatsoever I have said unto you”
(John 14:26).

Christ’s mercy heals the injustices of mortality. A large part of our train-
ing consists of being taught through injuries that result from the injustices of
others and the injustices of mortality—the “arduous isometrics” of practic-
ing to live God’s law as we conquer the natural man. All of this is done in a
hands-on fashion where God’s laws and our inability to live them clash in the
crucible of justice and law. And yet we must learn to live the law. God’s eternal
laws will consistently operate regardless of who chooses to live or break them.
From the Book of Mormon we read, “There is a God, and he hath created all
things, . . . both things to act and things to be acted upon. . . . Wherefore, the
Lord God gave unto man that he should act for himself” (2 Nephi 2:14, 16).
We must learn to act according to God’s law or it will act on us. If it were not
for a merciful Redeemer all would be lost, whether we have broken one or all
of God’s laws.

When the law acts upon us, the result is a training injury. It is through
Christ’s mercy that our injuries and our souls are healed. The Savior taught
during his ministry among the Nephites, “Have ye any that are . . . afflicted in
any manner? Bring them hither and I will heal them, for I have compassion
upon you; my bowels are filled with mercy” (3 Nephi 17:7).

Christ negotiates a settlement for each of us, wherein we are allowed the
opportunity to continue to prove ourselves—an opportunity that, accord-
ing to the law, should have expired. The Apostle Paul refers to this extension
as justification: Christ “was delivered for our offences, and was raised again
for our justification” (Romans 4:25; see also Romans 5:16, 18; D&C 20:30).

Justification, according to Webster’s 1828 dictionary, can be defined as a
“remission of sin and absolution from guilt and punishment; or an act of free
grace by which God pardons the sinner and accepts him as righteous, on
account of the atonement of Christ.” And because we know we are guilty, we
marvel at how Christ pardons or justifies us. Having satisfied the demands of
the law, Christ is able to justify us that we might take advantage of his great
plan of mercy. Alma notes this plan of mercy “could not be brought about
except an atonement should be made . . . to appease the demands of justice, that God might be a perfect, just God, and a merciful God also” (Alma 42:15).

But this is not all. Christ’s mercy strengthens and rescues each of us when all the forces of evil combine against us. In long-distance runs, one must continually resist the urge to quit running—every muscle in the body cries out in fatigue for relief. Depending on running conditions, the heat or cold can make long runs unbearable. In our struggle to train for eternity, we are enticed by Satan or by the challenges of mortality to quit at each mile marker along the way. Lehi taught his sons, “Wherefore, the Lord God gave unto man that he should act for himself. Wherefore, man could not act for himself save it should be that he was enticed by the one or the other” (2 Nephi 2:16). Satan is tempting us to avoid the hard work of training for eternity, but let us not forget that a merciful Christ is also enticing us through the gift of the Holy Ghost to hold on, to persist, to be obedient and persevere.

Exaltation is a challenging goal—a goal we cannot achieve without divine assistance. Too many of us are training for eternity as if it depended on us alone. And yet we have access to a meritorious and merciful Christ who desires to claim us as his own. Moroni observed, “Christ hath . . . claim[ed] of the Father his rights of mercy which he hath upon the children of men . . . . For he hath answered the ends of the law, and he claimeth all those who have faith in him” (Moroni 7:27–28). With the demands of God’s justice satisfied, Christ is able to extend his great mercy.

Christ’s Grace—the Enabling Power

As mentioned, all of God’s children benefit from Christ’s saving grace. Earth life is possible because of Christ’s grace. All men experience this gift to a degree because all men will be resurrected. But there is another aspect of grace that provides “strength and assistance to do good works that they otherwise would not be able to maintain if left to their own means. This grace is an enabling power that allows men and women to lay hold on eternal life and exaltation after they have expended their own best efforts.”

With a solid base of training, we are now ready to introduce the spiritual equivalents of speed work and hill training. These two elements of our training are designed to take us to levels previously unknown to the amateur marathoner. We are desirous of running with those who are seeking eternal life. This training is especially difficult and requires someone who has run at this level of competition to help us condition. Being perfectly obedient, Jesus
“received all power, both in heaven and on earth” (D&C 93:17) and is the one to whom we turn. We may be tempted at times to conclude that Jesus was perfect because he received a fullness as the Only Begotten Son of the Father; however, scripture indicates otherwise: “He received not of the fulness at first, but continued from grace to grace, until he received a fulness” (D&C 93:13). He desires to share the fullness of the Father’s glory with all those who believe on his name (see John 17). He does this through his enabling power, which is aimed specifically at strengthening and equipping us to do good works that are beyond our capacity to do on our own.

By drawing upon this enabling power, we cross over into the final frontier of mortal imperfection—acquiring a new disposition and becoming a Saint. This comprises the most difficult stage of our training for eternity—changing personalities and dispositions that seem to define who we are or provide our uniqueness. These characteristics constitute that part of the natural man that “will not go quietly or easily.” By seeking to be enabled and yielding to Christ’s grace, we can tackle such an ominous task. King Benjamin taught his people, “For the natural man is an enemy to God . . . unless he yields to the enticings of the Holy Spirit . . . and becometh a saint through the atonement of Christ the Lord, and becometh as a child, submissive, meek, humble, patient, full of love, willing to submit to all things” (Mosiah 3:19). Elder David A. Bednar observed:

The gospel of Jesus Christ encompasses much more than avoiding, overcoming, and being cleansed from sin and the bad influences in our lives; it also essentially entails doing good, being good, and becoming better. Repenting of our sins and seeking forgiveness are spiritually necessary, and we must always do so. But remission of sin is not the only or even the ultimate purpose of the gospel. To have our hearts changed by the Holy Spirit such that “we have no more disposition to do evil, but to do good continually” (Mosiah 5:2), as did King Benjamin’s people, is the covenant responsibility we have accepted. This mighty change is not simply the result of working harder or developing greater individual discipline. Rather, it is the consequence of a fundamental change in our desires, our motives, and our natures made possible through the Atonement of Christ the Lord. Our spiritual purpose is to overcome both sin and the desire to sin, both the taint and the tyranny of sin.

While Christ’s merits and mercy make possible forgiveness of sins, it is the enabling power of the Atonement that makes possible our overcoming the desire for sin—this constitutes the speed and hill training. Those who endure the more rigorous training qualify for exaltation. The Prophet Joseph Smith observed of those who are exalted: “These are they who are just[ified] men made perfect through Jesus the mediator of the new covenant, who
wrought out this perfect atonement through the shedding of his own blood” (D&C 76:69).

We access Christ’s merits, mercy, and grace by drinking deeply and frequently from the living water of the Atonement. Only the living water quenches the thirsts of mortality. To the woman at the well, he said: “Whosoever drinketh of the water that I shall give him shall never thirst; but [it] shall be in him a well of water springing up into everlasting life” (John 4:14). As we drink the living water by opening ourselves to his merits and mercy, we find redemption from sin. As we drink the living water of his grace, we lose our desire for sin and find sanctification. And whether we drink occasionally or ten thousand times, we must continue to drink until the desire for sin is gone. Unlike the mortal tendency to keep track of the injustices we endure, our merciful Christ seems only to care that we drink and drink often. It is through Christ’s merits and mercy we are able to drink the living water; it is through his grace that we are able to drink often and deeply, until the “taint and tyranny of sin” are gone.

**Coming Full Circle**

Christ’s merits, mercy, and enabling grace combine to create the perfect training regimen for mankind to be saved in the kingdom of God. His merits of suffering, death, and a sinless life qualify him for eternal life but offer us only the hope of eternal life. Partaking of his merits and mercy alone is akin to saying “sorry” over and over again for the same weakness but never actually changing. Until saying “sorry” leads to an improvement in behavior and a transformation of desires and dispositions, we will never gain eternal life. The training is difficult and rigorous. Unless we are enabled in our training, we will surely expire. Christ’s enabling grace is available to all who tire of saying sorry over and over as they practice again and again. By calling upon his merits, taking full advantage of his mercy, and seeking his enabling grace, we find that he is “mighty to save” (2 Nephi 31:9).

I am now almost twenty years older and twenty pounds heavier and have not trained for a marathon in fifteen years. I have come full circle. I now run each day just to finish well. But finishing well is no longer measured with decreases in overall time, greater weekly mileage, or how long I can run in a single session. All these concerns have been replaced with simply trying to find joy in the training and running of life. I hope one day to echo Paul’s reflections to his good friend and colleague, Timothy: “I have fought a good
fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith” (2 Timothy 4:7). My training consists of more willing submission to the master trainer. I am seeking to embrace the daily struggles put on the training schedule by a loving Father and Savior with the hope of doing a little better each day—to “run with patience the race that is set before [me]” (Hebrews 12:1). It is through Christ’s merits, mercy, and grace that I am sustained and made equal to the challenges set on the training schedule.

Winning the race is no longer the goal; even running the race has been replaced with just walking faithfully. I have come to fully appreciate the Lord’s perfect training regimen: “And all saints who remember to keep and do these sayings, walking in obedience to the commandments, . . . shall run [the race of life] and not be weary, and shall walk [the strait and narrow path] and not faint” (D&C 89:18, 20).

Notes
Prayer offers a way to receive divine strength and revelation and win victories over sin.
In My Mortal Wanderings

P. SCOTT FERGUSON AND DANIEL KERR

1. In my mortal wanderings, Lord, help me stay the course.
   Father, take away my guilt And take away the shame.
2. Give me strength to overcome This fallen mortal frame.
   Through the sorrow and the pain, My strength, Thou art the source.
   Help, I plead with broken heart, My understanding pain.
   Help me keep the covenants That bear Thy holy name.

In this mortal realm of choice, Oh, help me choose the right.
May the bitter ness of sin E ventually fade a way.
Help me win the victory, The battle over sin.

May I shun the evil one And al ways walk in light.
Cleanse my hands, refine my heart, Oh Lord, this day I pray.
Through Thy merits, mercy, grace, A crown of glory win.

Text: P. Scott Ferguson
Music: Daniel D. Kerr
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Caesarea is where Cornelius received his vision and where Peter taught and baptized the first Gentile converts.
The Jerusalem Conference: The First Council of the Christian Church

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The most famous council of the early Christian Church is probably the Council of Nicaea, which took place in AD 325 in the city of Nicaea, located just south of Constantinople, or modern-day Istanbul, Turkey. At the Council of Nicaea, Christian leaders from all over the Roman Empire convened in order to discuss, among other things, doctrinal issues related to the controversial teachings of Arius, a presbyter or local leader from Alexandria, Egypt. Much of the discussion centered on the views of Arius concerning the nature of Christ as well as the Savior’s precise relationship to the other members of the Godhead: God the Father and the Holy Ghost. This conference resulted in the formulation and distribution of the Nicene Creed. Despite the declarations of the leaders of the Church at that time, doctrinal controversies relating to the teachings of Arius persisted.

The Council of Nicaea, however, was not the first council of the Christian Church. Roughly two decades after the crucifixion of the Savior, leaders of the Church met in Jerusalem to discuss issues relating to the law of Moses, Gentile conversion, and the obligations of faithful members of the Church of Jesus Christ. This council also resulted in the formulation and distribution of
important documents—letters announcing the decisions of the council (see Acts 15:23–31). Significantly, even after the leaders of the Church made certain decisions at this conference, questions remained unanswered.

This paper will analyze the Jerusalem Conference. First, I will outline the attitudes toward the law of Moses and Gentiles that led up to the council. Then I will discuss factors of the early Christian proselytizing of Gentiles. Finally, I will investigate the decisions made by the leaders of the Church at this council and their effect upon the remainder of the members of the Church. The leaders were inspired in their council regarding the law of Moses, but followers of Christ still struggled to maintain the proper balance between the doctrine of the Church and the traditions of the Jewish Saints.

The Law of Moses

Jesus Christ is the Lord Jehovah of the Old Testament. When the resurrected Savior appeared to the Nephites, he declared: “I am he who gave the law, and I am he who covenanted with my people Israel” (3 Nephi 15:5; compare Exodus 3:14 and John 8:58). Before the children of Israel received the law of Moses, however, they were offered an opportunity to accept the gospel. The Prophet Joseph Smith taught that “when the Israelites came out of Egypt they had the Gospel preached to them.”4 Comparing Church members in his own day with the children of Israel, the author of the Epistle to the Hebrews similarly explained, “For unto us was the gospel preached, as well as unto them” (Hebrews 4:2).5 Referring to crucial information concerning the higher priesthood and ordinances of the gospel, the Lord has told us, “This Moses plainly taught to the children of Israel in the wilderness, and sought diligently to sanctify his people” (D&C 84:23). Jehovah clearly told Moses that the purpose for the escape of the children of Israel from Egypt was “that they may serve me in the wilderness” (Exodus 7:16; see also Exodus 8:1, 20; 9:1, 13; 10:3). This means that the Lord’s original intent was that the Israelites would serve him by receiving and living the fullness of the gospel.

Eventually the Lord gave to Moses two tablets of stone (see Exodus 31:18), upon which was inscribed the gospel. But when Moses descended from Mount Sinai with the tablets, he found the children of Israel rebelling against the teachings they had received, and in his anger Moses broke the original tablets (see Exodus 32:19). When Moses asked Jehovah for another set of tablets, the Lord agreed, but then explained to Moses: “But it shall not be according to the first, for I will take away the priesthood out of their
midst; therefore my holy order, and the ordinances thereof, shall not go before them” (Joseph Smith Translation, Exodus 34:1). Thus the first set of tablets contained the gospel of Jesus Christ, including the higher priesthood and ordinances, while the second set contained the law of Moses, which was to be administered by the lower priesthood.

In a revelation to the Prophet Joseph Smith, we are taught about the rebellion of the children of Israel: “But they hardened their hearts and could not endure his presence; therefore, the Lord in his wrath, for his anger was kindled against them, swore that they should not enter into his rest while in the wilderness, which rest is the fulness of his glory. Therefore, he took Moses out of their midst, and the Holy Priesthood also; and the lesser priesthood continued” (D&C 84:24–26).

Though it was the lower law, the law of Moses was nonetheless a binding covenant and an inspired set of commandments written by “the finger of God” (see Exodus 31:18; Deuteronomy 9:10) and given by Jehovah to the children of Israel to teach them about Christ and his gospel. By the time of the New Testament, the importance of the law of Moses was well established among the Jews living in Judaea and Galilee, though at times it was taken by some to the extreme as oral traditions were multiplied and sometimes amplified beyond the original intent of the original law (see Matthew 15:1–6). The seriousness with which many Jews treated the law of Moses is demonstrated in the Gospels by the multiple occasions when groups of Jewish leaders accused Jesus of breaking that law (see Matthew 12:1–2; John 7:49).

It is important to note that during his mortal life, though he did not agree with the oral traditions that Jewish teachers had created over the centuries, Jesus fully supported keeping the actual written law of Moses. For example, the Savior declared to a man he had just healed from leprosy: “Go thy way, shew thyself to the priest, and offer for thy cleansing those things which Moses commanded” (Mark 1:44). Further, in his Sermon on the Mount, Jesus declared, “Whosoever therefore shall break one of these least commandments, and shall teach men so, he shall be called the least in the kingdom of heaven: but whosoever shall do and teach them, the same shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 5:19). The Savior’s own attitude toward the law of Moses had a great effect upon the outlook of the disciples concerning the Mosaic regulations.
**Gentiles and the Law**

The law of Moses contains certain teachings concerning the relationships between Israelites and non-Israelites. Although Jehovah had strictly charged the children of Israel to avoid worshipping any foreign deities (see Exodus 20:3–5), they were also directed to refrain from mistreating non-Israelites: “Thou shalt not oppress a stranger: for ye know the heart of a stranger, seeing ye were strangers in the land of Egypt” (Exodus 23:9). The Lord declared, however, that Gentiles should not eat of the Passover meal unless the males were circumcised (see Exodus 12:43–48). Further, non-Israelites were forbidden to partake of any priestly sacrificial meals (see Exodus 29:31–33; Leviticus 22:10). But, overall, Israelites were to treat non-Israelites with respect and compassion.

The law of Moses did not forbid association between Israelites and non-Israelites. Following the Babylonian captivity, however, Jewish attitudes toward non-Jews became increasingly skeptical and exclusive, presumably to prevent the kind of foreign religious influences that led to the exile in the first place. For example, a Jewish document entitled Ecclesiasticus, a book of the Apocrypha written around 200 BC, declares, “Receive strangers into your home and they will stir up trouble for you, and will make you a stranger to your own family” (Ecclesiasticus 11:34). Similarly, the Jewish book of Jubilees—probably written in the second century BC—states: “Separate yourself from the gentiles, and do not eat with them, and do not perform deeds like theirs. And do not become associates of theirs. Because their deeds are defiled, and all of their ways are contaminated, and despicable, and abominable” (Jubilees 22:16). By the time of the New Testament, these kinds of negative attitudes toward contact with Gentiles were common in Jerusalem.

When Jesus Christ commissioned his Twelve Apostles, he commanded them, “Go not into the way of the Gentiles” (Matthew 10:5). The Savior, however, never intended the disciples to permanently withhold the gospel from Gentiles, but was informing them that they were not to teach them at that time. Earlier, Jesus had prophesied to a group of Jews in Galilee concerning the faith of a Roman centurion: “Many shall come from the east and west, and shall sit down with Abraham, and Isaac, and Jacob, in the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 8:11). During his mortal ministry, in spite of the temporary prohibition he gave his disciples, the Savior himself blessed the lives of Gentiles (see Matthew 8:5–13; 15:21–28). The inability of some early disciples to accept new revelation concerning the Gentiles, however, would fracture the young Church.
Early Apostolic Mission

According to the Gospel of Matthew, the resurrected Lord declared to his disciples: “Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost” (Matthew 28:19; emphasis added; see also Mark 16:15–16). Following the forty-day ministry, the Savior reminded them, “Ye shall be witnesses unto me both in Jerusalem, and in all Judaea, and in Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth” (Acts 1:8; emphasis added). Possibly because there were Jewish communities scattered all over the Roman world, however, the early disciples did not seem to fully appreciate the significance and scope of the Savior’s declarations until later.

For the earliest Christians, the first opportunities for missionary work were with groups of Jews in and around Jerusalem. These Jewish audiences were taught that Jesus of Nazareth was the true Messiah, was crucified for the sins of the world, and had been resurrected (see Acts 2:21–36; 3:13–26). The precise teachings of these early missionaries about the law of Moses, however, are not as clear. What is clear is that they stirred up controversy. Stephen, for example, was accused of teaching “blasphemous words” concerning the temple and the law of Moses (see Acts 6:11, 13). His accusers stated: “We have heard him say, that this Jesus of Nazareth shall destroy this place [i.e.
the temple], and shall change the customs which Moses delivered us” (Acts 6:14). The future tense of the verbs (i.e. “shall destroy” and “shall change”) may indicate that some early disciples, including Stephen, misunderstood the divine timetable in the process of fulfilling the law, supposing that the law of Moses was to be fulfilled at the destruction of the temple, rather than at the death of the Savior. Thus, many of the earliest Jewish Christians were not...
prepared to allow non-Jewish converts to refrain from the requirements of the law of Moses.

Peter’s experience with Cornelius seems to support this conclusion. On one occasion after the resurrection of the Savior, the chief Apostle Peter was visiting his friend Simon in the coastal city of Joppa. While taking a nap on the roof in the middle of the day, Peter had a vision in which he saw a large sheet containing animals that were unclean according to the law of Moses. When a voice commanded him to kill and eat these animals, Peter promptly responded by defending his faithful observance of the law of Moses: “Not so, Lord; for I have never eaten any thing that is common or unclean” (Acts 10:14). The voice then declared to Peter: “What God hath cleansed, that call not thou common” (Acts 10:15). This experience was repeated three times.

At first, “Peter doubted in himself what this vision which he had seen should mean” (Acts 10:17). But before his arrival at the coastal city of Caesarea, the true meaning of his dream—that it was about people, not animals—was revealed to Peter. When the sincere Gentile Cornelius greeted the faithful Jewish Peter, he “fell down at [Peter’s] feet, and worshipped him” (Acts 10:25). Peter acknowledged the Jewish cultural taboo concerning interaction between Jews and non-Jews, but then declared emphatically: “But God hath shewed me that I should not call any man common or unclean” (Acts 10:28). Peter taught a radical new perspective to those who were present in Caesarea: “God is no respecter of persons: But in every nation he that feareth him, and worketh righteousness, is accepted with him” (Acts 10:34–35). The Lord had previously sent an angel to Cornelius, preparing him to receive the good news from Peter (see Acts 10:1–8, 30–33). After listening to Peter, many of the Gentiles who were present were filled with the Holy Ghost (see Acts 10:44–46). Peter then took those Gentiles who believed and “commanded them to be baptized in the name of the Lord” (Acts 10:48).

The conversion of Cornelius is extremely important. Before this point in the history of the early Church, all Christians were either Jews, who were already keeping the law of Moses, or “proselytes”—Gentiles who had previously converted to Judaism and were also keeping the law of Moses at the time they became Christians. Cornelius is identified as “a devout man, and one that feared God” (Acts 10:2). The descriptions “devout” and “God fearer” seem to be “quasi-technical phrases” that refer to Gentiles who were sympathetic toward Judaism and worshipped Jehovah, but were not keeping the regulations of the law of Moses, especially that of circumcision.
Christians were “astonished” (Acts 10:45) because the gifts of the Spirit were shared with those whom many considered their enemies. Thus Cornelius’ conversion was the first time in the early Church that an individual who was not already keeping the law of Moses was allowed to be baptized.22

Given the importance that most early Jewish Christians placed upon faithful observance of the law of Moses, it should come as no surprise that some Jewish members of the Church reacted less than enthusiastically to the news of Cornelius’ baptism. When Peter arrived in Jerusalem, Jewish Christians “contended with him” (Acts 11:12) because of his association with Gentiles.23 Peter defended himself by recounting the details of the dream he received from God and bore his solemn witness that “God gave [the Gentiles] the like gift as he did unto us, who believed on the Lord Jesus Christ; what was I, that I could withstand God?” (Acts 11:17).24 Many in the audience “glorified God” (Acts 11:18) because of the new revelation, but as we will see, resistance from Jewish Christians continued.25

The Council Proceedings

While Paul and Barnabas were in Asia Minor on their first mission, they experienced some success among groups of non-Jews (see Acts 13:7, 42, 48; 14:1, 21–23). When they returned to their headquarters in Antioch of Syria, Paul and Barnabas testified that God “had opened the door of faith unto the Gentiles” (Acts 14:27). While in Antioch, groups of Jewish Christians visiting from Judea were teaching the false doctrine, “Except ye be circumcised after the manner of Moses, ye cannot be saved” (Acts 15:1).26 Paul and Barnabas “had no small dissension and disputation with them” (Acts 15:2).27 After Paul received “revelation” on the matter (Galatians 2:2), he and the Christians in Antioch were convinced that he “should go up to Jerusalem unto the apostles and elders about this question” (Acts 15:2).28

In about AD 49 or 50, Paul and Barnabas traveled from Antioch to Jerusalem to meet with other leaders of the Church concerning whether Gentile converts should be compelled to keep the law of Moses.29 Along the way, Paul and Barnabas met with groups of Christians and were favorably received when they preached about “the conversion of the Gentiles” (Acts 15:3). Paul brought with him a new Gentile convert by the name of Titus, who had joined the Church but had not undergone circumcision (Galatians 2:1–3). Titus seems to have been brought along to encourage the leaders of the Church to make a firm decision on the matter: here was an uncircumcised
Gentile Christian—how would Peter and the Jewish Christians in Jerusalem respond toward him?10

The council was attended by a number of those who “were of reputation” within the Church at Jerusalem (Galatians 2:2), including “apostles and elders” (Acts 15:4). Paul and Barnabas were the first to speak, and they shared with the audience the success they had experienced among the Gentiles during their mission (see Acts 15:4). In his letter to the Galatians, Paul indicated that the Church leaders in attendance at this meeting recognized the inspiration of his mission to the Gentiles (see Galatians 2:7). Jewish Christians who had been Pharisees, however, interjected that “it was needful to circumcise them, and to command them to keep the law of Moses” (Acts 15:5). The leaders at the council discussed the issue with no immediate resolution (see Acts 15:6–7).

Peter, who was the leader of the Church, arose and reminded those who were present of his revelation concerning Gentiles and the prophetic interpretation of his dream—that God “put no difference between us and them, purifying their hearts by faith” (Acts 15:9). He then bore his witness that “through the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ we shall be saved, even as they” (Acts 15:11). Peter likened the requirement to keep the regulations of the law of Moses unto a burdensome “yoke upon the neck of the disciples, which neither our fathers nor we were able to bear” (Acts 15:10). Following this, Paul and Barnabas addressed the audience a second time and reinforced Peter’s declaration by recounting the “miracles and wonders God had wrought among the Gentiles by them” (Acts 15:12).

The final speaker at the meeting was James, the brother of Jesus.31 By the time of the Jerusalem Council, Paul recognized James as one of the “pillars” (Galatians 2:9) or leaders of the Church alongside Peter and John.32 While Peter was the overall leader of the early Church, James seems to have been functioning as the local leader of the branch of Jewish Christians in Jerusalem.33 James acknowledged Peter’s experiences concerning the Gentiles and declared that they fulfilled Amos’s prophecy that non-Israelites would seek after the truth of the Lord (compare Acts 15:16–17 with Amos 9:11–12). Thus, following the testimonies of Paul, Barnabas, Peter, and James, the stage was set for the important verdict.

The Decision of the Council

After the leaders had discussed their views on the matter, James announced the decision of the council.34 One might have expected Peter, the chief
Apostle and leader of the entire Church, to be the one to make the announce-
ment. But recall that Peter’s reputation had suffered because of his association
with Cornelius and other Gentiles at Caesarea (see Acts 11:1–4). In addi-
tion, James was the leader of the Jerusalem branch, many of whom seem to
have been in attendance (see Acts 15:4, 22). Therefore, James was the logi-
cal choice to deliver the decision of the council. It is likely that the Jewish
Christians would be more willing to accept whatever verdict was given if it
came from their own respected leader.

James charged the Jewish Christians to “trouble not them, which from
among the Gentiles are turned to God” (Acts 15:19). This first expression
may have initially sounded like a complete victory for the Gentile Christians—
freedom from all the requirements of the law of Moses. But then James
clarified the decision, stating that Gentiles should “abstain from pollutions
of idols, and from fornication, and from things strangled, and from blood”
(Acts 15:20). These rules are not just random moral obligations—they are all
regulations from the law of Moses.

The term “fornication” is a translation of the Greek word ψευδοσθολοφεία. It is
used in the Septuagint—or Greek version—of Leviticus 18:6–18 to describe
various types of prohibited sexual unions. The other three prohibitions are
from Leviticus 17:8–15 and describe requirements for non-Israelites who
were living among Israelites. Such individuals were required to worship
the Lord Jehovah rather than false idols (see Leviticus 17:8–9), abstain from
eating animals that had not been properly or ritually prepared and drained
of their blood (i.e. “strangled”) (see Leviticus 17:13–15), and refrain from
ingesting animal blood (see Leviticus 17:10–12). According to Paul, the lead-
ers in Jerusalem also asked Paul “to remember the poor” (Galatians 2:10),
which, Paul affirmed, he was already eager to do. Both Paul and Barnabas had
already been active in gathering assistance for those in need at Jerusalem (see

Thus, while Gentile Christians were not forced to submit to circumcision,
they were expected to keep four regulations from the law of Moses. This is
important because it is sometimes thought that the law of Moses was com-
pletely rescinded, but such is not the case. The decision of the leaders at
the Jerusalem Conference was ratified by the Holy Ghost (see Acts 15:28),
but it was, in essence, a concession. The Jewish Christians, on the one hand,
wanted the Gentile members to be required to keep the entire law of Moses.
The Gentile Christians, on the other hand, desired complete freedom from
Mosaic regulations, especially circumcision. The leaders settled upon an inspired solution which, they hoped, would appease both sides.39

The limited scope of this concession, however, is sometimes overlooked. While Gentile converts would not be required to undergo circumcision or keep all aspects of the Mosaic law, it is important to note that the council made no declaration concerning whether or not Jewish Christians needed to continue keeping the law of Moses. This compromise permitted the Jewish Church members to maintain their previous practice of following the Mosaic regulations if they desired.40 In fact, there is evidence in the Book of Acts that Jewish Christians continued to keep aspects of the law of Moses well after the Jerusalem Council.41 The decision at the conference addressed only the relationship of Gentile Christians—not Jewish Christians—to the Mosaic law.

Since Peter knew that the law of Moses was not necessary for salvation—for either Jew or Gentile—why did the Church leaders not come down more firmly on this important issue? Why did they not simply declare the truth and let the consequences follow? Robert J. Matthews has suggested a number of possibilities: “Perhaps they hoped to avoid dividing the Church and alienating the strict Jewish members. Likewise, they would not have wanted to invite persecution from nonmember Jews. . . . By wording the decision the way they did, the Brethren probably avoided a schism in the Church and no doubt also the ire that would have come from the Jews had the decision been stronger. There must have been many who preferred a stronger declaration, but the Brethren acted in the wisdom requisite for their situation.”42

In order to inform the general membership of the Church of the council’s decision, the leaders composed a letter contradicting the previous teachings of the Jewish Christians and announcing the new policy.43 This letter read in part: “We have heard, that certain [men] which went out from us have troubled you with words, subverting your souls, saying, Ye must be circumcised, and keep the law, . . . [but] we gave no such commandments” (Acts 15:24).44

In addition, in order to help reassure these Christians that the letter contained a genuine pronouncement and it was not a fraud, the leaders sent “chief men among the brethren” (Acts 15:22), named Judas Barsabas and Silas, to accompany Paul and Barnabas and act as witnesses of the decision of the council.45
Reactions and Results

Apparently, not all Jewish Christians readily accepted the ruling of the Jerusalem Council. At some point after it took place, Peter and Paul were eating with some Gentile converts in Antioch when a group of Jewish Christians arrived from Jerusalem. Peter, the head of the Church, “withdrew and separated himself” (Galatians 2:12) because, in the opinion of Paul, he feared the disapproval of the Jewish Christians, who viewed eating with Gentiles as violating the law of Moses (see Galatians 2:12).

Paul was upset because Peter’s actions were having a negative effect upon those who were present, including Paul’s close friend and companion Barnabas (see Galatians 2:13). Paul felt that the example of Peter would completely undermine the decisions that had been made at the Jerusalem Conference and influence Gentiles to think they needed to “live as do the Jews” (Galatians 2:14), probably meaning to submit to the regulations of the Mosaic law. Paul likened these Jewish Christians unto “false brethren” whom he felt, in essence, were attempting to once again bring non-Jews into spiritual bondage by requiring them to keep the Jewish law (Galatians 2:4). In response to this issue, Paul boldly testified concerning the true relationship between salvation and keeping the law of Moses: “A man is not justified by the works of the law [of Moses], but by the faith of Jesus Christ, even we have believed in Jesus Christ, that we might be justified by the faith of Christ, and not by the works of the law [of Moses]: for by the works of the law [of Moses] shall no flesh be justified” (Galatians 2:16).

One may wonder why Peter, who had recently received an important revelation concerning Gentiles, who had authorized the baptism of the Gentile Cornelius, and who had testified at the Jerusalem Conference, would respond this way. In defense of the chief Apostle, however, one should recall that Peter was the leader of a relatively small church that was composed of two emotionally fragile factions; the situation was delicate. The Jewish Christians, on the one hand, did not appreciate the reluctance of some Gentiles to submit to the regulations of the Mosaic law, especially circumcision. Paul and his followers, on the other hand, were not worried about offending the feelings of the Jewish Christians who still held fast to the traditions of the law of Moses. Peter the prophet, naturally, loved and was concerned about both Jewish and Gentile members of the Church.

It was a no-win situation for Peter. If he continued eating with the Gentiles, he would offend the visiting group of Jewish Christians. If he departed, he
would offend Paul and the Gentile Christians in Antioch. No compromise was possible. Either way, he was going to hurt some feelings. Maybe Peter felt that an offended Paul would still remain true, while an offended group of Jewish Christians would potentially influence many others to dissent or leave the young church. In any case, Peter chose to leave. The ambiguity of Jewish Christian attitudes toward the law of Moses would unfortunately continue for decades.

Conclusion

There are lessons that one can learn from this interesting episode in earliest Christian history. First, as Robert J. Matthews has pointed out, there can be “a conflict between culture and doctrine.” Because the law of Moses had been the central feature of Jewish life for over one thousand years it was extremely difficult to give up even after it was fulfilled in Christ. Applying the lessons learned from the Jerusalem Council, Elder Spencer J. Condie observed, “Sometimes cultural customs obfuscate eternal principles.” Indeed, true disciples of Jesus Christ must be willing and able to give up long-held traditions when they conflict with living the principles of the gospel.

Second, the events associated with the Jerusalem Council clearly demonstrate the necessity of having a living prophet to receive continuing revelation and teach the will of God concerning current circumstances. Richard Lloyd Anderson explained, “The apostles were inspired to go beyond the Bible, to reverse the lesser law given earlier and to extend the higher law through Christ. In other words, not past scripture but new revelation was the foundation of the Church of Christ.” This is a fundamental truth of the restored gospel.

As Elder Dallin H. Oaks taught, “For us, the scriptures are not the ultimate source of knowledge, but what precedes the ultimate source. The ultimate knowledge comes by revelation,” particularly “through those we sustain as prophets, seers, and revelators.” The Lord himself has declared to his Saints in the latter days: “Whether by mine own voice or the voice of my servants, it is the same” (D&C 1:38). Obedience to the teachings of living prophets and apostles is always the safest path as we face decisions concerning our own cultural or traditional preferences and the revealed will of God.

Notes

2. For the creed and canons of the Council of Nicaea, see Bart D. Ehrman and Andrew S. Jacobs, *Christianity in Late Antiquity 300–450 C.E.* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 251–56.


6. Paul taught that the law of Moses was “ordained by angels in the hand of a mediator” and was “our schoolmaster to bring us unto Christ” (Galatians 3:19, 24).

7. The law of Moses was not fulfilled at the birth of Jesus Christ, but rather at his death. Therefore, disciples of Christ were obligated to keep the law of Moses during the mortal ministry of the Savior (compare 3 Nephi 1:23–25 with 3 Nephi 9:17–20). The Savior’s attitude toward the oral traditions, which some Jews felt were equally as binding as the written law, is illustrated in Matthew 15:1–6.

8. The Joseph Smith Translation includes the following statement: “Whosoever shall do and teach these commandments of the law until it be fulfilled, the same shall be saved . . . in the kingdom of heaven” (JST, Matthew 5:121; emphasis added). For a convenient collection of all the JST changes in the New Testament, see Thomas A. Wayment, ed., *The Complete Joseph Smith Translation of the New Testament* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2005).

9. See also Exodus 22:21, Leviticus 19:33–34, and Deuteronomy 10:18; 23:7; 24:14. Israelites were also to allow Gentiles to rest on the Sabbath (see Exodus 23:12 and Leviticus 25:6), to glean the leftovers from the field (see Leviticus 19:10; 23:22 and Deuteronomy 24:19–21), to receive protection in any city of refuge (see Numbers 35:15), to be judged fairly according to the law (see Deuteronomy 1:16; 27:19), and to receive welfare support from the annual tithes (see Deuteronomy 14:28–29; 26:12).


12. The Old Testament also contains prophecies that the message of Jehovah would eventually be received by non-Israelites (see, for example, Matthew 4:14–16, which quotes Isaiah 9:1–2).

13. For example, the resurrected Savior declared to the Nephites, concerning his teaching to the Jews in John 10:16: “They understood not that the Gentiles should be converted through their preaching” (3 Nephi 15:22).

14. Peter was similarly accused. See, for example, Acts 10:28 and 11:2.

15. The Savior himself and the Apostle Paul were similarly accused (see Matthew 26:59–61; Mark 14:55–58; Acts 21:28 and 25:7–8).

16. Jeffrey R. Chadwick has proposed that the Savior never taught the Jewish Christians to stop keeping the law of Moses (see “What Jesus Taught the Jews about the Law of Moses,” in *The Life and Teachings of Jesus Christ: From the Transfiguration through the Triumphant Entry*, ed. Richard Neitzel Holzapfel and Thomas A. Wayment [Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2006], 176–207). Most Latter-day Saint scholars, however, interpret such passages as JST, Matthew
5:19, Alma 25:15, Alma 34:13–14, 3 Nephi 9:17–20, 3 Nephi 15:3–8, Moroni 8:8, and Galatians 3:24–25 to refer to all followers of Christ, regardless of their lineage.

17. It is extremely difficult to date these events with precision. Acts 1 begins forty days after the crucifixion of the Savior (c. AD 30–33) and Acts 12 describes how James was martyred shortly before the death of Herod Agrippa I (c. AD 44). Therefore Peter’s vision occurred somewhere in the late 30s or early 40s. It is interesting to note that Simon was a tanner (see Acts 9:43)—a man who worked with animal hides to sell the leather. The law of Moses forbade contact with the carcasses of certain dead animals (see, for example, Leviticus 11:24–40). Thus, tanners not only were generally looked down upon in Jewish society, but also would have been ritually unclean according to the law of Moses (see C. K. Barrett, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles* [Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1994], 1:486–87; F. F. Bruce, *The Book of the Acts*, rev. ed. [Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1988], 200).


19. Note also the threefold repetition of Moroni’s appearance to Joseph Smith (see Joseph Smith—History 1:30–47). The Prophet Joseph Smith stated that such repetition left very deep impressions upon his mind (see Joseph Smith—History 1:46). It is possible that Peter’s dream was also repeated to achieve such lasting impressions.

20. There were proselytes in the audience on the Day of Pentecost (see Acts 2:10) who may have heeded Peter’s call to be baptized (see Acts 2:38, 41). Nicolas, one of the “seven men of honest report” (Acts 6:3) who were given the responsibility to oversee the temporal welfare of “the Grecians” (Acts 6:1), or Greek-speaking members of the Church, is specifically identified as “a proselyte of Antioch” (Acts 6:5). See Robert J. Matthews, “The Jerusalem Council,” in *Sperry Symposium Classics: The New Testament*, ed. Frank F. Judd Jr. and Gaye Strathearn (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University: 2006), 257.


22. Robert J. Matthews stated: “Cornelius is a good man, an Italian, and a soldier, but he is not a proselyte to Judaism. . . . This is the first clear case of a Gentile coming into the Church without having first complied with the law of Moses through circumcision and so forth” (“The Jerusalem Council,” 258).

23. See Acts 11:3. These Jewish Christians who defended keeping the law of Moses are sometimes called “Judaizers” by modern scholars.

24. Similarly, after the prophet Wilford Woodruff announced that the practice of plural marriage was being rescinded, he testified: “I should have let all the temples go out of our hands; I should have gone to prison myself, and let every other man go there, had not the God of heaven commanded me to do what I did do” (*Deseret Weekly*, November 14, 1891; excerpt reprinted following Official Declaration 1 in the Doctrine and Covenants).

25. There were a number of Jewish Christians who would continue to go forth “preaching the word to none but unto the Jews only” (Acts 11:19).

26. Elder Bruce R. McConkie pointed out, “This is not circumcision as an operation for reasons of health or personal hygiene, but circumcision as a saving ordinance, as a part of the plan of salvation” (*Doctrinal New Testament Commentary* [Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1971], 2:139). Richard Lloyd Anderson stated, “Circumcision symbolized this issue, but Judaizers were talking about hundreds of obligations beyond circumcision” (*Understanding Paul*, 2nd ed. [Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2007], 50). In sum, as Robert J. Matthews taught, “The manner in which the word *circumcised* is used throughout the book of Acts and the Epistles
is generally as a one-word representation for the entire law of Moses; hence when the Jewish members of the Church insisted that Gentiles be circumcised, they meant that the Gentiles should obey all the law of Moses” (“The Jerusalem Council,” 260–61; emphasis in original).

27. It is not necessary to suppose that these Judaizers were evil. As Sidney B. Sperry taught, they “were in most respects good Church members,” and they “were simply a party of otherwise good men who needed a considerably broader and more accurate outlook on the teachings of Christianity” (Paul’s Life and Letters [Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1955], 55).

28. A minority of scholars feel that Paul’s epistle to the Galatians should be dated before the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15, and therefore Galatians 2 does not describe Paul’s view on the proceedings of that conference. See, for example, Ben Witherington III, Grace in Galatia: A Commentary on St. Paul’s Letter to the Galatians (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), 8–20. Most scholars, however, conclude that Galatians was written after the Jerusalem Council and therefore Galatians 2 contains Paul’s perspective on that council (see James D. G. Dunn, Christianity in the Making, vol. 2: Beginning from Jerusalem [Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008], 446–47).

29. The arguments concerning the date of the Jerusalem Council are complex. Most scholars estimate that it took place around AD 49 or 50. On this issue see J. Louis Martyn, Galatians (New York: Doubleday, 1997), 180–82; and Matthews, “The Jerusalem Council,” 263.

30. Sidney B. Sperry referred to Titus as a “test case” (Paul’s Life and Letters, 59).

31. James was technically the half-brother of Jesus. According to the Gospel of John, the brothers of Jesus did not believe in Jesus during his mortal ministry (see John 7:5). See also Mark 3:21, where “his friends” should probably be translated as “his family.” Later, the resurrected Savior appeared to his brother James (see 1 Corinthians 15:7). On this, see Gerald N. Lund, “I Have a Question,” Ensign, September 1975, 36–37. The brothers of Jesus were included among those who were praying with Mary the mother of Jesus after the Resurrection (see Acts 1:14). Paul refers to James as an Apostle (see Galatians 1:19).

32. James, the brother of John, had been martyred earlier by the order of Herod Agrippa I (see Acts 12:1–2).


35. See Lancelot C. L. Brenton, The Septuagint with Apocrypha: Greek and English (Hendrickson: Peabody, MA, 1986), 152–53. Similarly, Paul uses the term porneia in 1 Corinthians 5:11 to refer to illicit sexual relations.

36. See Leviticus 17:8: “Whatsoever man there be of the house of Israel, or of the strangers which sojourn among you” (emphasis added).

37. See Wayment, From Persecutor to Apostle, 104.


39. Sidney B. Sperry taught that “Paul would, of course, have no objection to the prohibitions added at the end of the letter [i.e. the announcement of the decision], since they involved no important principles for which he had fought so hard” (Paul’s Life and Letters, 61).
40. See Larsen, “Some Thoughts on Goal-Setting,” 64; see also Anderson, Understanding Paul, 51; Matthews, “The Jerusalem Council,” 263; Sperry, Paul’s Life and Letters, 63; and Wayment, From Persecutor to Apostle, 104.

41. When Paul visited Jerusalem in Acts 21, possibly around a decade after the decision made at the Jerusalem Council, James informed him that there were still “thousands” of Jewish Christians who were “zealous of the law” (Acts 21:20). For further references, see Chadwick, “What Jesus Taught the Jews about the Law of Moses,” 183–88.


43. Similarly, when plural marriage was rescinded during the administration of Wilford Woodruff and when the priesthood was extended to all worthy males during the presidency of Spencer W. Kimball, the First Presidency issued letters announcing the revelations and the new policies. For excerpts of these letters, see Official Declarations 1 and 2 in the Doctrine and Covenants.

44. At a later point in the narrative, Luke, the writer of Acts, refers to these letters as “decrees” (Acts 16:4). The Greek word translated as “decree” is the same word that Luke uses elsewhere (e.g., Luke 2:1 and Acts 17:7) when describing “official edicts of the Roman Emperor” (Anderson, Understanding Paul, 52).

45. See Acts 15:22, 25, 27. The issue of forgery was a real one even during this early period. Paul warned the Thessalonian Christians: “Be not soon shaken in mind, or be troubled, neither by spirit, nor by word [or rumor], nor by letter as from us” (2 Thessalonians 2:3; emphasis added). Some person had apparently forged a letter in the name of Paul (i.e., as if from Paul).

46. See Galatians 2:12. This likely included partaking of the sacrament of the Lord’s supper. On this, see F. F. Bruce, The Epistle to the Galatians: A Commentary on the Greek Text (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1982), 129; and Martyn, Galatians, 252.

47. For an in-depth study of the proper balance between faith and works, see Stephen E. Robinson, Believing Christ (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1992).

48. Sidney B. Sperry suggested that Peter “may have recognized in the party certain weak persons whose faith could be hurt if they discovered their great leader’s close and continued association with the Gentiles” (Paul’s Life and Letters, 64).

49. Robert J. Matthews observed, “In avoiding a major division in the Church, they also created in effect two types of practice within the Church: the Jewish practice with the law of Moses, and the Gentile practice without the law of Moses” (Behold the Messiah: New Testament Insights from Latter-day Revelation [Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1994], 306).


51. Spencer J. Condie, Your Agency: Handle with Care (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1996), 51.

52. Anderson, Understanding Paul, 51.

The Lord communicates through dreams. Here Joseph of Egypt is interpreting the dreams of the chief butler and the chief baker.
Quiet Slumber: Revelation through Dreams

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“For God speaketh once, yea twice, yet man perceiveth it not. In a dream, in a vision of the night, when deep sleep falleth upon men, in slumberings upon the bed; then he openeth the ears of men, and sealeth their instruction” (Job 33:14–16).

“We Have a Right to Revelation” through Dreams

Near the end of his Liberty Jail ordeal, the Prophet Joseph Smith conveyed to Isaac Galland: “We believe that we have a right to revelations, visions, and dreams from God, our Heavenly Father; and light and intelligence, through the gift of the Holy Ghost . . . on all subjects pertaining to our spiritual welfare; if it so be that we keep his commandments, so as to render ourselves worthy in his sight.” Joseph Smith experienced and understood revelation, and the Prophet’s life teaches us that as we live in righteousness our Father in Heaven will communicate in a variety of ways and in unique circumstances.

Sometimes references in the scriptures to visions and dreams are used interchangeably. Elder Bruce R. McConkie made the distinction: “An
inspired dream is a vision given to a person while he sleeps. . . . All inspired dreams are visions, but all visions are not dreams. Visions are received in hours of wakefulness or of sleep and in some cases when the recipient has passed into a trance; it is only when the vision occurs during sleep that it is termed a dream.” Sleep is something we all have in common. What satisfaction or level of enjoyment we gain from the experience varies, as does the effect it has on our mind and heart. Most of our subconscious state goes without memory. Irrational and absurd dreams are easily dismissed by an individual who has the Spirit of God. But on occasion the Lord judiciously issues dreams for his divine purposes and an individual’s personal growth. Elder Parley P. Pratt, who was himself given to prophetic dreams, described:

In all ages and dispensations God has revealed many important instructions and warnings to men by means of dreams.

When the outward organs of thought and perception are released from their activity, the nerves unstrung, and the whole of mortal humanity lies hushed in quiet slumbers, in order to renew its strength and vigor, it is then that the spiritual organs are at liberty, in a certain degree, to assume their wonted functions, to recall some faint outlines, some confused and half-defined recollections, of that heavenly world, and those endearing scenes of their former estate, from which they have descended in order to obtain and mature a tabernacle of flesh.

Elder Pratt alluded to instructions and warnings as the purpose for God giving dreams to individuals at times. He also suggested that dreams are sometimes for “recall” or divine recollections of our origin and purpose as we journey in the flesh and develop a “mature tabernacle of flesh.” Dreams may also confirm premonitions or show something that is about to happen. An inspired dream might entail a warning—a rebuke for course correction—it might convey a direct command to do something, or it might serve as spiritual assurance or bestow a promise. In every dispensation dreams have been a prevalent spiritual gift, and the gift is validated in scripture.

**Dreams in the Standard Works**

That our Father in Heaven communicates through dreams is indicated early in the standard works. For example, in the Old Testament we read of dreams given to Abimelech, Jacob, Laban the Syrian, Joseph, and two men—a baker and a butler—from Pharaoh’s court. In the New Testament, the book of Matthew identifies six dreams: four to Joseph, one to the Wise Men, and one to Pilate’s wife regarding the Savior’s innocence. In the Book of Mormon, Lehi took his family into the wilderness based upon a divine dream. It was
a dream that sent Nephi and his brothers back for the brass plates and most likely for Ishmael’s family. Lehi also had a dream (vision) regarding the tree of life.

Four significant individuals given to dreams stand apart in the scriptures: Joseph of Egypt, Daniel, Joseph the carpenter, and Lehi.7

**Joseph of Egypt.** Around the age of seventeen, Joseph had two dreams, the imagery of which varied. But the meaning of the dreams was one and the same. In them obeisance, an act of reverence by bowing in honor, was made to young Joseph (see Genesis 37:7–9). The fact that he conveyed the dreams to his family suggests that he felt the dreams had significance and were sent by God, but doing so elicited his brothers’ envy and his father’s rebuke. We do not know from the text how much he understood the meaning of the dreams or the timeline for their fulfillment.

Joseph exhibited the gift to interpret dreams as well,8 a gift the Pharaoh’s chief butler came to appreciate and the Pharaoh’s chief baker to loathe. Furthermore, this gift helped Joseph gain audience in Pharaoh’s court. When brought before the Pharaoh, Joseph was presented with two dreams of proportioned imagery. He interpreted the Pharaoh’s dreams of kine and ears of corn and explicated the foreshadowing of seven years of plenty and seven years of drought. Joseph assured the Pharaoh of the interpretation by noting, “The dream was doubled unto Pharaoh twice; it is because the thing is established by God, and God will shortly bring it to pass” (Genesis 41:32). It was a precedent or pattern he understood from personal experience.

Under the circumstances it would be natural that Joseph would recall his own “doubled” dreams in which his family made obeisance to him. Dreams that have been doubled, or multiplied, should be given somber attention both in reflection and in writing, and the recipient should “[keep] all these things, and [ponder] them” (Luke 2:19). But it must be remembered that for an individual to pretend to have the gift of the interpretation of dreams, or for an individual to share nonsensical dreams as a divine message from God, would be detrimental—spiritually and mentally. The Lord has warned: “I am against them that prophesy false dreams . . . and cause my people to err by their lies, and by their lightness; yet I sent them not, nor commanded them” (Jeremiah 23:32). But such was not the case with Joseph, and there is solid evidence that Joseph was purposefully placed to fulfill his role in mortality. The Lord likewise inspired his interpretation of the Pharaoh’s dreams. It is safe to assume Joseph respected his gifts regarding dreams and acted with the
sanction of the spirit. Pharaoh himself exclaimed, “Can we find such a one as this is, a man in whom the Spirit of God is?” (Genesis 41:38).

Daniel. Like Joseph, Daniel was prominent among the kings of his day. He was also a recipient and an interpreter of dreams. Daniel’s youthful obedience resulted in God giving him “knowledge and skill in all learning and wisdom,” with “understanding in all visions and dreams” (Daniel 1:17). Daniel had “purposed in his heart that he would not defile himself” (Daniel 1:8) with the king’s offerings of food and wine, and his exactness in honoring the laws of God blessed him with an illuminating spiritual and physical countenance. King Nebuchadnezzar and others in the Babylonian court recognized Daniel’s remarkable ability to know “of things both of heaven and in the earth” (D&C 88:79).

Calling upon three friends equal in spiritual stature, Daniel pleaded with the “God of heaven concerning [the] secret” (Daniel 2:18) dreams that troubled Nebuchadnezzar’s spirit. These noble young men desired not only the mercies of God for themselves but for the benefit of others; for the king’s hasty decree was to kill all the wise men. Daniel never failed to recognize that “wisdom and might” (Daniel 2:20) come from the Lord. He testified to Nebuchadnezzar that “there is a God in heaven that revealeth secrets” (Daniel 2:28). Surely this wasn’t the first secret or revelation made known to Daniel. His confidence in inquiring of the Lord must have been preceded by individual moments with the Lord that gave him unflinching assurance that he could boldly declare to Nebuchadnezzar, “The dream is certain, and the interpretation thereof sure” (Daniel 2:45).

Daniel was also the recipient of a dream detailing events in the last days. In this case we know “he wrote the dream, and told the sum of the matters” (Daniel 7:1). In general, recording dreams strengthens the relationship between the Lord and the individual to which the dream is given. As we record inspired dreams, we can more readily see the Lord’s hand in our life and his tender mercies extended in our behalf. The Book of Daniel provides several accounts wherein we see the Lord blessing Daniel with knowledge and wisdom through dreams and visions. In large part this is the result of Daniel’s inquisitive mind and heart and his desire to know the truth and interpretation of that which God was generously bestowing upon him (see Daniel 7:16).

Joseph the carpenter. Matthew, in his Gospel, indentified the gift of dreams while narrating the Savior’s birth and later at his trial before Pilate. Matthew
recounts that “While [Joseph] thought” of his future wife’s pregnancy “an angel of the Lord appeared unto [Joseph] in a dream.” The angel’s declaration that the child was in fact Father in Heaven’s begotten son assured Joseph to faithfully enter into the pending marriage (see Matthew 1:19–20). Joseph’s logical and rational mindset as he pondered the news of Mary’s pregnancy prepared his mind and heart to be receptive to a dream confirmed not only by the Holy Ghost but by a heavenly messenger as well.

To counter the evil intentions of Herod after the Savior’s birth, the Lord warned the wise men from the East through a dream to depart out of the region “another way.” He furthermore told Joseph in a dream to “flee into Egypt.” After the death of Herod, Joseph was told in a dream to return to the “land of Israel.” His dreams, the angel’s directions, and his spiritual impressions led Joseph and Mary to Galilee. His obedience to spiritual impressions brought him into harmony with God and the prophecies of ancient patriarchs and prophets (see Matthew 2).

Matthew stands alone from the other Gospel writers in noting that Pilate’s wife “suffered many things” by a dream; having had it revealed to her that Jesus Christ was a “just man” (see Matthew 27:19). Her husband rejected her sufferings and pleas and did not concern himself with her dream. Pilate, much like Laman and Lemuel in the Book of Mormon, rejected his wife’s dream because he did not feel and understand the Spirit of the Lord and its workings upon God’s children. The Gospel of Matthew confirms the gift of dreams and contrasts how one man, Joseph, responded obediently while another man, Pilate, rejected the Lord’s intervention.

Lehi. Lehi’s dreams are an integral part of Nephite religious history. Over five hundred years after Lehi landed in the promised land, an anti-Christ named Korihor ridiculed the foolishness of Nephites who paid heed to dreams and visions. In his deceiving rhetoric, he said the priests “lead away this people after the foolish traditions of your fathers . . . and their dreams and their whims and their visions and their pretended mysteries” (Alma 30:27–28). Of course Korihor’s unbelief and cold-heartedness to the things of the Spirit mirrored the unbelief and cold-heartedness of Nephi’s brothers, Laman and Lemuel. Before coming to the promised land, Nephi’s two brothers could not see past the social standing and the material comforts of Jerusalem. Nephi noted, “They did murmur in many things against [Lehi], because he was a visionary man,” and claimed his exit from Jerusalem was “done because of the foolish imaginations of his heart” (1 Nephi 2:11). They could not
admit their materialistic inclinations and disinterest toward God’s commandments, and Lehi’s inspired dreams and visions could not reach their minds and hearts. Nephi summarized Laman and Lemuel’s rebellion and rejection of their father’s dreams matter-of-factly: “they knew not the dealings of that God who had created them” (1 Nephi 2:12). Their murmuring about “their father, because he was a visionary man,” led some family members to much sorrow, while other family members found great comfort in shared resentment. Nephi’s choice to exercise faith and to act on “great desires to know the mysteries of God” set an example for Lehi’s posterity (1 Nephi 2:16).

### Comprehensive list of dreams in the standard works

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Individual</th>
<th>Reference</th>
<th>Purpose of Dream</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Abimelech</td>
<td>Genesis 20:2–18</td>
<td>To [warn] Abimelech that his desire to take Sarah as a wife was contrary to the will of the Lord. Also, it shows Abimelech that God’s mercy protected “the integrity of his heart” and spared him from a grievous sin.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jacob</td>
<td>Genesis 28:10–22</td>
<td>To [assure and promise] Jacob that through him “all the families of the earth shall be blessed.” The dream proved that the Lord not only was at Beth-el but also was intimately involved in Jacob’s life: “I am with thee, and will keep thee in all places whither thou goest.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Genesis 31:10–11</td>
<td>To [command or instruct] Jacob to leave the house of Laban, his father-in-law.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Laban the Syrian</td>
<td>Genesis 31:24 (see also Genesis 24:50)</td>
<td>To [confirm] that Jacob’s secretive departure from Laban’s household was approved by God and that Jacob was commanded to return to the land of Canaan. Also it could be argued that God gave Laban this dream to [restrain] him from doing Jacob or his daughters harm or injustice.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joseph</td>
<td>Genesis 37:5–19</td>
<td>To [reveal] through imagery a future event. The fulfillment of the dream and its truthfulness would play out years later in Egypt.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chief butler and chief baker</td>
<td>Genesis 40:5–23</td>
<td>To [reveal or prepare] them for the verdict of their fate in Pharaoh’s court. Without Joseph the men would have been void of an interpretation. Not only given to dreams, Joseph was an interpreter of dreams and knew that all “interpretations belong to God” (see v. 8).</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Nebuchadnezzar  Daniel 2:1-45  To [reveal] unto Nebuchadnezzar the future kingdoms of the earth and their submission to the triumphant kingdom of God in the last days. To [trouble] the king so that he sought for a correct interpretation from an inspired individual, in this case Daniel.

Daniel  Daniel 7  To [reveal] significant future events. To [see and hear] saints of God from other realms. Daniel admitted that this dream “troubled” his thoughts, and his “countenance changed,” therefore keeping the “matter in [his] heart.”

Joseph the carpenter and husband of Mary  Matthew 1:20  To [comfort] Joseph regarding the news that his future wife Mary was with child. To [declare] the truth of the divinity of the child and his name.
Matthew 2:13  To [command] Joseph to go into Egypt to avoid the wrath and murderous spirit of Herod.
Matthew 2:19-22  To [command or instruct] Joseph to return unto the “land of Israel.” A subsequent dream led Joseph back to Galilee.

Wise Men from the East  Matthew 2:12  To [warn] the wise men not to return to Herod. We do not know to what extent they understood the dream, only that they faithfully responded to it.

Pilate’s wife  Matthew 27:19  We do not know the imagery or details of her dream, but it obviously [troubled] her soul. The power of her dream led her to confront her husband, who was deciding the fate of the Savior. Like Nebuchadnezzar, she was troubled, and she sought to alleviate the pressing feelings by speaking out on the Lord’s behalf. This shows that dreams may be troubling, agitating, or distressing for several reasons. They may also lead one to repentance.

Lehi  1 Nephi 2:2  To [command] Lehi to take his family into the wilderness.
1 Nephi 3:2  To [command or instruct] Lehi to send his sons back to Jerusalem for the “record of the Jews.”
1 Nephi 8:2–34  To [teach] Lehi visually the plan of salvation and the variety of lives individuals choose to live while in mortality.

Omer  Ether 9:3  Like Lehi, Omer was commanded to take his family out of the rebellious land. The Lord [warned] him through a dream. He too obeyed the revelation.
Dispensational Evidence of the Gift of Dreams

Prior to Joseph Smith’s First Vision, the Lord prepared the mind and heart of his father, Joseph Smith Sr., to believe his son’s vision. From 1811 to 1819, Joseph Smith Sr. received at least seven dreams, and his wife, Lucy Smith, detailed five of them. The first two dreams strike a peculiar familiarity to the dream and vision of the tree of life given to Lehi. Some authors have suggested that there could be as many as thirty correlations between the two dreams. This level of correlation is interesting, considering Lehi and Joseph Smith Sr. were separated by 2,400 years. Another unique component of Joseph Smith Sr.’s first two dreams was the theme of apostasy in modern-day religions. It is no wonder that he distanced himself from organized religion prior to the First Vision, notwithstanding pressure from family and friends.

In the third dream, “the guide,” or “attendant spirit,” common in most of his dreams, directed Joseph Smith Sr. to a garden. Once he arrived in the garden he was healed of an infirmity and honored by twelve wooden images which made obeisance to him. The fourth dream was more personalized and stressed the principle that justice must be satisfied and mercy is only granted when one pleads for the merits of Jesus Christ. The fifth dream Lucy recorded was the last of the seven dreams she said he had experienced. In this dream, his guide appeared to him and confirmed his integrity and character to be acceptable to the Lord, adding that this would be the last time he would be visited by the guide. Strikingly, the guide told Joseph Smith Sr. that “there is but one thing which you lack in order to secure your salvation.” However, he awoke before discovering what it was that he lacked.

The forthcoming events of the Restoration through his son Joseph Smith Jr. would bring ordinances and covenants assuring the venerable patriarch of future salvation. These dreams prepared Joseph Smith Sr. for what was about to unfold in the latter days and, more intimately, among his own family. When Joseph Smith Jr. approached his father and told him what had transpired during Moroni’s initial visits, his father counseled, “My son, these things are of God; take heed that you proceed in all holiness to do His will.” A messenger coming to his son must have resonated with the messenger in his own inspired dreams. Though the dreams of Joseph Smith Sr. were not recorded in Book of Commandments, their validity and timing confirm the Lord’s practice of reaching the children of men through this avenue of revelation.

Another significant reference to the importance of dreams as a source of revelation surfaced in the Prophet Joseph Smith’s life. The Prophet recorded
two significant dreams in the last four months of his life. These dreams seem to have been prescient relief to a man bogged down by the constant fury of his enemies. In early February 1844, Joseph had a dream about overcoming troubled waters, which he related to Wilford Woodruff, Willard Richards, and W. W. Phelps:

I was standing on a peninsula, in the midst of a vast body of water where there appeared to be a large harbor or pier built out for boats to come to. I was surrounded by my friends, and while looking at this harbor I saw a steamboat approaching the harbor. There were bridges on the pier for persons to cross, and there came up a wind and drove the steamboat under one of the bridges and upset it.

I ran up to the boat, expecting the persons would all drown; and wishing to do something to assist them, I put my hand against the side of the boat, and with one surge I shoved it under the bridge and righted it up, and then told them to take care of themselves. But it was not long before I saw them starting out into the channel or main body of the water again.

The storms were raging and the waters rough. I said to my friends that if they did not understand the signs of the times and the spirit of prophecy, they would be apt to be lost.

It was but a few moments after when we saw the waves break over the boat, and she soon foundered and went down with all on board.

The storm and waters were still very rough; yet I told my friends around me that I believed I could stem those waves and that storm, and swim in the waters better than the steamboat did; at any rate I was determined to try it. But my friends laughed at me, and told me I could not stand at all, but would be drowned.

The waters looked clear and beautiful, though exceedingly rough; and I said I believed I could swim, and I would try it anyhow. They said I would drown. I said I would have a frolic in the water first, if I did; and I drove off in the raging waves.

I had swam but a short distance when a towering wave overwhelmed me for a time; but I soon found myself on the top of it, and soon I met the second wave in the same way; and for a while I struggled hard to live in the midst of the storm and waves, and soon found I gained upon every wave, and skimmed the torrent better; and I soon had power to swim with my head out of water; so the waves did not break over me at all, and I found that I had swam a great distance; and in looking about, I saw my brother Samuel by my side.

I asked him how he liked it. He said, “First rate,” and I thought so too. I was soon enabled to swim with my head and shoulders out of water, and I could swim as fast as any steamboat.

In a little time it became calm, and I could rush through the water, and only go in to my loins, and soon I only went in to my knees, and finally could tread on the top of the water, and went almost with the speed of an arrow.

I said to Samuel, See how swift I can go! I thought it was great sport and pleasure to travel with such speed, and I awoke.16

A year prior to this dream Joseph taught, “To dream of flying signifies prosperity and deliverance from enemies. To dream of swimming in deep
water signifies success among many people, and that the word will be accompanied with power."\(^{17}\) So the dream appears to be a conspicuous compliment to his role as a dispensational head and to his being one who taught with power and authority.

The Prophet’s last dream came on his very last night of mortality. On June 26 in Carthage Jail, while Joseph was surrounded by murderous souls, the Lord painted the sad predicament of Joseph’s enemies. The dream also indicated the Prophet’s safe removal from their relentless torment. Joseph stated:

I was back in Kirtland, Ohio, and thought I would take a walk out by myself, and view my old farm, which I found grown up with weeds and brambles, and altogether bearing evidence of neglect and want of culture. I went into the barn, which I found without floor or doors, with the weather-boarding off, and was altogether in keeping with the farm.

While I viewed the desolation around me, and was contemplating how it might be recovered from the curse upon it, there came rushing into the barn a company of furious men, who commenced to pick a quarrel with me.

The leader of the party ordered me to leave the barn and farm, stating it was none of mine, and that I must give up all hope of ever possessing it.

I told him the farm was given me by the Church, and although I had not had any use of it for some time back, still I had not sold it, and according to righteous principles it belonged to me or the Church.

He then grew furious and began to rail upon me, and threaten me, and said it never did belong to me nor to the Church.

I then told him that I did not think it worth contending about, that I had no desire to live upon it in its present state, and if he thought he had a better right I would not quarrel with him about it but leave; but my assurance that I would not trouble him at present did not seem to satisfy him, as he seemed determined to quarrel with me, and threatened me with the destruction of my body.

While he was thus engaged, pouring out his bitter words upon me, a rabble rushed in and nearly filled the barn, drew out their knives, and began to quarrel among themselves for the premises, and for a moment forgot me, at which time I took the opportunity to walk out of the barn about up to my ankles in mud.

When I was a little distance from the barn, I heard them screeching and screaming in a very distressed manner, as it appeared they had engaged in a general fight with their knives. While they were thus engaged, the dream or vision ended.\(^{18}\)

Joseph’s last dream resonates with Mormon 4:5: “The judgments of God will overtake the wicked; and it is by the wicked that the wicked are punished.” The Lord removed Joseph out of the reach of wicked and corrupt men, leaving them to fight and murder each other; it is important to stress that the Lord took him. So it can be viewed that the next day the Lord took Joseph to another sphere of existence to continue the work which leads to the salvation and exaltation of man.
This dream confirms what the Lord taught his disciples: “And I say unto you my friends, Be not afraid of them that kill the body, and after that have no more that they can do” (Luke 12:4; see also Matthew 10:28). Through Joseph Smith Sr. and his son Joseph Smith Jr. we see that the Lord comforted and prepared these men for events that were to come to them. Both men prospered despite their circumstances, were delivered from their enemies’ malicious behaviors, and were taught the word of God which was accompanied with great power—their dreams assured them it was so.

“It is to teach us a principle.” President Wilford Woodruff proposed that “we may have dreams about things of great importance, and dreams of no importance at all. . . . There are a great many things taught us in dreams that are true, and if a man has the spirit of God he can tell the difference between what is from the Lord and what is not. . . . Whenever you have a dream that you feel is from the Lord, pay attention to it.” He illustrated this truth by recounting an occurrence during a mission in England:

When I was in the City of London on one occasion, with Brother George A. Smith, I dreamt that my wife came to me and told me that our first child had died. I believed my dream, and in the morning while at breakfast, I felt somewhat sad. Brother George A. noticed this and I told him my dream. Next morning’s post brought me a letter from my wife, conveying the intelligence of the death of my child. It may be asked what use there was in such a thing. I don’t know that there was much use in it except to prepare my mind for the news of the death of my child. But what I wanted to say in regard to these matters is, that the Lord does communicate some things of importance to the children of men by means of visions and dreams as well as by the records of divine truth. And what is it all for? It is to teach us a principle. We may never see anything take place exactly as we see it in a dream or a vision, yet it is intended to teach us a principle.19

The blow of Wilford Woodruff’s heartbreaking letter was softened by the Lord preparing him through his dream. He was certain the communication was from God, and George A. Smith would stand as a second witness to the truthfulness of the account. However, Wilford Woodruff had to determine the principle the Lord was teaching him with this dream for himself. Likewise, we must wisely discern what we are supposed to learn from our own inspired dreams.

*A glimpse of our glorious potential.* Dreams can encourage us in the path of righteousness and sustain us in afflictions. While frustrating mortal concerns bear down upon us, we may receive eternal glimpses of our future state of existence. In the winter of 1831–32 while suffering from an illness, Parley P.
Pratt, who helped establish the settlement of the Saints in western Missouri, experienced the following dream:

I thought I saw myself dressed in a clean and beautiful robe, white as snow, and extending from the neck downward in beautiful folds. On either breast were lines of golden writing, in large Roman letters, about a third of an inch in length, and the lines extending from the center of the breast on each side six or eight inches long. The upper line on each side appeared larger and more beautiful or conspicuous than the others; one of these lines was: “HOLY PROPHET,” and the other was: “NEW JERUSALEM.” On awaking from this dream I immediately called to mind the words of the Saviour to John the Revelator: “He that overcometh will I make a pillar in the temple of my God, and he shall go no more out; and I will write upon him the name of my God, and the name of the City of my God, which is New Jerusalem.”

Oliver Cowdery had baptized Parley a year and a half earlier in New York and Pratt had already become a noticeable pillar in God’s kingdom in the early days of the Restoration. He had quickly proven to be an avid missionary, exceptional teacher, and influential writer. Though Elder Pratt was sick and destitute in Missouri, the Lord permitted him a glimpse of his glorious potential (the purity and nature of his garments) and position (holy prophet/apostle) in the kingdom rolling forth. It is unlikely that it was a coincidence that the dream occurred on the very ground that had been declared six months earlier by the Lord as the land “appointed and consecrated for the gathering of the Saints, . . . the land of promise, and the place for the city of Zion [New Jerusalem]” (Doctrine & Covenants 57:1–2). Four years would lapse before Parley P. Pratt would be ordained an Apostle, and the New Jerusalem he and the other Saints sought to establish has yet to be built. Pratt noted the significance of the 1831 dream: “[It] certainly encouraged me, and enabled me to bear my sickness, privation and long absence from the wife and former friends more patiently.” Even today, dreams given to us as Latter-day Saints can encourage us as we face the vicissitudes of life.

To impel us to do that which is required. As a young Apostle, Spencer W. Kimball was privileged to learn from George F. Richards (1861–1950), who was an alert man and attentive to God-given dreams. He did not think they were the least unusual for the faithful. While addressing the topic of dreams in a general conference, President Kimball referred to the following experience told by George F. Richards in council with the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles nearly thirty years earlier.

I believe in dreams, brethren. The Lord has given me dreams which to me are just as real and as much from God as . . . any . . . that we might read in the scriptures.
It is not out of place for us to have important dreams. . . . More than 40 years ago I had a dream which I am sure was from the Lord. In this dream I was in the presence of my Savior as he stood mid-air. He spoke no word to me, but my love for him was such that I have not words to explain. I know that no mortal man can love the Lord as I experienced that love for the Savior unless God reveals it to him. I would have remained in his presence, but there was a power drawing me away from him.

As a result of that dream, I had this feeling that no matter what might be required of my hands, what the gospel might entail unto me, I would do what I should be asked to do even to the laying down of my life. . . . If only I can be with my Savior and have that same sense of love that I had in that dream, it will be the goal of my existence, the desire of my life.24

President Richards’s dream influenced his heart to yearn for the Savior’s love, it influenced his behavior to align his will with the Lord’s, and it drew out of him a greater desire to give his life in the work of the Lord. It was not unusual for him because he saw “things both in heaven and in earth” (D&C 88:79). He saw and, more importantly, felt a sense of love more gratifying than anything under his current situation. He would “recall some faint outlines . . . of that heavenly world” and the right he had to be a citizen with the Savior in a holy city.

“It means God knows who I am.” More recently Elder David A. Bednar shared an experience in general conference having to do with dreams. He spoke of an alert stake president who was prompted to know the names of all the youth in his stake. Shortly after learning all of their names from snapshots he had had taken, the Lord sent him a dream. Elder Bednar described the experience:

One night the priesthood leader had a dream about one of the young men whom he knew only from a picture. In the dream he saw the young man dressed in a white shirt and wearing a missionary name tag. With a companion seated at his side, the young man was teaching a family. The young man held the Book of Mormon in his hand, and he looked as if he were testifying of the truthfulness of the book. The priesthood leader then awoke from his dream.

At an ensuing priesthood gathering, the leader approached the young man he had seen in his dream and asked to talk with him for a few minutes. After a brief introduction, the leader called the young man by name and said: “I am not a dreamer. I have never had a dream about a single member of this stake, except for you. I am going to tell you about my dream, and then I would like you to help me understand what it means.” The priesthood leader recounted the dream and asked the young man about its meaning. Choking with emotion, the young man simply replied, “It means God knows who I am.”25

What is unique about this dream is that the stake president saw the young man’s bright future and not the young man’s current misdeeds. The
stake president shared the dream with the young man, an action that gave him hope and courage to make his life worthy of representing the Lord in the mission field. Elder Bednar explained that the boy and the stake president continued meeting and counseling together. Ultimately, the young man’s life was positively influenced by a priesthood leader who was entitled to a dream for the welfare of those to whom he ministered.

Conclusion

Like the stake president in Elder Bednar’s talk, it would not be out of line for those holding priesthood keys to receive dreams on behalf of those over whom they preside. Dreams concerning members of their ward or stake could help leaders guide individuals to salvation. They could also give the leader inspiration and direction as they counsel members of the Lord’s flock in their personal matters. Cautionary counsel dictates that we understand the sacredness of this type of revelation and its purpose. Unauthorized individuals would not and should not take license to counsel, correct, or share advice with someone in spiritual trouble because they dreamt about it the night before. Exceptions may be limited to family members, particularly fathers or mothers who dream of their children.

More often than not it would be unwise to solicit interpretation of dreams from a family member or a best friend. We do believe in the interpretation of dreams. This article identifies two individuals that saved people from starvation and premature death because they exercised their gift to interpret dreams. But typically this is a spiritual gift reserved for spiritually mature individuals under ordination from God. Remember Joseph of Egypt’s interrogative: “Do not interpretations belong to God?” (Genesis 40:8). Thus the Lord ought to be involved, and we ought to be desirous to “see, and hear and know” our own dreams “by the power of the Holy Ghost” (see 1 Nephi 10:17–19).

The Prophet Joseph Smith constantly urged the Saints to obtain knowledge of heaven for themselves: “It is a great thing to inquire at the hands of God, or to come into His presence; and we feel fearful to approach Him on subjects that are of little or no consequence, to satisfy the queries of individuals, especially about things the knowledge of which men ought to obtain in all sincerity, before God, for themselves, in humility by the prayer of faith.”

Sharing inspired dreams (or any personal revelation) should be guarded by inspired wisdom (see D&C 63:64). As he addressed the newly formed Quorum of Twelve Apostles in 1835, the Prophet encouraged propriety with
sacred experiences: “Let us be faithful and silent, brethren, and if God gives you a manifestation, keep it to yourselves.”

Similarly, the prophet Jeremiah had to confront people in his day who claimed to have inspired dreams or stole the words and revelations of others and manipulated them for their own dishonest purposes. Jeremiah declared: “I am against the prophets [false prophets or pretended prophets] . . . that steal my words everyone from his neighbor. . . . I am against [those] . . . that use their tongues and say, He saith. . . . Behold, I am against them that prophesy false dreams . . . and do tell them . . . and cause my people to err by their lies” (see Jeremiah 23:30–32).

In order to follow the Prophet Joseph’s counsel and to heed Jeremiah’s warning, consider the following three suggestions. First, keep the dream to yourself, unless impelled by the spirit to convey it in appropriate settings and at appropriate times (see Alma 12:9). Recall Wilford Woodruff’s suggestion in context that dreams are to teach you a principle. President Boyd K. Packer taught, “It is my conviction that experiences of a special, sacred nature are individual and should be kept to oneself.”

Second, allow the dream to play out in personal records and in time. This course of action will protect the sacredness of the revelation, and the dreams may have more of an influence on future posterity. The Lord is gracious enough to give us further revelation, no matter the avenue, so long as we can be trusted. Third, do not steal someone else’s spiritual experience and twist that experience for unrighteous purposes. President Harold B. Lee sadly observed, “It never ceases to amaze me how gullible some of our Church members are in broadcasting sensational stories or dreams or visions or purported patriarchal blessings or quotations . . . supposedly from some person’s private diary.”

Verifying dreams or visions from primary sources and understanding the context and circumstances under which they were given is sound gospel scholarship. It is also pleasing to the spirit and honors the recipient of the dream and protects them from undeserved ridicule or negative coloring of character.

Thankfully there are scriptural accounts, diaries, journals, and personal writings noting the intervention of God through inspired dreams. They witness that God does know who we are and that he desires to help lead us through this mortal experience. The precedent has long been established that our Father in Heaven speaks to his children. And on occasion, at the appointed time, and when we least expect it, the Lord “in a dream, in a vision of the night, when deep sleep falleth upon men, in slumberings upon the bed, . . . openeth the ears of men, and sealeth their instruction” (Job 33:15–16). In
the coming days, both old and young—both servants and handmaids—shall receive and be refreshed through the revelatory avenue of dreams (see Joel 2:28–29).

Notes

1. Joseph Smith to Isaac Galland, March 22, 1839, Liberty Jail, Liberty, Missouri, published in Times and Seasons, February 1840, 54; emphasis added. A year previous to his letter to Isaac Galland, the Prophet outlined what we now call the Articles of Faith. The seventh article states: “We believe in the gift of tongues, prophecy, revelation, visions, healing, interpretation of tongues, and so forth.” The phrase “and so forth” may include several other gifts, including dreams.

2. For an example of a vision given in broad daylight, see Gwen Marler Barney, Anson Call and the Rocky Mountain Prophecy (Salt Lake City: Call Publishing, 2002), 217–19. This vision occurred at Chicken Creek, August 17, 1853, while Anson Call sat in the front seat of his wagon.


4. In many instances it is important to record dreams. The Prophet would record dreams in the History of the Church. Not only did the Prophet have a few of his dreams recorded but dreams of others as well—for example, Heber C. Kimball (see History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, ed. B. H. Roberts, 2nd ed. rev. [Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1957], 4:203, 5:15–16) and Sally Knight, first wife of Newel Knight (see History of the Church, 1:101).

5. For a review of the dreams of Parley P. Pratt, see “visions” in the index of Autobiography of Parley P. Pratt (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1874). Visions and dreams were a gift of this early Apostle (Autobiography of Parley P. Pratt, 134).

6. Parley P. Pratt, Key to the Science of Theology (Liverpool: F. D. Richards, 1855), 120. See chapter 13 for Parley P. Pratt’s essay on dreams as an avenue of revelation.

7. We could also note Jacob, son of Isaac. The Lord gave him a specific dream perpetuating the covenant and promises made with his grandfather, Abraham. Jacob’s dream caused him to state, “Surely the Lord is in this place” (Genesis 28:16). This is a memorial to not only the experience at Beth-el, but also to Jehovah (see Genesis 28:10–22). God also “came to Abimelech in a dream” (Genesis 20:3). This Philistine king had innocently sought Sarah, Abraham’s wife, being told she was Abraham’s sister. But the Lord spared Sarah and Abraham the sorrow and Abimelech the condemnation because all three exemplified integrity pleasing to God (see Genesis 20:1–7).

8. Perhaps in exercising his gift to interpret dreams, Joseph more clearly found the meanings, blessings, and imminent fulfillment of his own dreams.

9. Daniel 10 recounts the intimate experience of the Lord revealing himself to Daniel.

10. Each account stated that he had dreamed or had awakened out of sleep. Lucy’s recollection of these dreams, five of which she recorded, can be found in Lucy Mack Smith, History of Joseph Smith by His Mother, ed. Preston Nibley (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1853), 47–69.


13. This dream would be a great complement to teaching Alma the Younger’s conversion, found in Mosiah 27 and Alma 36.


23. George F. Richards served as President of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles from 1945 to 1950. President Spencer W. Kimball and President Richards served in the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles together for nearly seven years.


27. Smith, History of the Church, 1:339.


29. Note that we are given the charge to impart. Spiritual maturity will help us determine appropriate times to share inspired dreams and manifestations.


31. Clyde J. Williams, ed., Teachings of Harold B. Lee: Eleventh President of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1996), 399.
Every experience can become a redemptive experience if we remain bonded to our Father in Heaven through that difficulty.
The unjust incarceration of the Prophet Joseph Smith in Liberty Jail during the bitter winter of 1838–39 embodies a poignant irony. In the narrow confines of that foul-smelling and vile dungeon, Joseph Smith received extraordinary revelations (see D&C 121–23). Commenting on the circumstances in which these revelations were received, Elder Jeffrey R. Holland taught, “Every experience can become a redemptive experience if we remain bonded to our Father in Heaven through that difficulty.” In essence, “man’s extremity is God’s opportunity . . . [because] He can turn the unfair and inhumane and debilitating prisons of our lives into temples—or at least into a circumstance that can bring comfort and revelation, divine companionship and peace.”

If every experience can become a redemptive experience, then even when we unfairly suffer there is reason to hope. Joseph Smith learned in Liberty Jail that when the faithful suffer injustice, such afflictions “shall give thee experience, and shall be for thy good” (D&C 122:7). Significantly, the Book of Mormon confirms this principle and provides compelling evidence of its efficacy. These Book of Mormon teachings will be the focus of this paper.
“Because of the Rudeness of Thy Brethren”

Jacob was Lehi’s firstborn son “in the days of [his] tribulation in the wilderness” (2 Nephi 2:1). During this eight-year journey, Lehi’s family did “wade through much affliction” (1 Nephi 17:1, 4). On one occasion, when they were “much fatigued, because of their journeying, [and] did suffer much for the want of food,” even Lehi “began to murmur against the Lord his God” for they “were all exceedingly sorrowful” (1 Nephi 16:19–20). And yet, when Lehi refers to the suffering of Jacob’s childhood he does not talk about hunger, thirst, or fatigue. Instead Lehi observes, “And behold, in thy childhood thou hast suffered afflictions and much sorrow, because of the rudeness of thy brethren” (2 Nephi 2:1; emphasis added).

According to the 1828 edition of An American Dictionary of the English Language, rudeness constitutes much more than impolite behavior. Rudeness implies a “coarseness of manners; incivility; rusticity; vulgarity.” It can also denote violence. Though Lehi does not specify who the rude brethren were, 1 Nephi provides compelling evidence that Laman and Lemuel would be included. The following table documents a pattern of behavior that impacts Lehi’s entire family and helps us to have a clear understanding of what Lehi means by rudeness.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reference</th>
<th>Rude behavior</th>
<th>Unjust suffering imposed on the innocent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 Nephi 3:28</td>
<td>“angry,” “hard words,” “they did smite us even with a rod”</td>
<td>Mental, emotional, and physical abuse</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 Nephi 7:16, 19</td>
<td>“angry,” “did lay their hands upon me,” “did bind me with cords, for they sought to take away my life,” “angry with me again, and sought to take away my life”</td>
<td>Mental, emotional, and physical abuse</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 Nephi 16:37</td>
<td>“let us slay our father, and also our brother Nephi”</td>
<td>Anxiety and fear over threats of murder</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 Nephi 17:17–19, 48</td>
<td>“Our brother is a fool,” “complain against me,” “when they saw I began to be sorrowful they were glad in their hearts,” “angry with me, and were desirous to throw me into the depths of the sea”</td>
<td>Mental, emotional, and physical abuse</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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While Laman and Lemuel may have rationalized their abusive behavior to Nephi because they felt he was usurping their authority (see 1 Nephi 16:37; 18:10; 2 Nephi 5:3), there is no morally compelling defense for how their rude behavior adversely impacted an entire family—including aged parents, women, and children. Consider their ocean voyage to the promised land. Once again they chose to express their anger towards Nephi through violence and “much harshness” (1 Nephi 18:11). Not satisfied to focus on him alone, they “did breathe out much threatenings against anyone that should speak for [Nephi]” (1 Nephi 18:17). What follows is the sad tale of how the innocent suffered at the hands of the wicked:

And my parents being stricken in years, and having suffered much grief because of their children, they were brought down, yea, even upon their sick-beds. Because of their grief and much sorrow, and the iniquity of my brethren, they were brought near even to be carried out of this time to meet their God; yea, their grey hairs were about to be brought down to lie low in the dust; yea, even they were near to be cast with sorrow into a watery grave.

And Jacob and Joseph also, being young, having need of much nourishment, were grieved because of the afflictions of their mother; and also my wife with her tears and prayers, and also my children, did not soften the hearts of my brethren that they would loose me. (1 Nephi 18:17–19; emphasis added)

The fact that Lehi’s family suffers because of Laman and Lemuel’s misuse of moral agency touches upon a rather thorny problem in traditional Christian theology. This problem is known as theodicy and seeks to vindicate the goodness of God in the face of evil. David L. Paulsen, professor of philosophy at BYU, succinctly captured the problem as follows: “Soaked as it is with human suffering and moral evil, how is it possible that our world is the work of an almighty, perfectly loving Creator?” For either “God is unwilling to prevent evil or He is unable. If he is unwilling, then He cannot be perfectly good; if He is unable, then He cannot be all powerful.” This problem is exacerbated by creedal Christianity’s insistence on an ex nihilo creation (out of nothing) and God’s “absolute foreknowledge of all the outcomes of His creative choices.” In this view, God “is an accessory before the fact and ultimately responsible for every moral and non-moral defect in the universe,” including the suffering of Lehi’s family. No doubt, faith is challenged when this conundrum is not persuasively addressed. Thankfully, Lehi carefully tackles this issue.
Opposition, Law, and Agency

Too often the problem of evil is mistakenly treated as a convergent problem that can be solved with simple, straightforward logic. Of convergent problems, E. F. Schumacher has written, “The more intelligently you (whoever you are) study them, the more the answers converge.” Eventually proposed solutions will yield to the solution that can then “be written down in the form of an instruction.” The reasoning employed to solve convergent problems is well-suited for objects void of “consciousness and self-awareness” such as the problems found in “the fields of physics, chemistry, astronomy, in abstract subjects like geometry and mathematics.” However, Schumacher continued, as soon as we introduce “higher Levels of Being, we must expect divergence, for there enters, to however modest a degree, the element of freedom and inner experience.” If divergent problems are to be properly understood, there must be an admission that “life is bigger than logic” and that “faculties of a higher order” must be employed to discover truth that transcends what appears to be prima facie contradictions. Informed by higher truth, what first may appear to be opposites “cease to be opposites; they lie down together peacefully like the lion and the lamb.” For example, treated as a convergent problem, the doctrines of justice and mercy are irreconcilable; however, when viewed as a divergent problem that must be transcended by the infinite Atonement, they are no longer contradictory foes but become essential doctrines in the plan of salvation.

Lehi addressed the ill effects of his son’s rude behavior as a divergent problem. He placed their evil behavior and the attendant consequences to the innocent within the context of the doctrine of moral agency. Lehi declared, “There is a God, and he hath created all things, both the heavens and the earth, and all things that in them are, both things to act and things to be acted upon” (2 Nephi 2:14; emphasis added). Endowed with moral agency, man has the power to act “for himself” (2 Nephi 2:16; see also Moses 4:3; 7:32; D&C 29:35). Lehi explained that this exercise of free will is essential to bring about God’s “eternal purposes in the end of man” (2 Nephi 2:15). And what is that end? The Lord unequivocally announced his ultimate purpose as follows: “For behold, this is my work and glory—to bring to pass the immortality and eternal life of man” (Moses 1:39). Elder Russell M. Nelson equated immortality and eternal life with the Lord’s command to be “perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect” (Matthew 5:48). Therefore, to gain immortality and eternal life is to achieve “eternal perfection.” Significantly,
with the “sublime gift” of agency, President James E. Faust taught, we can “grow, improve, progress, and seek perfection.” Agency is not incidental to achieving eternal perfection; it is essential to it.

In verses pregnant with metaphysical implications, agency is placed in the context of law and opposition (see 2 Nephi 2:10–16). The “ends of the law which the Holy One hath given” verify the underlying reality of opposition. To each law there are “affixed” (2 Nephi 2:10) consequences. Disobedience results in misery, while obedience produces happiness. Thus the very existence of law itself presupposes that there is an “an opposition in all things.” Without “an opposition in all things . . . righteousness could not be brought to pass, neither wickedness, neither holiness nor misery, neither good nor bad.” Void of opposition, “all things must needs be compound in one” and would “remain as dead” (v. 11). In other words, without opposition there would be no life, consciousness, intelligence, or awareness. We would be nothing more than dead matter—inanimate objects void of “sense [and] insensibility” (2 Nephi 2:11). “Unless there are opposites,” Elder Bruce R. McConkie concluded, “there is nothing.” Accordingly, from the beginning “there was an opposition; even the forbidden fruit in opposition to the tree of life; the one being sweet and the other bitter” (2 Nephi 2:15).

Soured by bitter consequences, people often malign God’s character. As we have already noted, we reason that if God is all-loving, he surely would not allow the innocent to suffer at the hands of the wicked. This argument implies that if God really loves us and is all-powerful he would protect the innocent from the Lamans and Lemuels of this world. Since he does not, then he is either not all-loving or not all-powerful, or worse yet—he is pathologically flawed. As persuasive as this argument may be, it fundamentally misunderstands the nature of God and ignores the given realities of opposition, law, and agency.

God is an eternal being who governs by eternal truth. Eternal truth “was not created or made” (D&C 93:29) and therefore it “abideth forever and ever” (D&C 1:39). In simple terms, God’s “law is the truth” (Psalm 119:142) because truth is God’s law. These laws were not created ex nihilo any more than matter can be created ex nihilo. John Cobb and Truman G. Madsen wrote, “God is not the only self-existent reality. The creation accounts and other texts teach that God is not a fiat creator but an organizer and life-giver . . . and that the undergirdings of eternal law . . . are coexistent with him (cf D&C 88:34–45). ‘Omnipotence,’ then, means God has all the power it is
possible to have in a universe . . . of these givens.” More to the point, God governs a universe in harmony with eternal law not contrary to it.

The fact that God governs by eternal law does not undermine his perfect love for us. Elder Dallin H. Oaks has taught, “The love of God does not supersede His laws and His commandments, and the effect of God’s laws and commandments does not diminish the purpose and effect of His love.” If we choose to violate eternal law we will experience the fruit of our choices. Even so, Elder Nelson reminded us, since God’s “love is infinite and universal,” he will still love us. Thus while God loves “both saints and sinners,” how they experience that love is conditioned upon their obedience to his laws.

God’s love cannot contravene his laws. To the contrary, Terryl L. Givens wrote, within the “parameters that Lehi and Alma have framed, there can be no escape from the consequences of law without destroying the moral order of the universe and both the human agency it grounds and the status of the divine Guarantor of the whole system.” If God’s love was used to remove negative consequences of our choices, then our moral agency would be negated, law would be violated, and justice would be eliminated. Such divine intervention would destroy the plan of salvation and therefore could hardly be considered an act of love. Truly, “God is omnipotent,” David Paulsen concluded, “but He cannot prevent evil without preventing greater goods and ends—the value of which more than offsets the dis-value of the evil: soul-making, joy, eternal (or godlike) life.” Alma articulated this reality clearly when he declared to his wayward son Corianton that “justice claimeth the creature and executeth the law, and the law inflicteth the punishment; if not so, the works of justice would be destroyed, and God would cease to be God” (Alma 42:22).

The grief, sorrow, and pain Laman and Lemuel’s rude behavior inflicted on Lehi’s family provides compelling evidence of the reality of opposition, law, and agency. There is no indication that God either caused or condoned their choices or the related suffering. Since he has granted man their agency, he permits the consequences of their choices to bear fruit. As a result, Elder Oaks observed, “God does not intervene to forestall the consequences of some persons’ choices in order to protect the well-being of other persons—even when they kill, injure, or oppress one another—for this would destroy His plan for our eternal progress. He will bless us to endure the consequences of others’ choices, but He will not prevent those choices.”
T erryl Givens succinctly summarized these Book of Mormon teachings as follows: “Genuine moral agency must entail necessary consequences. If choice is to be more than an empty gesture of the will, more than a mere pantomime of decision making, there must be an immutable guarantee that any given choice will eventuate in the natural consequence of that choice.”

This means that all choices, good or evil, “are allowed, inexorably, to bear their own fruit.” The bitter fruits of wicked choices are experienced by both the evil and the good, by both the perpetrator and the victim, by both the guilty and the innocent.

Nevertheless

When innocent people suffer collateral damage because of wickedness we should be careful not to imply that such suffering is God’s will. Elder Neal A. Maxwell affirmed, “God is not ‘responsible’ for our human misdeeds!” Latter-day Saints do not subscribe to Augustine’s premise that “God—and God alone—is the ultimate cause of all things.”

We do not propose, as Martin Luther did, that “Nothing whatever can exist or happen apart from God’s direct plan and causation.”

Evil and its unhappy consequences are evidence of a violation of God’s will, not a fulfillment of it (see Alma 41:10; Helaman 13:38). Thus Laman and Lemuel were exercising their own will and not God’s will when they behaved with such “exceeding rudeness” that the rest of the family suffered grief and sorrow (1 Nephi 18:9). Yet even in the anguish of undeserved suffering there is hope. Lehi did not focus on Laman and Lemuel’s rude behavior but on the “righteousness of [his] Redeemer” (2 Nephi 2:13). Hope is not found in the experience itself but in what God can bring to that experience. “Nevertheless, Jacob, my first-born in the wilderness, thou knowest the greatness of God; and he shall consecrate thine afflictions for thy gain” (2 Nephi 2:2).

The pairing of affliction with consecration is curious, if not a bit unsettling to those who suffer innocently. Remember, in this particular instance Lehi is referring to the rude behavior of Laman and Lemuel; behavior that clearly constitutes emotional, mental, and physical abuse. Even so, Lehi chooses to connect such miserable experiences with the word consecrate. Why?

To capture the implications of this remarkable assertion, we must look carefully at the word consecrate. If something is consecrated it is declared holy and is set apart for a sacred purpose. In the context of these verses, Lehi taught that unjust suffering imposed upon the righteous can be transformed into a
blessing. Therefore, wicked choices that adversely impact righteous people can be ameliorated through the Atonement.

Elder Holland testified, “The Savior’s Atonement lifts from us not only the burden of our sins, but also the burden of our disappointments and sorrows, our heartaches and our despair.” A moment’s reflection verifies that Jesus does know something about unjust suffering. Without any warranted provocation, he was exposed to “shame and spitting” and to the lash of “the smiter” (2 Nephi 7:6), was “despised and rejected” (Isaiah 53:3), and was finally “wounded for our transgressions” and “bruised for our iniquities” (v. 5). Rising triumphant from the ashes of such egregious adversity, he became the “fully comprehending Christ” and thereby, Elder Maxwell taught, was “enabled to be a fully succoring Savior.” The conclusion is beautiful: through the Atonement of Jesus Christ all victims can become victors; indeed, “every experience can become a redemptive experience.”

A Case Study: Alma and Amulon

A classic moment of bitter irony in the Book of Mormon is when the two former priests of King Noah, Alma and Amulon, again cross paths. Both have become leaders of separate groups. Alma’s followers have formed the “church of Christ” (Mosiah 18:17) while Amulon’s followers have banded together by necessity of their cowardice (see Mosiah 19:11–23). In time both groups confront the same Lamanite army. Alma’s people find themselves in bondage after the Lamanites renege on a promise of freedom, while Amulon’s cohorts are given power and position because of the pleadings of their Lamanite wives—women whom they abducted from Shemlon (see Mosiah 20:1–5; 23:25–38). Alma has become the spiritual leader of a righteous flock of Nephites (see Mosiah 18:18), while Amulon through his cunning has found favor with the Lamanite king (see Mosiah 24:1). Alma has helped transform the lives of his people through faith in Jesus Christ (see Mosiah 18), while Amulon has not taught the Lamanites “anything concerning the Lord” (see Mosiah 24:5). In essence, we have a vintage juxtaposition between the righteous and wicked.

Now the irony: wicked Amulon is given charge by the Lamanite king over Alma’s righteous people. In his position Amulon “began to exercise authority over Alma and his brethren, and began to persecute him, and cause that his children should persecute their children” (Mosiah 24:8). If that were not bad enough, as the people “began to cry mightily to God” because of their afflictions, Amulon “commanded them that they should stop their cries; and
he put guards over them to watch them, that whosoever should be found calling upon God should be put to death” (vv. 10–11). Clearly, we have a case of good, righteous people suffering because of the rudeness of their brethren!

Though we do not have details, we can imagine the verbal and physical abuse that must have taken place. Nevertheless, it is in the midst of this ugliness that we have one of the most beautiful accounts of how the Atonement can consecrate human afflictions for our gain. In answer to their prayers the Lord promises to deliver Alma’s people from their difficult circumstances—but not immediately. Why? The answer bears witness of God’s consecrating power. The sacred text reads: “And I will also ease the burdens which are put upon your shoulders, that even you cannot feel them upon your backs, even while you are in bondage; and this will I do that ye may stand as witnesses for me hereafter, and that ye may know of a surety that I, the Lord God, do visit my people in their afflictions” (Mosiah 24:14).

While burdens are unjustly placed on their backs, the Lord promises to strengthen them so they can not only bear the burdens but also so they can bear witness that God does help his “people in their afflictions.” In short, they are to become witnesses of the “greatness of God” and his power to consecrate our afflictions for our gain (2 Nephi 2:2).

The consecrating power of the Lord is confirmed since “the burdens which were laid upon Alma and his brethren were made light; yea, the Lord did strengthen them that they could bear up their burdens with ease, and they did submit cheerfully and with patience to all the will of the Lord” (Mosiah 24:15). When Alma places cheerfulness in the context of suffering he is inviting us to see the consecrated and sacred dimensions of suffering. A careful reading suggests that in the midst of their suffering Alma’s people willingly turned to the Lord, and in him they found the power to bear their burdens. They were not cheerful about the burdens; they were cheerful about the Lord!

**Conclusion**

Liberty Jail has been called a “prison temple.” Elder Holland suggested that this is appropriate not because of the conditions and brutality associated with this jail but because of the marvelous spiritual blessings that came while Joseph Smith was held as a prisoner there. In short, one “can have sacred, revelatory, profoundly instructive experience with the Lord in the most miserable experiences of . . . life.”

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Because opposition, law, and agency are given realities in this mortal sphere, unwanted and undeserved difficulties will chaff the innocent and the righteous. Even so, we need to remember that through the Atonement of Jesus Christ all experiences can be consecrated for our gain—even “those inflicted from sources beyond our control.” Reflecting on a life of emotional and mental abuse, one woman wrote: “I have realized that [because of opposition, law, and agency], he does not control how other people treat us, but he does comfort and offer us peace through the Atonement. My trials haven’t gone away, but I feel very much like the people of Alma. He has strengthened me and made my trials lighter than they really are.” She concluded, “I can’t change how people treat me, but I can, through the Atonement, have those horrible experiences consecrate me to become a better person . . . , the person the Lord needs me to be.”

By taking upon himself the full scope of human suffering, Jesus knows “according to the flesh how to succor his people according to their infirmities” (Alma 7:12). Thus, as Elder Maxwell repeatedly taught in his ministry, “He knows personally all that we pass through and how to extend His perfect mercy—as well as how to succor us.” Adding his witness, Elder Oaks stated, “The healing power of the Lord Jesus Christ—whether it removes our burdens or strengthens us to endure and live with them like the Apostle Paul—is available for every affliction in mortality.” Truly, “every experience can become a redemptive experience.”

Notes
7. The gift of agency is essential to our self-understanding. Elder Wolfgang H. Paul of the Seventy noted: “When we came into this world, we brought with us from our heavenly home this God-given gift and privilege which we call our agency. It gives us the right and power to make decisions and to choose. Agency is an eternal law. President Brigham Young, speaking of our agency, taught: ‘This is a law which has always existed from all eternity, and will continue to exist throughout all the eternities to come. Every intelligent being must have the power of choice.’ President Wilford Woodruff observed on the same subject: ‘This agency has always
been the heritage of man under the rule and government of God. He possessed it in the heaven of heavens before the world was, and the Lord maintained and defended it there against the aggression of Lucifer and those that took sides with him” (Wolfgang H. Paul, “The Gift of Agency,” *Ensign*, May 2006, 34–35).


9. James E. Faust, “The Great Imitator,” *Ensign*, November 1987, 35. President Marion G. Romney taught that the plan of salvation “provided for them to receive physical bodies in a mortal experience where, endowed with free agency and being acted upon by good and evil, they would prove themselves worthy or unworthy to return to the society of God and go on in eternal progress to perfection” (“Faith in the Lord Jesus Christ,” *Ensign*, November 1979, 41). Elder Hugh B. Brown articulated the connection between agency and our eternal possibilities as follows: “Man faces a vista of limitless development, eternal progression, if he will cooperate in winning mastery over himself and the universe. We believe that man’s earth life was made possible by Adam’s role in a foreordained plan which included the provision for man to come face to face with both good and evil and, under the eternal law of free agency, elect good or evil without compulsion, knowing however that under the immutable law of the harvest he must abide the consequences of his choice, must reap as he sows. Free agency is prerequisite to any character-building plan, and while with free agency any plan is inevitably crammed with risk, we, with all the sons of God, accepted that risk and shouted for joy at the prospect of earth life” (Hugh B. Brown, in Conference Report, April 1956, 105).


11. Even though opposition and law are necessary conditions for moral agency, they are not sufficient. Moral agency is only a possibility for those who are capable of moral reasoning, or who have knowledge of good and evil (see 2 Nephi 2:5, 26). Furthermore, “man could not act for himself save it should be that he was enticed by the one or the other” (2 Nephi 2:16).

12. Joseph Smith taught, “The first step in salvation of man is the laws of eternal and self-existent principles.” (Joseph Smith, *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, comp. Joseph Fielding Smith [Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1938], 181). “There are certain laws of the universe that are immutable, that are without beginning of days or end of years. They were not created by an intelligent being, nor are they the product of moral thought, rather they are eternal, co-existent realities with the intelligences of the universe. These laws are immutable in that they cannot be altered or modified in any form. They are unchangeable from eternity to eternity” (Tad R. Callister, *The Infinite Atonement* [Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2000], 299–300).


21. In scripture there are examples of God preventing the natural consequences of human choices. In particular, prophets are protected by divine power (for example, Nephi, Abinadi, Alma, Amulek, Lehi, Nephi, Samuel the Lamanite, Moses, Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-nego) from those who were intentionally seeking to kill them. Thus the wicked intend to use their agency to kill, but the Lord intervenes and circumvents those murderous choices. Does this mean agency has been destroyed because consequences have been thwarted? If so, has the justice of God that underwrites and insures agency been compromised?

From a temporal perspective, in some cases the natural consequences of physical laws have been circumvented. The natural consequence of fire, stones, and arrows as instruments of death have been negated. Even so, I would propose that from God’s eternal view no spiritual law has been negated, but only a temporal consequence has been delayed or supplanted for a larger purpose. For instance, when Abinadi is preaching, an attempt is made on his life. God intervenes with his power and Abinadi’s attackers cannot touch him (see Mosiah 13:2–3). Later, after he has delivered his message, the Lord’s protective power is removed, and Abinadi is killed (Mosiah 17:14–19). It seems in these instances we have a classic case of competing interests in regards to the use of agency. A prophet chooses to do the Lord’s will, and the wicked choose to do Satan’s bidding. Significantly, when a prophet chooses to do God’s will and is therefore on the errand of the Lord, then he is entitled to God’s protection so he can accomplish his mission. The consequence of his choice is to receive God’s protective power to complete the divinely appointed mission. While the wicked choose to destroy the prophet, it would appear that the consequence of their choice cannot trump the prophet’s choice until his mission is completed. If a prophet and his choice to fulfill his mission were circumvented by Satan and his servants’ efforts to destroy the prophet, then the work of God would be frustrated—something that is not within the realm of possibility for man. When consequences collide, at least in the case of the Lord’s servants and their enemies, then prophetic choice to fulfill the will of God trumps the designs of evil men (see D&C 3:1).

Significantly, even when God thwarts the wicked from physically destroying his called messengers, the spiritual consequences are never lost. We are not only judged by our works but also by the desires of our hearts (see D&C 137:9). If we desire to kill a prophet, we suffer the spiritual consequences of our desires. We can become, like Laman and Lemuel, “murderers in [our] hearts” without actually killing someone (1 Nephi 17:44). In short, if we want to kill a prophet, but the Lord protects his life so he can fulfill his divinely appointed mission, the consequences for our murderous desires will impact our souls, and we will suffer accordingly—the spiritual consequence is affixed, and the justice of God will be satisfied.

Another dimension of this matter is compelling. Law, agency, and consequence are requisite to the justice of God. When people choose wickedness, innocent people suffer. I have often wondered how God can look upon the suffering of so many innocent souls and not simply turn this earth to dust. The answer is in the Atonement. I believe that God can bear the suffering of the innocent because he knows the healing and redemptive power of the Atonement. Thus when prophets receive God’s divine protection from the hands of the wicked, it is not to spare them from undeserved suffering or to give them special treatment, but it is because those prophets bear the message of hope—even the message of the Atonement. Without that message humans would lose all hope and drown in their own sorrow. No wonder he insures that the messengers are protected!


The aim of a teacher is to inspire the individual and help students act as a result of what they learn in the classroom.
President Thomas S. Monson taught, “The goal of gospel teaching . . . is not to ‘pour information’ into the minds of class members. . . . The aim is to inspire the individual to think about, feel about, and then do something about living gospel principles.”1 In this same talk he emphasized the importance of taking action as it relates to learning, saying, “I hear and I forget; I see and I remember; I do and I learn.”2 Thus a key responsibility in the role of a religious educator is to help students do things as a result of what they learn in the classroom. President Howard W. Hunter explained one of the reasons why this is so: “Action is one of the chief foundations of personal testimony. The surest witness is that which comes firsthand out of personal experience [see John 7:16–17]. . . . This, then, is the finest source of personal testimony. One knows because he has experienced.”3

Similarly, in a roundtable discussion sponsored by Seminaries and Institutes, Elder Kim B. Clark said:

How do you create an environment where students can exercise agency and act in order to authorize the Holy Ghost to teach them? That means that for teachers—as they think about the question “How can I help the students have the Holy Ghost
more powerfully in their lives?”—it becomes a question of “Well, how can I create an environment or experiences where they can exercise their agency?”

One of the things that I think is so powerful, and we see it in the way missionaries are taught to teach, is teachers inviting students to make a commitment, to take some kind of purposeful action. It happens even when you’re teaching calculus—really anything—when you invite the student to make a commitment, to act in a certain way, or to undertake a certain set of activities by committing to do it. In that action the students then open their minds both to the Spirit and to the experiences that they are about to have. That’s how they learn. . . .

I think when we give the students the opportunity to exercise their agency, it sort of opens them to change in their hearts and in their minds. It’s an amazing thing to watch because you can really see the work of the Lord going on in that person.4

While serving as president of Ricks college, David A. Bednar gave a devotional address in which he focused on two lines of scripture that emphasize the importance of taking action as a result of learning. The first phrase was, “Act in doctrine” (D&C 101:78). After quoting this verse in the Doctrine and Covenants, President Bednar said, “Would you not normally think doctrine is something you study, something you learn, something you remember? It is interesting that the Lord in this revelation says doctrine is something you and I should act in. Ultimately, the Lord is interested not just in knowledge, but in spiritual intelligence—in applying what we know for righteous purposes.”5

The second line he focused on came from John 3:21: “He that doeth truth cometh to the light.” Speaking of this verse, President Bednar said, “Would you normally think of truth as something you do? The message from the Lord in this revelation is that truth is something we should do. Doctrine and principle are things we should act in. . . . You will find throughout the scriptures a pattern of knowledge being related to performing and doing and applying what we know for righteous purposes.”6 Taking these foregoing quotes into account, it is clear that taking action should be a key outcome of students’ participation in religious instruction.

**General Principles for Helping Students Act**

Sunday School general president Russell T. Osguthorpe said, “Elder David A. Bednar shared these three simple elements of effective teaching in a recent training meeting: (1) key doctrine, (2) invitation to action, and (3) promised blessings.”7 The importance of the first point, teaching key doctrine, has been frequently emphasized.8 It is clear that without an understanding of key doctrine, students will be much less likely to act. The next two elements
of effective teaching, invitation to act and promised blessings, are explicitly related to helping students act.

Invitations to act. The book *Preach My Gospel* states, “Rarely, if ever, should you talk to people or teach them without extending an invitation to do something that will strengthen their faith in Christ. . . . People will not likely change unless they are invited to do so.”9 Brother Osguthorpe emphasized this importance of making frequent invitations, saying, “My question to each of us today is this: Is there anyone here who is receiving too many inspired invitations, invitations that help us improve? Is anyone’s e-mail inbox overflowing with inspiring invitations? Is anyone’s phone overloaded with text messages that invite us to come unto Christ? I don’t think so. . . . We can all invite others to do what they really want to do but can’t do without our help. And really, it’s not that they can’t do it—sometimes they just need to be invited.”10

An important part of inviting students to act is following up on their commitments to act. *Preach My Gospel* states, “Extending an invitation without following up is like beginning a journey without finishing it or buying a ticket to a concert without going into the theater. Without the completed action, the commitment is hollow.”11

Promised blessings. The third principle stated by Elder Bednar, “promised blessings,” is perhaps the least discussed of the three elements of effective teaching. When ancient and modern prophets teach, they often promise blessings.12 *Preach My Gospel* states, “People need a reason to change their thoughts and actions. Promised blessings often provide powerful motivation to obey God. . . . As you testify of a commandment, talk about the blessings you have received from living that commandment. Promise those whom you teach that they can enjoy similar blessings.”13

**Helping Students to Act**

Religious educators can, in a variety of ways, help students to act. Some find that assigning grades can be a helpful motivation. We, as seminary teachers, would like to share an approach we have tried.

Over the course of a semester we increased our focus on helping students act as a result of what they learned in class. We do not claim to have uncovered the most effective approach, and we do not suggest that others copy what we did. Our purpose in chronicling our efforts is simply to share our attempt to help students act, and more importantly, to let students share the impact
it had on them. We hope that other religious educators will be able to use the principles that we discuss to develop their own ways of helping students act. Although our approach took place in a seminary classroom, we believe that religious educators in all settings will be able to adapt the ideas to the settings in which they teach.

We teach released-time seminary on a block (A-B) schedule. This means that we see our students two or three times each week. Together we teach eight classes. Our approach has been as follows:

When planning a lesson we would focus on the question, “What do we want our students to do as a result of the things they learn in this class?” Sometimes there would be one clear application; on other days there would be multiple. We called them “challenges” and would issue them at the end of every class.

We would often extend one specific invitation (e.g., “Find a way in the next forty-eight hours to stand as a witness of Christ”) but also give students the option to choose their own challenge instead. We made sure that the last two minutes of class were reserved for making a clear invitation. Students were invited to write down this invitation or program it into their cell phones. At the beginning of the following class, students were given a 3 × 5 card and had the opportunity to report on their challenge. Typically they put their names on the 3 × 5 card, although they were told that if what they had done was personal, they could make their response anonymous or simply tell us it was personal. We found that rarely was the response so personal that the student chose to keep it anonymous. After students had reported in writing, they were given the opportunity to verbally report on their challenge by sharing with the class what they did and how they felt about it. This was an attempt to emphasize the promised blessings by having students hear from their peers how keeping commitments was helping them in their lives. Typically between one and five students would share their experience in applying the principle that had been taught in the previous class, and the whole process (including writing on the cards) usually took no more than five minutes of class time.

Table 1 illustrates statements about inviting, following up, and issuing promised blessings from *Preach My Gospel* and how we attempted to apply them in our classrooms.
Table 1: Applications of Statements from *Preach My Gospel*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statement from <em>Preach My Gospel</em>, 200</th>
<th>Our Application</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“Have them write their commitment on something you leave with them, such as a pamphlet or a card with your names and phone number.”</td>
<td>We gave students a sticky note or invited them to tear out a piece of paper from their notebook to remind themselves. Having them write a note in their day planner or program the invitation into their cell phone was particularly effective. Students were also given a wristband that said “I will go and do” to help them remember to act.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Make sure people know that you will make brief, daily visits between teaching appointments. Explain that your purpose is to support and help them. Give them an idea of what you will do during those visits.”</td>
<td>We explained to students that these invitations to act would be a regular part of the beginning and end of each class. On multiple occasions we shared prophetic quotes regarding the importance of acting as a result of what they learned in class.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Make specific notes in the Notes/To-do list section of your planner to follow up tomorrow on every commitment invitation you have extended today.”</td>
<td>We made a note in our lesson plan or put a PowerPoint slide into a presentation that would remind us to follow up on the invitation from the previous class.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Help investigators identify the blessings they have received as they have kept their commitments. Especially help them describe their feelings as the Spirit has testified of the truthfulness of the message.”</td>
<td>We gave students opportunities to both write down and vocally share what they experienced when they acted on the invitations. We often asked follow-up questions such as, “How did you feel when you were kind to your little brother?”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Compliment and encourage people who are succeeding in keeping commitments. . . . Sincerely and frequently praise them.”</td>
<td>Students were complimented when they shared with the class. Additionally, we would sometimes pull students aside and compliment them on what they had written down on their 3 × 5 card or write them a brief note of encouragement.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Express concern and disappointment when people fail to keep their commitments and thus fail to experience the blessings.”</td>
<td>When students consistently failed to act, we talked to them privately or wrote them a note to encourage them to act on what they were learning in class.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Results

We used two ways to measure how this practice of invitation and follow-up influenced students’ actions. First, we administered a survey (see appendix)
to students at the end of the semester; and second, we kept track of student responses to the invitations to act.

In total, 203 students took the survey we administered. Eighty-six percent of these students said that receiving and reporting on these invitations helped them act on what they learned more than they normally would have. One student wrote, “I would have just gone on with my day and forgotten about seminary without the challenges. I even did that with challenges, but more often I was able to remember lessons because of challenges.” Another student wrote, “Having a challenge makes me think about the lessons more often!”

Of the students surveyed, 88 percent said that receiving a specific invitation at the end of class was either “very helpful” or “somewhat helpful” in helping them act on what they had learned during class. Eighty-four percent said that reporting in writing in the next class was either “very helpful” or “somewhat helpful.” Ninety-six percent of the students said that listening to other students say what they had done to fulfill the invitation to act was either “very helpful” or “somewhat helpful” in helping them act. A complete copy of the survey can be found in the appendix of this article.

In addition to the survey, we saved the 3 × 5 cards on which students responded to the challenges. This was both to keep track of how many students acted on the invitations and to collect qualitative data to see the students describe their experiences with acting on principles discussed in class. The number of students who successfully completed challenges varied from class to class and also from invitation to invitation. For example, in one class only 11 percent of students took the invitation to visit the general conference website (http://lds.org/generalconference) to reread a conference talk. In this same class 88 percent of students completed the invitation to “do something this Christmas season that would more fully invite the Spirit of Christ into your life.” Apparently some challenges were easier to complete than others.

One class focused on the importance of righteous traditions. Students were invited to start or strengthen a good new tradition or stop a bad tradition. This invitation was given just before a weekend so students had multiple days to act on it. What follows are responses from several members of one class. All comments are transcribed here as written down on the students’ 3 × 5 cards, with the exception of minor correction of spelling or grammatical errors and changing of students’ names.
• I’ve never really started the tradition of reading the scriptures every day. But now that I have, I hope to continue it for the rest of my life. Although I’m not perfect and have missed a few days, I am back on track again. It’s become a great tradition.

• I used to fall asleep in seminary all the time because I felt that I could because not listening would not affect my GPA. I am stopping this altogether and will not sleep in class.

• I started a good tradition because of Maria. I began to pray on my knees and *only* on my knees. I had a bad tradition of kneeling by my bedside and flopping half of my body onto the bed and would end up falling asleep. I now only kneel, and it helps my prayers out a lot. One tradition I want to pick up on is one Chelsea does: every Sunday she writes letters to people. [It is interesting to note that when the author of this statement references Maria and Chelsea, he is referring to things they verbally shared with the class regarding previous challenges.]

• I had a tradition of skipping Sunday School. I went, and I am not sure of what is to come because of that, but I am glad I went.

• I always did my homework on Sunday, and that was something I wanted to stop. So this week I did all my homework Saturday, and Sunday was so peaceful.

• I put a set of scriptures next to my bed to make sure I wouldn’t forget to read them.

• I’ve started going to church (or at least trying to) thirty minutes early. And last Sunday I was there forty-five minutes early.

• I started reading my scriptures at night because I have no time to in the morning. I am also starting to say my personal prayers. It has made me feel whole. I love that feeling.

• I decided to start a tradition to serve someone every day. Yesterday I gave someone a ride home. Although holding doors is great, I want to try and do things that will significantly bless the lives of the people I serve.

• My bad tradition was not always helping my family and saying my things were more important. But I put others before myself this week, and I realized that’s what I should be doing.
Of course, not all responses were helpful or successful. For example, a student wrote:

- I totally forgot. I’ve been so busy with relatives coming over and stuff. I guess my bad tradition is not fully doing the challenges.

Some invitations to act occurred multiple times throughout the semester. For example, one theme we looked for was how prophets in the Book of Mormon pray. At various times we found principles such as praying for others, including enemies (see 1 Nephi 1:5; 2 Nephi 33:3; Enos 1:11), praying with *all* your heart (see 1 Nephi 1:5; Enos 1:2), kneeling to pray (see Enos 1:4), and praying in a special place (see 1 Nephi 17:7; 18:3; Enos 1:3). The following are responses that came from students in different classes as they responded to invitations (given at various times) to “pray like a Book of Mormon prophet.”

- My challenge was to make all my prayers “mighty prayers.” I never realized how I just recite my prayers instead of really thinking about what I’m saying. I feel like this really helped.
- I tried to follow the example of Enos to pray for myself, friends, and enemies. It made it easier to focus on what I was saying.
- I prayed in my backyard, in a special place. It was *way* cool. There were no distractions and it was very fulfilling.
- I prayed for the first time in two weeks, and I prayed on my knees instead of in my bed.
- I prayed last night with my family, and I said the prayer. I prayed about things I’ve never prayed about before, and when I finished I felt very humble.
- I did pray like a prophet, and it was like I was talking to God on the phone, as in I could feel it stronger. And I knew he was listening.
- I’ve been praying on my knees lately. I used to just turn over in bed but not anymore. I’ve also been praying more for the kid that stole my iPod.
- I prayed for the person that cut me off in traffic—and for the two people I accidentally cut off. It helped me to not get angry.
- A lady at my ward lost her keys. I helped her but we couldn’t find her keys. Then she went back to her car. While she was walking, I knelt in a room and prayed for her to find her keys. Then I walked outside to
see what had happened. She found her keys. So because of my prayer for her, she found her keys.
• I have been kneeling for the first time, and my prayers have been a ton better.
• I took the challenge to pray vocally. I found that I stayed focused more, and I could feel the Holy Ghost.
• I prayed like a prophet. I went to the Jordan River Utah Temple and prayed and listened!

Benefits Seen
We noticed several benefits from our focus on inviting students to act. Significantly, it appears that this approach helped students act and consequently helped principles taught in class sink deeper into their hearts. We believe that hearing students talk about how fulfilling an invitation to act had blessed their lives encourages other students to act. In addition, reading the students’ responses from the challenge helped us get to know each student more personally and also alerted us to students who needed extra attention.

One difficulty associated with the system we implemented was that it took planning to make sure we had a specific invitation for the students and followed up with them. But the reality is that it did not take too much time, and we felt that issuing and following up on invitations to act was helping us with a core purpose of gospel teaching—“to inspire the individual to think about, feel about, and then do something about living gospel principles.”

Another difficulty with the approach we took was that it was sometimes hard to tell if students had done something as a result of the invitation or if they were writing down things they would have done anyway. For example, if there had been an invitation to serve others, when students came to class the next day and wrote down, “I set the table for my sister,” it would be hard to tell if they consciously did that as a result of the seminary challenge. Ultimately we determined that it was not bad for students to fulfill the challenge unconsciously, and that having the time to write about it the next day could solidify in their minds the blessings that came as a result of that action.

We found that the consistency of issuing and reporting on invitations to act helped the students fulfill them. At first, many students forgot; however, as they began to sense that it was an ongoing part of class, more students remembered. We also believe that having students write their names on the
3 × 5 card increased the accountability students felt. There are many ways our approach could be improved. For example, we could have involved parents by letting them know about the invitations we were giving. Another approach we did not try that might have been effective was having students send each other text messages as reminders to accomplish the challenges.

Conclusion

One of the most important things religious educators can do is invite students to act on the doctrines and principles presented in class. Elder David A. Bednar discussed the importance of helping people act in terms of parent-child relationships. Consider how the following quotation could be applied to the teacher-student relationship:

We put way too much importance on what we say. We think that by telling people things that somehow that will connect and get inside. My observation is that the role of a parent [teacher] includes talking and telling, but it extends beyond that to inviting a child [student] to act in accordance with truth. And only when the child [student] acts in accordance with the truth that has been explained or taught can the child [student] come to know for himself or herself the truthfulness of what they have heard and what they are doing. . . . It’s only when in that process of communicating, loving, and working with a child [student] you help them act in accordance with truth that they get it for themselves. It moves from their head to their heart.16

We hope our attempts to invite students to act can assist other teachers in helping their students act as a result of doctrines and principles taught in class. We believe that as principles of invitations and promised blessings are implemented, more students will act as a result of what they learn in class—and this action will help the gospel penetrate their hearts and lead them to increased conversion.

Appendix: Survey

What follows is the survey administered to the students as well as the quantitative results. The qualitative responses are not included due to space requirements; however, they can be obtained by contacting the authors of this paper.

Survey about “The Challenges”

This semester we have focused on the importance of taking action as a result of what we learn in class. We want to know if the things we have done have been helpful to you. Please honestly answer the following questions:
Helping Students Act as a Result of Classroom Lessons

1. How helpful were each of the following activities for you in terms of helping you to act on what we learned in class?

   a. Receiving a specific challenge at the end of class of something you could do.
      i. Very helpful ......................... 42%
      ii. Somewhat helpful .................... 46%
      iii. Not very helpful .................... 10%
      iv. Not helpful ......................... 1%
      v. No answer ........................... 1%

   b. Having the opportunity to give yourself your own “personal challenge.”
      i. Very helpful .......................... 41%
      ii. Somewhat helpful .................... 44%
      iii. Not very helpful .................... 7%
      iv. Not helpful ........................... 2%
      v. Did not give myself personal challenges ........ 5%
      vi. No answer ........................... 1%

   c. Writing down the challenge on a piece of paper or typing it into your cell phone to help you remember it.
      i. Very helpful .......................... 46%
      ii. Somewhat helpful .................... 33%
      iii. Not very helpful .................... 12%
      iv. Not helpful ........................... 3%
      v. Did not write challenges to remind myself ........ 6%
      vi. No answer ........................... 1%

   d. Reporting in writing on a 3 × 5 card during the next class.
      i. Very helpful .......................... 42%
      ii. Somewhat helpful .................... 42%
      iii. Not very helpful .................... 12%
      iv. Not helpful ........................... 3%
e. Making comments in class about what you had done with the challenge.
   i. Very helpful ........................................ 48%
   ii. Somewhat helpful .............................. 32%
   iii. Not very helpful .............................. 9%
   iv. Not helpful .................................. 2%
   v. Did not make comments about what I did .... 9%

f. Listening to what other students have done with the challenge.
   i. Very helpful ...................................... 67%
   ii. Somewhat helpful .............................. 29%
   iii. Not very helpful .............................. 3%
   iv. Not helpful .................................. 1%

2. Do you think that the process of receiving and reporting on challenges helped you to act on what we were learning more than you normally would have?
   a. Yes ............................................... 86%
   b. No ............................................... 11%

Note: 1.5% wrote in “maybe,” and 1.5% gave no answer.

3. Was there one challenge that was most meaningful for you? If so, what was it and why was it so meaningful?

4. How could we improve the process of giving and reporting on challenges so that you would be more likely to act as a result of what we discuss in seminary?

Notes
5. David A. Bednar, “Gain Spiritual Intelligence,” devotional address given at Ricks College, September 9, 1997; emphasis in original.
8. For example, President Boyd K. Packer has taught, “True doctrine, understood, changes attitudes and behavior. The study of the doctrines of the gospel will improve behavior quicker than a study of behavior will improve behavior.” “Little Children,” Ensign, November 1986, 17. Elder Bruce R. McConkie wrote, “Since it is impossible for a man to be saved in ignorance of God and his laws, and since man is saved no faster than he gains knowledge of Jesus Christ
and the plan of salvation, it follows that men are obligated at their peril to learn and apply true
doctrines of the gospel.” *Mormon Doctrine*, 2nd ed. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1966), 5. See also Alma 31:5.


12. For example, Alma gave both instruction and promised blessings when he taught, “Counsel with the Lord in all thy doings, and he will direct thee for good; yea, when thou liest
down at night lie down unto the Lord, that he may watch over you in your sleep; and when thou risest in the morning let thy heart be full of thanks unto God; and if ye do these things, ye shall be lifted up at the last day” (Alma 37:37). In general conference, Elder Neil L. Andersen said, “For those who are truly repentant but seem unable to feel relief: continue keeping the commandments. I promise you, relief will come in the timetable of the Lord. Healing also requires time.” “Repent . . . That I May Heal You,” *Ensign*, November 2009, 40.


14. Although in this semester we called them “challenges,” they might more appropriately be termed “invitations to act.”


Most topics cannot be covered completely during a class period or even over the course of a term.
One of the things teachers often say in class is, “We still have a few things left to cover” or “Let’s see how much we can cover today.” The idea of coverage is ever-present in the classroom and seems often to have a prominent place in the teacher’s lesson preparation. When teachers get together, they often bemoan the lack of time they have to cover all of the necessary material in a given hour or in the term. As one who has not only listened to those conversations but also participated in them, I have recently wondered what we mean by cover. Do we mean cover in breadth or in depth? Breadth coverage would be something like trying to touch on all the verses in a chapter. Depth coverage would be to work on a particular verse or passage until it is fully understood and digested by the students. Since teachers generally have large blocks of scripture to deal with in each class session, both of those types of coverage are impossible in the time allotted and cannot reasonably be expected of a teacher or a class. The sooner a teacher lets go of the idea of coverage, the better will be the learning experience for his or her students.

I have on my bookshelf a copy of The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah by Alfred Edersheim. It is over fifteen hundred pages long. It is a marvelous
book and one may think that, given its length, it adequately covers the life of Jesus Christ. Next to it I have *Jesus the Christ* by James Talmage, which is about eight hundred pages long. Nearby is *The Life of Christ* by Frederic Farrar with over seven hundred pages, followed by Bruce R. McConkie’s *Messiah* series, which is six volumes and around three thousand pages. Add to that the first volume of Elder McConkie’s *Doctrinal New Testament Commentary* at almost eight hundred pages, and I have a total of over sixty-seven hundred pages written on the life of Jesus Christ. Does any one of those works adequately cover the life of Christ? Taken together, do they cover it sufficiently? Who is to say that sometime in the future another volume or series will not be written that sheds even more light on his life? In fact, Elder McConkie said that in the millennial day we will learn “a thousand times more about the earthly ministry of the Lord Jesus than we now know.”

Here is another example. In 1994, Deseret Book published a volume entitled *The Allegory of the Olive Tree: The Olive, the Bible, and Jacob 5*. It is a collection of twenty-one scholarly essays about olive culture in the Middle East and how it is directly tied to Jacob 5 in the Book of Mormon. It is over five hundred pages long, meaning this book, which is devoted to explaining one chapter of the Book of Mormon, is almost as long as the entire Book of Mormon. There is that much information about and insights into just one chapter of this sacred volume. Can we say that, because of the publication of that book, the fifth chapter of Jacob is now covered? Probably not. Coverage in depth is an illusion. There seems to be a desire among teachers to be able to say “we covered” that topic today, but when I teach Jacob 5, I use one fifty-minute period to do it, as do most of my colleagues. That chapter cannot be covered in depth in that period of time or in ten such periods of time because there is simply too much there.

Likewise, the idea of coverage in breadth is not realistic. We do not have the time or the stamina to move from verse to verse, probing all of the possible implications and interpretations of each.

So what can we do in a class period or over the course of a term that will help students to understand and learn? If we acknowledge that we cannot really cover everything, what can we do? Here are three ideas, followed by some explanations:

1. We can fully accept the idea that the Holy Ghost is the real teacher for all of us in the classroom and that our teaching and student learning
happens by and with the Holy Ghost. Once we really believe that, we will be free from the idea that all aspects of student learning rests on our shoulders. It will dissolve the need to cover everything because we will willingly acknowledge that only the Holy Ghost can cover what is necessary.

2. After we have accepted the Holy Ghost as the real teacher, we can address doctrines and principles rather than ineffectively trying to cover them.

3. When we are no longer focused on trying to cover everything, we can give more studied focus to what happens at the end of class—the outcomes—rather than how much we are able to pour on at the beginning of the lesson.

Accepting the Holy Ghost as the Teacher

From page 12 of the Teaching the Gospel handbook, we read: “Teaching by the Spirit is defined as taking place when the Holy Ghost is performing his role or functions with the teacher, with the student, or both. This can happen during lesson preparation and lesson presentation. It can happen as teachers interact with students outside of class, or even while teachers are just thinking how best to help their students. In some cases, the Spirit may touch a student’s mind or heart long after class is over.” The role of the Holy Ghost is broad and expansive and includes such things as

- Showing a person what to do (see 2 Nephi 32:5)
- Testifying of gospel principles (see John 15:26)
- Bringing things back to our remembrance (see John 14:26)
- Carrying truth to our hearts and softening our hearts (see 2 Nephi 33:1; 1 Nephi 2:16)
- Edifying both the student and the teacher (see D&C 50:22–23)

The above list is only a small sampling of what the Holy Ghost can and will do. He locks the truth into our hearts and minds. Long after the stories and examples from the teacher have faded from the memory of the student, the pure testimony, confirmed by the Holy Ghost, will still vibrate within the heart and the mind.

In 1953 Elder Harold B. Lee taught: “And the greatest thrill that our teachers can give each of our youth is the thrill that comes when the Spirit
of the Almighty comes into his soul and whispers that testimony—when he knows that God lives and that this is the Church of the kingdom of God. That is the greatest of all the thrills.” The Holy Ghost is eager to do that. We should provide the opportunity for Him to whisper testimony in and around our classrooms and that often means that we need to step back and say less. We need to worry less about covering what we have planned to cover. However, getting out of the way does not allow us to become lax in our preparations or in our classroom presence.

Elder Neal A. Maxwell said, “When we speak about teaching by the Spirit, it is not about a mystical process. Teaching does not remove responsibility from the teacher for prayerful and pondering preparation. Teaching by the Spirit is not the equivalent of going on ‘automatic pilot.’ We still need a carefully worked out flight plan. Studying out something in our own minds involves the Spirit in our preparations as well as in our presentations.” We need to come to class well prepared, with a well-thought-out lesson plan, and then allow the Holy Ghost to direct our informed mind and use our preparations to begin to work on the hearts and minds of the students. When we are committed to doing that, the issue of coverage ceases to be an issue.

**Addressing Doctrines and Principles Rather Than Covering Them**

To address something is “to speak to” or “to direct to the attention of” or “to devote the energy or force of oneself.” This seems like a better aim than trying to cover things. We should use our energy to direct our students to the life-changing principles of the gospel. When a block of scripture is in front of us and we picture a classroom full of students with their needs and desires, we realize that we must plan a lesson that meets those needs. Because of our study and experiences, we may feel a desire to speak extensively about certain verses or chapters (coverage), but generally students do not have that same desire or even that need. What do they need? They need the Holy Ghost to fill them, to help them deal with personal concerns and issues in their own life. They need personalized revelation, and much of that comes from the existing canon of scripture, wherein God has already answered many of the questions we ask. They must learn to understand the scriptures to see those answers.

How do we best help them while they are our students? We direct their attention to doctrines and principles found in the scriptures and expound and explain those doctrines. It is as Elder David A. Bednar taught:
When you and I are called to a position and set apart to serve in the Church, our responsibility is not to teach. It is to preach. The word “preach” in our contemporary vocabulary has some negative baggage associated with it. We think of people ranting and raving and pounding the pulpit; that is not it at all. Preaching is explaining and articulating the doctrine of Christ by the power of the Spirit. If you and I, as we are properly set apart, fulfill that responsibility, who then does the teaching? The answer is found in [Doctrine and Covenants 50:14]: “Even the Comforter which was sent forth to teach the truth.” We are taught by the third member of the Godhead, even the Holy Ghost.6

If we can devote our energy in class to expounding doctrines and principles in a way that softens the hearts of students and urges them on to further inquiry, then we have set the stage for the Holy Ghost to do the real teaching. We will not need to worry about not covering all of our material, for we will have accomplished what was most important. Useful to this end is another thought from Elder Bednar, as shared by Garry Moore:

Recently I read this insightful comment given by Elder David A. Bednar to Church members in Australia: “The role of a teacher is not just to talk and dispense information. Rather, the role of a teacher is to invite, encourage and entice learners to act in accordance with truth…. The very process of formulating a question, raising a hand, asking a question and listening attentively is an expression of faith. This principle of seeking learning by faith invites individualized teaching by the Holy Ghost.”7

More Concern with Outcomes Than Pouring Out Information

The outcome we seek is not to expose our students to all of the facts or information we know; instead, it is to assist in their conversion to the gospel. “What we are being asked to accomplish is not a program based on procedures but an outcome based on eternal principles. Programs and teaching practices are important, but only to the extent that they accomplish the desired outcome, and that outcome is the conversion of our students. Therefore, the challenge and the opportunity that is ours is to identify and implement ways of inviting the Holy Ghost into the learning experience more often and with more power.”8

Once we come to understand our real role in the classroom, we are more able to let go of the feeling that the whole learning process is our task alone. The role of the classroom teacher is “to direct the learning experience,” to impose a “logical or progressive order to the presentation,” to “decide what to emphasize and what to summarize,” and to provide appropriate pacing during the teaching hour. “One of the most common mistakes teachers make is
taking too much time on the first part of the lesson and then running out of
time and having to rush through the last part.”9 Being organized, thoughtful,
well-planned, and well-paced will invite the Spirit to the learning experience.
When the Spirit is there and students and teacher alike allow him to do his
job, then real learning takes place. Elder Holland gave this caution about
lesson preparation and presentation: “In discussing preparation, may I also
courage you to avoid a temptation that faces almost every teacher in the
Church; at least it has certainly been my experience. That is the temptation
to cover too much material, the temptation to stuff more into the hour—or
more into the students—than they can possibly hold! Remember two things
in this regard: first of all, we are teaching people, not subject matter per se;
and second, every lesson outline that I have ever seen will inevitably have
more in it than we can possibly cover in the allotted time.”10

One of the outcomes that should be included as we prepare and then
enter the classroom is the chance for the teacher or a student to bring things
to a conclusion at the end of class. There should be time for a thoughtful
recap of what just happened, what was learned, and why it matters. For exam-
ple, there could be time given to bear testimonies and an invitation given for
all involved to make changes in their life to order it more in accordance with
the lessons from that day. In this regard, Elder Holland taught:

I have been painfully disappointed over the years at wonderful lessons, given by
loyal, gifted teachers who, somehow, at the end of a class, say, “Well, there is the
bell. Brother Jones, would you give the prayer?” And it’s over. There’s no closing
of the books, no looking in the eye for just a minute, no settling down to say, in
effect, where have we been and where are we going and what does the Lord want us
to do? In some cases—I’m being a little unfair and a little extravagant, but to make
a point—not a single reference is made to what this lesson was supposed to mean
to the student or to the teacher. I’m left to walk away saying, “I wonder how he felt
about that. I wonder what she thought about it or what it was supposed to mean to
me.” There is so much effort to get some doctrine, some principle, some map, some
video clip across to the students, but not a hint of personal testimony about what
that doctrine or that principle meant to the teacher, the one who was supposed to
lead us and guide us and walk beside us.”11

Summary
The use of the words *cover* and *coverage* will probably never disappear from
a teacher’s vocabulary, but hopefully some of the negative connotations and
unrealistic expectations associated with those words will fade away. So if I
am not going to *cover* topics in class, what am I going to do? Consider this
possibility: I will address certain doctrines and principles in the classroom in a way that will engage my students, challenge them to think and ask questions, and stir them up so as to invite the Holy Ghost into their life to help them understand the doctrine and solve the concerns they have. I will prepare and plan in a way that allows the Holy Ghost to lead my informed mind and employ my preparations for the learning of my students. And I will not be bothered if I do not get through everything that I planned or tell all the stories or use all the examples or do all of the activities that I wanted to do. As Elder Richard G. Scott said: “Remember, your highest priority is not to get through all the material if that means that it cannot be properly absorbed. Do what you are able to do with understanding. Determine, according to the individual capabilities and needs of your students, what is of highest priority. If a key principle is understood, internalized, and made part of the students’ guidebooks for life, then the most important objective has been accomplished.”

Notes

Icebergs, point guards, waves, and softballs are analogies that aid teachers in asking good questions and directing effective discussions to encourage meaningful participation.
What do icebergs, point guards, waves, and softballs have to do with asking good questions and directing effective discussions? They are analogies that can help teachers ask better questions and direct more insightful and inspiring discussions. These analogies will be presented along with principles and practices that can help teachers. The *Teaching the Gospel* handbook states, “Effective teaching is edifying teaching, and people are more likely to be edified when they participate in learning under the influence of the Spirit. . . . Asking good questions and directing effective discussions are primary ways to encourage that participation.”

If asking good questions and directing effective discussions are primary ways to encourage meaningful participation, then what constitutes a good question? *Teaching the Gospel* suggests that teachers should “ask questions that stimulate thinking and encourage student response. Questions can be asked that lead students to search for information, analyze what they are studying, or help them apply it in their own lives.” Furthermore it suggests, “Teachers should avoid questions that can be answered with a simple ‘yes’ or ‘no’ or where the answer is so obvious the students are not motivated to think about
“It” also adds, “Good questions require students to search the scriptures for the answer and to seek the Spirit’s help.” According to this handbook, good questions “ask students to apply what they have learned from the verses,” draw comparisons of “a person or an event in one part of the scriptures to another person or event somewhere else.” In sum, “Good questions are the very heart of good discussions.”

Elder Richard G. Scott stated, “It is imperative that we use our every capacity to stimulate students to think.” He continued, “Ask carefully formulated questions that stimulate thought. Even if the responses are not perfect, they will increase the probability that important lessons will be learned.” As students respond to questions and share what they think, they are much more likely to retain the lessons that are being discussed. Furthermore, as they verbally participate, the lesson is retained longer in the storage of their mind. Most importantly, by sharing what they know and feel, students can have their words driven deep into their hearts by the Holy Ghost.

In addressing the importance of asking good questions, President Henry B. Eyring gave the following counsel:

Now, I suggest one more routine tool that we might use more effectively: to ask and to answer questions is at the heart of all learning and all teaching. . . . Some of those questions require only an answer of fact taken from memory: “Who was the father of Helaman?” or “Unto whom is this land consecrated?”

But some questions invite inspiration. Great teachers ask those. That may take just a small change of words, an inflection in the voice. Here is a question that might not invite inspiration: “How is a true prophet recognized?” That question invites an answer which is a list, drawn from memory of the scriptures and the words of living prophets. Many students could participate in answering. Most could give at least a passable suggestion. And minds would be stimulated.

But we could also ask the question this way, with just a small difference: “When have you felt that you were in the presence of a prophet?” That will invite individuals to search their memories for feelings. After asking, we might wisely wait for a moment before calling on someone to respond. Even those who do not speak will be thinking of spiritual experiences. That will invite the Holy Ghost. Then, even if no one should speak, they will be ready for you to bear quiet testimony of your witness that we are blessed to live when God has called prophets to guide and teach us.

In speaking of the importance of asking good questions, Chad H. Webb, administrator of Seminaries and Institutes, stated, “Another teaching practice that is crucial to inviting the Spirit is to ask good questions. This is especially true with questions that cause our students to think about their experiences with gospel principles or that cause them to reply with testimony. Questions like ‘When have you been blessed by being obedient to that commandment?’
or ‘Why do you believe that principle is true?’ will often cause our students to respond by expressing their gratitude to the Lord and their testimonies of gospel principles. Good questions are simple yet powerful ways to invite the Holy Ghost to witness to our students.”

The following is a list of questions that, when asked, can provide an opportunity for students to “search their memory for feelings” and to “express their gratitude to the Lord and their testimonies of gospel principles”:

- When have you seen, felt, or experienced this principle in your life?
- What difference has this principle made in your life?
- How has living this principle helped you (or someone you know)?
- What evidence have you seen in your life that this principle is true?
- When have you been blessed by being obedient to this commandment?
- How do you know that what we have talked about is true?
- Why is this meaningful to you? Why is this important to you?
- How has knowing this principle helped you in your life?
- Why do you believe this principle is true?
- Would you explain how understanding this principle makes you feel gratitude for the Lord?

Certain types of questions can help students share positive examples of people they know who are living the discussed principle. By having students share examples of those they personally know who live the principle with excellence, students will feel the Spirit and hopefully receive encouragement to more fully live that truth. Most importantly, these questions can help students consider how they can better influence or serve other people, especially family members, as they more fully apply and live gospel principles. Note the following examples of questions that assist students in sharing and applying the positive qualities of people they know:

- Do you know anyone who exemplifies this principle?
- Do you know anyone in your family, among your friends, or at your school who is an excellent example of living this principle?
- What did you learn from the example of (Nephi) that you could apply to your own life?
- Why is this principle important and critical in your life right now?
- How will living this principle help you to strengthen your family?

Students seem to enjoy speaking about those they know who are great examples, especially friends, classmates, leaders, and parents. As students
discuss these testimony-fortifying examples, they are often edified, especially as we connect them to the perfect life of the Savior. Furthermore, seeing positive examples of others living the gospel can help students “more easily understand how gospel principles can be applied in their own lives.” As we apply truth, we are prone to make the vital choices in our life in accordance with our Heavenly Father’s will.

“Appropriate questions,” according to Elder Scott, “lead a student to think about doctrine, appreciate it, and understand how to apply it in his or her personal life.” In addition, the Teaching and Learning Emphasis, which gives direction to seminary and institute teachers and leaders, adds, “Applying gospel principles brings promised blessings, deepens understanding and conversion, and helps us become more like the Savior.” Nephi also shared benefits of applying gospel principles when he said he “did liken all scriptures unto us that it might be for our profit, and learning, . . . that [we] might have hope” (1 Nephi 19:23–24).

The following types of questions, when utilized, provide an opportunity for students to share how they have come to know a principle is true, and to help those who are struggling to understand, accept, or live a principle. As students hear their classmates bearing testimony of what they know is true, as well as how they came to know it, a seed can be planted in the hearts of the listeners, which can “begin to swell,” “enlarge [their] soul,” and “enlighten [their] understanding” (Alma 32:28). Examples of these types of questions are:

- How have you come to know this principle is true?
- What helps you to live this principle?
- What counsel would you give to someone who is struggling to accept or live this principle?

When using questions addressed to those who are struggling, teachers need to be sensitive to those students who do not feel like they have received a witness of truth. Students might feel that the reason they have not received a witness is that something is wrong with them, or that Heavenly Father might not love them as much as others, and so on. It is good to remind students that we all receive the Spirit in different ways and that we can and do receive revelation but do not always recognize it as such. We can also provide the encouragement to continue qualifying for the Spirit through obedience (see John 7:17), the testimony that the Lord loves us and will help us, and the counsel to not give up asking for his guidance and for help to recognize it when it comes.
In constructing questions, it is wise for the teacher to ponder and prepare questions before the class begins. Meaningful questions are often best formulated during a contemplative time of preparation, and the best questions are received by revelation. That is not to say that the Lord will not give us these questions in our mind, “in the very hour, yea, in the very moment” of our need (D&C 100:6). He has and he will, especially after we have done all we can do (see 2 Nephi 25:23) and have followed his command to “treasure up in your minds continually the words of life” (D&C 84:85). In short, as we consistently pay the price in preparation, the Lord will reveal to us those questions that will benefit and bless our students the most.

Icebergs: Follow-up Questions

Sometimes a student shares a thought, but the teacher senses there is more the student could share. The portion of information the student initially shares might be compared to the tip of an iceberg; there is much more beneath the surface. A simple follow-up question will provide an opportunity for the student to descend from “surface-level” answers to the deeper, more meaningful thoughts and feelings. When this appropriately happens, students will disclose magnificent and monumental portions of the iceberg that can lift and edify students in the classroom.

One teacher shared an experience he had in class after he had heard the iceberg analogy. He was discussing with his students times when they had seen a source of true power. One young man, who rarely commented in class, raised his hand and said, “I have learned that priesthood power is power from God.” The teacher said he actually visualized an iceberg and then said, “Danny, it sounds like you know what you are talking about. Would you tell us more?” Danny continued, “When my little sister was born, she was born with many health complications. The doctors said she wouldn’t live for even one hour.” Then he added, “Then she died, and my dad blessed her, and she started to live again.” Concluding, he said, “She is nine years old now.”

After Danny had shared this experience, the teacher stated that a powerful feeling had entered the room. He looked at his students and asked, “Does anyone else know that priesthood power is the true power of God?” Amber raised her hand and said, “I have never had an experience like that, but when Danny was talking, I know I felt the Spirit.” The teacher later commented that, just as Danny looked back to the time his father blessed his sister as a day his testimony of the priesthood was strengthened, Amber would most likely
look back to that day in seminary as a day her testimony of the priesthood was also strengthened.

Imagine if the teacher had not asked Danny the follow-up question. A meaningful, faith-fortifying opportunity definitely would have been lost. Contrast the previous experience with another occurrence a friend of mine observed in a seminary classroom a few years ago. During class a young woman raised her hand and made the comment, “I have just learned for myself that Gordon B. Hinckley is a true prophet of God!” The teacher looked at her and said, “That’s great—now back to my story.” An opportunity was lost (hopefully, the teacher asked her the next class period to elaborate). A simple follow-up prompt, such as “Please tell us more,” would have given her an opportunity to disclose the rest of the iceberg—in this case, a life-changing event. She had just learned for herself that we have a prophet of God on the earth!

I am certain that in classes I have taught I have missed many opportunities similar to this one. It is imperative, however, that teachers recognize such golden opportunities when they come and ask the appropriate questions that will lead to responses that inspire, uplift, and encourage those who are listening.

The following are examples of follow-up statements and questions that can be effective in encouraging students to appropriately share additional meaningful thoughts and feelings:

- Please tell us more.
- Teach us.
- Please explain.
- Please give us an example.
- What do you mean by that?

Another type of follow-up question helps students move from sharing experiences and thoughts to testifying about truth. After a student shares a poignant, faith-promoting experience a teacher can ask: “How has this experience strengthened your testimony of Jesus Christ?” or, “How has knowing this strengthened your faith or testimony?” Another question that can lead to fruitful answers is, “What have you learned about Heavenly Father (or Jesus Christ) from this experience?” Such questions frequently lead to responses that are filled with pure testimony. At these times, the outcomes listed in Doctrine and Covenants 50:22, of understanding, edification, and rejoicing are often realized. These questions include:
• How has this experience strengthened your testimony of Jesus Christ?
• How has this experience strengthened your faith?
• What have you learned about Heavenly Father from this experience?
• What have you learned about Jesus Christ from this experience?
• How has studying this increased your testimony of the Atonement?
• How does that make you feel about your Heavenly Father? Jesus Christ?

Anytime we speak with reverence and gratitude about our Heavenly Father, His Son Jesus Christ, or the Atonement, the outcome is power. In teaching of the importance of testifying of the Savior, President Eyring observed, “One of the offices of the Holy Ghost is to testify of the Savior and His work. There are many true things you can choose to say to your child or to your student. The Spirit testifies of all truth. And yet the surest way I know to have the Spirit come to verify what you say is to testify of the Savior. So, when the person you love and serve feels the Spirit as you testify of the Savior, it strengthens their faith. They then are more likely to choose to testify of their growing faith in Him and His works. And when they do, the Spirit will confirm what they say to those who hear them. And it will reinforce their own faith.”

As students respond to the invitation to bear testimony it can have a strengthening effect on them. President Boyd K. Packer said, “Oh, if I could teach you this one principle. A testimony is to be found in the bearing of it!”

In adding to this principle, President Packer said on another occasion, “There are two dimensions to testimony. The one, a testimony we bear to them, has power to lift and bless them. The other, infinitely more important, the testimony they bear themselves, has the power to redeem and exalt them. You might say they can get a testimony from what we say. The testimony comes when they themselves bear a witness of the truth and the Holy Ghost confirms it to them.”

Point Guards: Effective Discussions

Teaching the Gospel states, “Good questions are at the very heart of good discussions.” This handbook also clarifies that, “A good discussion can help students learn the value of personal inquiry in their own lives. They need to learn how to ask for help from the Lord and then to search for answers.” Furthermore the handbook reads, “A stimulating discussion is also a way to
create learner readiness and help students apply what they learn.” Hence, directing effective discussions allows the students and teacher to learn from each other in a setting where the Holy Ghost is active so that “all will be edified of all” (D&C 88:122). Elder Joseph B. Wirthlin stated the following pertaining to the effectiveness of discussions: “The more class members . . . discuss what the gospel actually means in their lives, the more will be their inspiration, growth, and joy as they try to solve their personal concerns and challenges.”

One way to direct an effective discussion is through redirecting questions to other students in the class. For example, when a student shares a poignant insight, a teacher can then turn to another member of the class and say, “John, what can you add to what we just heard?” or “Sarah, would you tell us what you feel?” The implementation of this teaching practice is like a point guard distributing the ball to members of his team. When the teacher asks a question, it is like he passes the ball to a student who in turn answers the question and then passes the ball back to the teacher. The teacher then looks at another student and distributes the ball to him or her, and this exchange can be repeated for the duration of the discussion. As teachers redirect questions to other students, the effect it has on the team or members of the classroom is significant. There is something good that happens inside the classroom. Participation is broadened and the discussion is deepened. There is also an increased feeling of unity and strength as students get to know each other better and as they listen to and learn from one another.

One day, as I was teaching a class at the Orem Institute, my friend (whom I consider a master teacher) was observing me. He silently sat in the back of my classroom and watched my lesson as I taught a scripture block from the Book of Mormon. Following my class, I asked him for some feedback or suggestions that he thought would improve my teaching. He shared with me one thought that has really helped me as I ask and redirect questions to other students. He said, “I know you have students who won’t always raise their hands to respond but who will have things to share if you will ask them.” He added, “Watch their eyes; you will see it; you will just know it.”

I have since learned how to watch my students’ eyes, and have discovered that what my friend taught me is true—you can see it in their eyes when students have something insightful or inspiring to add. Sometimes the students give it away through nodding their heads affirmatively to what is being shared. As teachers, we can see and know by discernment when the Holy Ghost has
shared something with the student that may be appropriate to share with the class. Since that time, as I have watched my students’ eyes and called on them in my institute and BYU religion classes, I will receive an occasional “I don’t know,” but the vast majority of the time the student will share helpful and inspiring thoughts and feelings, which adds power to the class.18

The following are examples of questions that redirect or bridge to other students:

- Who would be willing to add to what was just shared?
- How is what was shared the same or different with you?
- Is there anyone else who would like to share?
- John, what do you think about what we just heard?
- John, what would you add to what Amanda just said?
- Sarah, what do you know to be true about this principle or doctrine?
- John, will you also share your feelings about the principle we have just discussed?
- Sarah, would you tell us what you feel?

When redirecting questions to individuals, a teacher must use caution not to bridge to a student who might bring contention into the discussion or make derogatory comments regarding their classmates’ thoughts and feelings. It is one thing for a student to add another witness to the principle being discussed or add their insight or experience into the discussion, but it is quite another to bring a contrary and unedifying spirit into the classroom. A point guard is always careful where and to whom he passes the ball. He never wants to pass the ball to an opponent.

An effective way to provide opportunities for students to meaningfully participate is by redirecting questions that are asked by a student right back to the entire class. For example, a few weeks ago I was observing a class when a junior high seminary student raised her hand and asked, “Did Jesus really suffer for all of us?” It was a great question. Certainly it would have been appropriate for the teacher to bear testimony of the Atonement of Christ, but had the teacher redirected this question back to the class, it definitely could have yielded marvelous, affirming, and living testimonies borne by the students regarding Christ’s suffering for everyone, or, even better, every one. Through the use of follow-up questions and redirecting questions, the experience could have produced tremendous spiritual fruit—in this case, testimonies about the Atonement.
In addressing this topic, President Packer wrote, “How easy it is for a teacher to respond quickly to simple questions, to close a conversation that might have ignited a sparkling and lively class discussion. The wise teacher deftly and pleasantly responds, ‘That’s an interesting question. What does the class think of this?’ Or, ‘Can anyone in the class help with this interesting problem?’ A simple two-way conversation, and you’ve involved the whole class and their minds come alive and are open to teaching.”

A one-dimensional chart shows the interaction between the Holy Ghost and the teacher and the student (see figure 1). The most significant questions the teacher can ask are those questions that are prompted (asked) by the Lord through the teacher, and the most meaningful responses from the students are those that are “received” or revealed to the student by the Holy Ghost. Through discernment, we might sense when such interactions have occurred between the Holy Ghost and students.

![Figure 1](image_url)

However, by adding another dimension to our chart (see figure 2), we can see that the Holy Ghost interacts not only between the teacher and student, but also between individual students as well. Such interactions between students can be spirit-filled and result in testimonies being strengthened, lives touched, and understandings increased. Likewise, when students meaningfully share their thoughts and feelings about truth, the outcome is often edification. In speaking about edification, Elder Scott said, “To me, the word *edified* means that the Lord will personalize our understanding of truth to meet our individual needs and as we strive for that guidance.” That personalized understanding comes as we study truth, and as we hear our teacher and classmates speak truth that has been revealed to them. The Lord describes this exchange between the Spirit, teacher, and students in Doctrine and
Covenants 88:122: “Appoint among yourselves a teacher, and let not all be a spokesmen at once; but let one speak at a time and let all listen unto his sayings, that when all have spoken that all may be edified of all, and that every man may have an equal privilege.”

On one occasion I observed a lesson where the Spirit was strongly active between the teacher and members of the class. It occurred while the teacher was helping his students apply the New Testament scripture mastery scriptures to their personal challenges. The teacher asked his students to anonymously write down a trial or struggle they were currently experiencing. As the students wrote their responses, the teacher circulated around the class, collected the papers, and shuffled them to preserve their anonymity.

After the teacher had collected all of the papers, he took one and read it to the class. It read, “I have a friend who is struggling with addiction.” The teacher said to the class, “Let’s help this person by sharing with them scripture mastery scriptures that you think would help their friend.” After a short pause, a student raised her hand and said, “I think Matthew 5:14–16 might help.” She continued, “I think knowing that we are the light of the world helps. We are examples to others and addictions take away from the light we hold and when we don’t have the light we can’t share it with others.” Continuing, she said, “Also, light makes us feel good, and when we lose it it’s no fun.” Her concluding comment was, “We need light.” The teacher thanked her and then asked, “Who else would like to help?” Another young woman raised her hand and said, “I think the answer is in Luke 24:36–39.” The teacher simply said, “Okay, how?” The young woman answered, “I know these verses are about the Resurrection, but when I think of them I also think of the Atonement.” She then testified, “I think the thing that helps us overcome addictions the most.
is the Atonement of Christ.” Finally, she sincerely added, “The Lord gives us the strength to resist temptations, and he gives us the strength to break addictions.” She said, “The key is Christ; we just need to let him help us.”

By then a few more hands were lifted in the air, and students continued to share scriptures that would help a class member to in turn help a friend. Then the teacher read the next trial. The cycle was repeated one more time, with students sharing scriptures and providing insightful comments. The teacher was definitely directing an effective discussion. In fact, it was like he was conducting an orchestra with students beautifully sharing their part with richness and quality that made the class a living work of art.

**Waves: An Unrushed Atmosphere**

Another idea for directing effective discussions is to withstand the temptation to prematurely end a discussion when you and your students are experiencing a marvelous faith-promoting conversation. Oftentimes we feel the weight of the unfulfilled teaching outline, and we move the class away from a spiritually nourishing experience that is fortifying faith, renewing hope, and having a profound effect on our students. When we feel those times when the Spirit is rich and deeply edifying, it is wise to continue the discussion, even if we do not get to the end of our outline. I have heard this referred to as “riding the wave.” Once you are on a great wave, continue to ride it while it lasts. If it lasts too long, you will feel it and know it is time to move on, but many times we can abandon the wave too early. By riding the wave, we allow the Holy Ghost time to testify of pure truth that is impressed into the minds and hearts of the listeners.

Recently I watched a class ride a wonderful wave. The class was speaking about times when they had “wrestled” with God in “mighty prayer” (Enos 1:2, 4). As the students shared their experiences, the Spirit washed over the entire class. One young man told of an experience where he had recently learned the Lord wanted him to focus on preparing for his mission rather than on obtaining an athletic scholarship. He had prayed to the Lord for direction in his life, and he gradually received perspective and peace. This young man concluded his experience by simply sharing pure truth. He said, “We must keep the Lord as our most important priority in our life.” The teacher paused and then asked him to state the truth again. It was one of those spiritual moments, where pure truth was spoken, and the entire class became still. Finally the teacher broke the silence and bore his own testimony.
His testimony was like an exclamation point to the lesson. The class had ridden a wonderful wave that was exhilarating and stimulating for the entire class.

In speaking about this topic, Elder Scott said, “Remember, your highest priority is not to get through all the material if that means that it cannot be properly absorbed. Do what you are able to do with understanding. Determine according to the individual capabilities and needs of your students, what is of highest priority. If a key principle is understood, internalized, and made part of the students’ guidebooks for life, then the most important objective has been accomplished. The best measure of the effectiveness of what occurs in the classroom is to observe that the truths are being understood and applied in a student’s life.”

Once you are on a great wave, continue to ride it while it lasts.
In a Worldwide Leadership Training Meeting, Elder Jeffrey R. Holland spoke on the importance of teaching in an unrushed atmosphere:

In discussing preparation, may I also encourage you to avoid a temptation that faces almost every teacher in the Church; at least it has certainly been my experience. That is the temptation to cover too much material, the temptation to stuff more into the hour—or more into the students—than they can possibly hold! Remember two things in this regard: first of all, we are teaching people, not subject matter per se; and second, every lesson outline that I have ever seen will inevitably have more in it than we can possibly cover in the allotted time.

So stop worrying about that. It’s better to take just a few good ideas and get good discussion—and good learning—than to be frenzied, trying to teach every word in the manual.

An unrushed atmosphere is absolutely essential if you are to have the Spirit of the Lord present in your class. Please don’t ever forget that. Too many of us rush. We rush right past the Spirit of the Lord trying to beat the clock in some absolutely unnecessary footrace.

I have heard an area director share the following counsel with teachers who struggle with rushing too fast and trying to cover too much material. He simply advised, “Slow down; teach less; ask a question.” By so doing, he felt students would actually gain more from the experience. He explained that when we slow down, cover less, and engage students by asking a question, they will learn more, feel more, absorb more, and walk away with more than if we try to “hydrate them with a fire hose.”

Sometimes it is helpful to remind ourselves that we will not be the last teacher ever to teach the students. They will learn additional principles throughout their life in personal study as well as in future church settings. Since we cannot teach them everything, we must choose to teach them principles that are most meaningful and applicable to their lives right now in a way that will have lasting impact.

Teaching the Gospel suggests that we (a) carefully prepare and plan the discussion, (b) conduct the discussion under the influence of the Holy Ghost, (c) plan a discussion so that students are seeking, asking, and knocking, (d) call on students by name, (e) give students time to think, and (f) listen to students’ answers and acknowledge the response in a positive manner.

Another suggestion is that teachers should not be overly concerned if a student’s comment seems to be taking the discussion in a direction that was not intended. Because we are teaching students and not lesson outlines, through the promptings of the Spirit the discussion will be guided at times away from our plan into a direction that is most fertile for our students. Just
as the Liahona guided Lehi and his family into the “most fertile parts of the wilderness,” so too can our discussions be directed to those “fertile parts” that will bless and benefit our students the most (see 1 Nephi 16:14, 16). However, if the teacher feels the discussion is not fruitful, he or she can direct the discussion back on course so that it is more productive.

**Cautions**

Chad Webb offered the following caution and challenge that applies to asking questions and directing discussions. He stated, “Programs and teaching practices are important, but only to the extent that they accomplish the desired outcome, and that outcome is the conversion of students. Therefore, the challenge and the opportunity that is ours is to identify and implement ways of inviting the Holy Ghost into the learning experience more often and with more power.” In other words, asking good questions and directing effective discussions are simply the means to a greater end, which is to help our students become converted. Elder Scott counseled, “Will you pray for guidance in how to have truth sink deep into the minds and hearts of your students so as to be used throughout life? As you prayerfully seek ways to do that, I know that the Lord will guide you.”

Next, it is important to remember that, with any teaching practice, there is always a danger to overuse it. Students who are met with follow-up questions or redirecting questions after every single comment could become weary if this practice becomes monotonous or tedious. It is far more effective to use any teaching practice wisely and providentially.

Another caution: some questions are too personal to discuss in class. Teachers should not ask questions that probe into the private areas of life. For example, it is unwise to ask specific questions about past sins and worthiness. Qualifying certain questions with statements like “Without disclosing any sins, how do you feel about . . . ?” Or, “If it is not too personal, what do you think regarding . . . ?” There are times when it is wise to remind students of important boundaries of propriety. More personal questions can be asked rhetorically, and are best answered only in the minds of our students.

Finally, in regards to stimulating good discussions, teachers of the gospel have been cautioned not to use adversarial debate, controversy, speculation, or sensationalism as the catalyst of a good discussion. In speaking of avoiding adversarial discussions, Elder Dallin H. Oaks gave the following counsel: “The Lord’s prescribed methods of acquiring sacred knowledge are very different
from the methods used by those who acquire learning exclusively by study. For example, a frequent technique of scholarship is debate of adversarial discussion, a method with which I have had considerable personal experience. But the Lord has instructed us in ancient and modern scriptures that we should not contend over the points of doctrine (see 3 Nephi 11:28–30; D&C 10:63). . . . Techniques devised for adversary debate or to search out differences and work out compromises are not effective in acquiring gospel knowledge.”28 Teaching the Gospel cautions teachers and counsels that they should avoid asking a “controversial question just to stimulate a lively discussion. This may frustrate the students and create contention in the class, which grieves the Spirit.”29

Softballs: A Quieter Class

One of the greatest challenges (if not the greatest) that teachers face in asking questions is when a class will not respond to them or will not engage in an effective discussion. In classes that are predominantly comprised of passive, nonparticipative, or shy students, the teacher finds himself or herself carrying the bulk of the load from the beginning to the end of class. These classes seem long and are often boring and tedious for the teacher and the students.

This past summer we spent time in an in-service training meeting discussing ideas that would help us work with reticent students and classes. During this meeting we brainstormed what we can do as teachers to help students open up and verbally participate more.

One of the items we discussed is making sure we give our students adequate time to formulate their answers. In speaking on this point, Elder Neal A. Maxwell said, “Provide moments of deliberate pause. The Spirit will supply its own ‘evidence of things not seen.’ And don’t be afraid of inspired silences.”30 Often the best responses come after a period of “inspired silence.” One experienced teacher wrote,

Like most people, I am conditioned to interpret silence as a symptom of something gone wrong. . . . Panic catapults me to the conclusion that the point just made or the question just raised has left the students either dumbfounded or bored, and I am duty-bound to apply conversational CPR. . . . But suppose my panic has misled me and my quick conclusion is mistaken. Suppose that my students are neither dumbfounded nor dismissive but digging deep; suppose that they are not ignorant or cynical but wise enough to know that this moment calls for thought; suppose that they are not wasting time but doing a more reflective form of learning. I miss all such possibilities when I assume that their silence signifies a problem.”31
“Be patient!” is the counsel given to teachers in *Teaching the Gospel* regarding these times of silence when no one responds to the question. Continuing, the handbook reads, “Students often need time to find the answer in the scriptures or to think about the question and what they want to say. The silence should not trouble the teacher if it does not go on too long. On the other hand, sometimes there is no response because the question is not clear. If this is the case, the teacher may need to rephrase the question or ask the students if they understand what was asked.”

We also spoke about the advantage of speaking directly with our students about the importance and spiritual benefit of responding to questions. *Teaching the Gospel* says, “From time to time, teachers can remind students of what they can do to encourage the Spirit of the Lord to be with them. . . . The discussion could also focus on behaviors that . . . are pleasing to the Spirit,” including “opening our mouths” (D&C 28:16). Elder David A. Bednar stated, “Are the students we serve acting and seeking to learn by faith, or are they waiting to be taught and acted upon? Are you and I encouraging and helping those whom we serve to seek learning by faith? You and I and our students are to be anxiously engaged in asking, seeking, and knocking (see 3 Nephi 14:7).” Elder Bednar added, “Learning by faith requires spiritual, mental, and physical exertion and not just passive reception. It is in the sincerity and consistency of our faith-inspired action that we indicate to our Heavenly Father and His Son, Jesus Christ, our willingness to learn and receive instruction from the Holy Ghost.” In this same regard, Elder Scott succinctly stated, “When you encourage students to . . . respond to a question, they signify to the Holy Ghost their willingness to learn.”

If students understand the importance of responding to questions, not just as “recording devices that play back information for a class discussion . . . with little thought of future use,” then the miracle of edification and the deepening of conversion can take place. One administrator commented that the most meaningful spiritual experiences he has observed in the classroom are when students share their thoughts, feelings, and experiences with the class. Elder Scott summarized this principle by stating, “Assure that there is abundant participation because that use of agency by a student authorizes the Holy Ghost to instruct. It also helps the students retain your message. As students verbalize truths, they are confirmed in their souls and strengthen their personal testimonies.” Elder Carlos E. Asay succinctly stated, “A pure
doctrine taught by a pure [young] man or [young] woman with pure motive will result in a pure testimony.”38

In our summer in-service we also discussed the importance of creating a safe atmosphere where students feel free to share what is on their mind and in their heart. Criticism, put downs, and other tactics that make students feel dumb after they make comments are not tolerated in such a class. Additionally, teachers can emphasize that there is no such thing as a “dumb question” or a “dumb comment,” and those times when students miss the target in their response, a wise teacher can carefully rescue them by saying, “You know what, I asked the question wrong. Let me reword it and ask it again.”

Along with this point, teachers can also foster a spirit of inquiry in class. As students feel comfortable in asking, seeking, and knocking, they can receive answers to their questions. It is wonderful to observe classes where students freely raise their hands to ask questions that they are pondering and to watch the teacher and the other students assist by sharing with the inquisitive student what they know. It is good to see several hands up in the air, each with either a question or a thought about the principle that is being discussed. In these types of settings students feel secure to earnestly ask, seek, and knock, and as a result their questions are answered. When the spirit of inquiry exists in a class, students spontaneously ask those questions that are relevant to their own understanding, lending to an active classroom experience.

Another way we discussed that can help students verbally participate more is by asking some students easier questions at first to break the ice. As students respond to simpler questions first, it will often prime the pump so that they will feel the desire to continue in the discussion. This idea of first asking a simpler question is like lobbing a softball to students. As we “lob softballs,” it can help some students build confidence as well as increase their desire to continue participating.

Many of us have either taught or witnessed an inexperienced batter learn to hit a ball (typically using a plastic ball and an oversized plastic bat). Usually, the pitcher draws near to the hitter, and then asks him or her to “check swing” the bat. Then the pitcher tries with precision to pitch the ball in the exact location where the bat was just swung. Once the inexperienced batter (usually a small child) hits the ball, the pitcher (usually a parent) is verbally supportive, validating, and congratulatory. Likewise, when a teacher lobs a softball—an easier question—at a student, the teacher is providing the student with a simple, easy-to-answer question. Once the student makes contact
and answers the question appropriately, the teacher can then positively reinforce the student. This positive, genuine reinforcement has an encouraging effect on students. It can help students to try again and participate more. Teaching the Gospel states, “Those students who know they are loved, respected, and trusted by their teacher are most likely to come to class ready to learn.” Furthermore, as our students know their thoughts and feelings are valued, they will often feel more comfortable and participate in sharing their testimonies, experiences, questions, and ideas.

Lobbing a softball can also include asking students to respond to the question first on paper. This allows students time to process the question and better formulate their thoughts. This time can also be used for students to ponder and seek for inspired responses. After they have written their thoughts, the teacher calls on them to either read their written comments or to summarize them verbally. Students can do this first in smaller groups, which can be less intimidating, followed by speaking to the class at large. In sum, lobbing softballs can help certain students become more engaged in classroom discussions.

It is important to remember that although some students or classes need softballs to help them begin to engage in discussions, other students need other, more skillful pitches to help pull them into the game. Some students might find playing softball with a plastic ball and oversized bat not as fulfilling. The principle is to pitch to the needs and abilities of our students.

In our summer in-service meeting, we discussed several other ideas to help reluctant students to share more. The discussion included (a) increasing class unity so students are comfortable in sharing with each other, (b) preparing lessons that are scripture-based and spiritually nourishing so students feel the power and inspiration to share, (c) consistently preparing lessons that are interesting, relevant, and enjoyable, so that healthy learner readiness is maintained (when learner readiness is low, students often do not feel the desire to respond to even good questions), (e) formulating questions for students that require more than the superficial answers of “pray,” “go to church,” and “read the scriptures” and most importantly, (f) receiving inspired questions from the Lord.

Chad Webb addressed this topic and said, “Please don’t get discouraged if your students don’t respond immediately to the opportunity to participate more. There are wonderful blessings that will come as we patiently help them
to become good learners. It doesn’t always happen with our first attempt. It will take some time and some effort.”41

Finally, Elder Scott stated, “Don’t let Satan lead you to underestimate your worth. As a mission president, it was easy to distinguish the difference between a young man or woman who had consistently attended seminary or institute from those who had missed those enriching experiences. You may be discouraged when parents who are able to help their children don’t do it. You may be less than enthusiastic when a student comes to class and doesn’t appear to be concentrating. Accept the challenge to get him or her actively engaged. Don’t let Satan lead you to underestimate your worth and the impact for good you have in the lives of students. It can be immense.”42

Conclusion

When Jesus appeared to the Nephites, he taught the people for three days. The record informs us that “he did teach and minister unto the children of the multitude of whom hath been spoken, and he did loose their tongues, and they did speak unto their fathers great and marvelous things, even greater than he had revealed unto the people; and he loosed their tongues that they could utter” (3 Nephi 26:14).

Like Jesus to the Nephites, a modern prophet of God shared his observation about the youth of our day. President Eyring said, “In recent months I have heard deacons, teachers, and priests give talks which are clearly as inspired and powerful as you will hear in this general conference. As I have felt the power being given to young holders of the priesthood, I have thought that the rising generation is rising around us, as if on an incoming tide. My prayer is that those of us in the generations which have come before will rise on the tide with them.”43

In this paper, I have shared analogies (icebergs, point guards, waves, and softballs) that can help teachers to improve their use of questions and discussions in order to increase understanding and edification. Such questions and discussions provide opportunities for our students to express thoughts and feelings that are inspired by the Spirit. And just as he did in ancient days, the Lord can also loose the tongues of our students so they too can share great and marvelous things. Similarly, as President Eyring said, we too can hear our students respond in ways that are inspired and powerful.

In sum, Teaching the Gospel succinctly states, “Effective teaching is edifying teaching, and people are more likely to be edified when they participate in
learning under the influence of the Spirit. . . . Asking good questions and directing effective discussions are primary ways to encourage that participation.”

Notes
6. In his book *Teach Ye Diligently*, President Packer teaches, “If we learn in order to serve, to give to others, and to ‘feed’ others, we will find the acquisition of subject matter much easier. . . . Then there will come to us the full meaning of this scripture; ‘He that findeth his life shall lose it: and he that loseth his life for my sake shall find it’” ([Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1975], 191).
10. Elder S. Dilworth Young taught, “I can testify to you that there will be none of you [who will] have any adventure greater, more thrilling, and more joyful than finding out how to interpret the Spirit which comes into you bearing testimony of the truth. Young folks have to learn how, so do we older folks. We have to find out the technique by which the Spirit whispers in our hearts. We have to learn to hear it and to understand it and to know when we have it, and that sometimes takes a long time” (in Conference Report, April 1959, 59). Similarly, President Thomas S. Monson stated, “As we pursue the journeys of life, let us learn the language of the Spirit” (“The Spirit Giveth Life,” *Ensign*, June 1997, 5).
11. An example of this principle is found in Doctrine and Covenants 6:14–15. The Lord taught Joseph Smith Jr. and Oliver Cowdery that “as often as thou hast inquired thou hast received instruction of my Spirit. If it had not been so, thou wouldst not have come to the place where thou art at this time.” The Lord continues in the next verse, “Behold, thou knowest that thou hast inquired of me and I did enlighten thy mind; and now I tell thee these things that thou mayest know that thou hast been enlightened by the Spirit of truth.”
18. President Howard W. Hunter stated, “Do not fall into the trap that some of us fall into by calling on the ones who are always so bright and eager and ready with the right answer. Look and probe for those who are hanging back, who are shy and retiring and perhaps troubled in spirit” (Eternal Investments, An Evening with President Howard W. Hunter, February 10, 1989, 4). In working with an overzealous student, see Packer, Teach Ye Diligently, 172–73.

19. Packer, Teach Ye Diligently, 68.

20. Richard G. Scott, “Helping Others to be Spiritually Led,” address to religious educators at a symposium on the Doctrine and Covenants and Church history, Brigham Young University, August 11, 1998, 11.

21. A common misconception is that the Resurrection is not part of the Atonement. Preach My Gospel states, “The Atonement included His suffering in the Garden of Gethsemane and His suffering and death on the cross, and it ended with His Resurrection” (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2004), 52.


24. “Teachers should be careful not to end a good discussion prematurely in an attempt to cover all the material they have prepared. What matters most is not the amount of material covered but that class members feel the influence of the Spirit, increase their understanding of the gospel, learn to apply gospel principles in their lives, and strengthen their commitment to live the gospel” (“Gospel Teaching and Leadership,” Church Handbook of Instructions, Book 2, 304).

25. Teaching the Gospel, 38.


29. Teaching the Gospel, 38.

30. Neal A. Maxwell, “Teaching by the Spirit—The Language of Inspiration,” in Old Testament Symposium Speeches, 191, 1–6, also found in Church Educational System, Teaching Seminary: Preservice Readings (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2004), 38.


32. Teaching the Gospel, 38.

33. Teaching the Gospel, 25.

34. David A. Bednar, “Seek Learning by Faith,” address to CES religious educators, February 3, 2006, 3; emphasis added.


37. Scott, “To Understand and Live Truth,” 3. There are other ways students can demonstrate to the Lord they are willing to be taught by the Spirit. The Church News reported, “By way of tradition, BYU—Idaho students hold their scriptures in the air at the weekly devotional assemblies to show they are ready to be taught the word of God. Elder Bednar explained the reason behind the outward symbol of inward preparation that he began seven years ago upon his arrival as the fourteenth president of the university. Elder Bednar stated, ‘I choked with emotion as I watched you hold up your scriptures today. You may wonder, ‘Why does Elder Bednar always have us raise our scriptures?’ The answer is simple. Our study and use of the scriptures is an invitation to receive revelation and be tutored by the Holy Ghost” (“New Apostle Addresses BYU—Idaho Students,” Church News, November 20, 2004, 3).


42. Scott, “To Understand and Live Truth,” 6; emphasis added.


44. *Teaching the Gospel*, 37.
Joseph Fielding McConkie discusses what it takes to become a master teacher.
Holzapfel: After all of your years of studying and learning, what would you like to pass on to a third generation of teachers?

McConkie: First of all, drink from the fountainhead; that is, teach the scriptures from the scriptures. When we read the scriptures, they do not always tell us what we need to know because we are not looking for the right things. Let me give you an illustration: often in reading the Book of Mormon we are preoccupied with finding references to Christ. Interestingly enough, in that process we are missing the major message from the Book of Mormon writers, which is that you come to the knowledge of Christ through the covenant. And so we spot the word Christ, but we do not notice the word covenant.

Think about this for a minute. You start the book on the title page, where Moroni says the reason he is writing is so that we may come to the knowledge of the covenants the Lord made with our fathers and also that we might come to the knowledge that Jesus is the Christ. If I go out and take a random sample of a hundred returned missionaries on BYU campus and ask them what the purpose of the Book of Mormon is, they will tell me it is to bear witness and testimony to the Jew and Gentile that Jesus is the Christ, but they will miss the
concept of covenant. If we miss the concept of the covenant, we do not have anything to distinguish our testimony of Christ from the testimony of Christ being borne by others in the world. It is only through keeping covenants that we come to the knowledge of Christ that has the power of salvation in it.

I will read you a scriptural text to illustrate the point. Nephi talks to his brothers about this record that is going to come forth in the last days: “And at that day shall the remnant of our seed know that they are of the house of Israel, and that they are the covenant people of the Lord; and then shall they know and come to the knowledge of their forefathers, and also to the knowledge of the gospel of their Redeemer, which was ministered unto their fathers by him; wherefore, they shall come to the knowledge of their Redeemer and the very points of his doctrine, that they may know how to come unto him and be saved” (1 Nephi 15:14).

Holzapfel: So what is the covenant?

McConkie: What Nephi is saying is that if you are not baptized, you cannot receive the gift of the Holy Ghost. Without the Holy Ghost, you cannot come to the knowledge of Christ that has the power of salvation. It is generally thought that the testimony of Christ leads us to covenants, but look at the world. The early members of the Church read the Book of Mormon differently that we do. They were the grandchildren of the Pilgrims, who had come to America as a covenant people and established a covenant community. If we read it that way, we would read: covenant, covenant, covenant. We would be reading a different book, and we would see that the message of the book is “come to the covenant” to get knowledge of the saving power of Christ.

Holzapfel: You say that to become a master teacher is to drink from the fountainhead. In what ways do teachers not do that when teaching the gospel?

McConkie: Sometimes we feel like we have to improve on the scriptural story because we are afraid it will not be interesting to our students. So we focus on a hair-raising or emotional story in its place. You see the same kind of thing in a testimony meeting in which people feel like they have to have a story to tell or they cannot bear testimony. This kind of thing can get in the way of the bearing of a pure testimony. We get in the habit of using a lot of doctrinal substitutes and a lot of faith substitutes. We would be better served if we just spent our major attention and effort on asking, “What is this saying, where is it taking us, and why?”
Holzapfel: Nephi talks about likening the scriptures unto ourselves. How would you distinguish between the unchanging fountainhead of the scriptures and applying them or likening them unto ourselves?

McConkie: What Nephi did was to pick up the scriptures and say, “Isaiah said this, and Isaiah is talking to you and me. And this is what the scriptures are saying to us.”

Holzapfel: So instead of telling a story, he is using the scriptures that truly apply in that sense.

McConkie: Exactly. He said that we are of the house of Israel and that Isaiah was talking to us.

Holzapfel: The second point you made is to let the scriptures speak for themselves. You have written much, your father has written much, your grandfather wrote much, and your great-grandfather wrote a great deal. We have many things that master teachers have written to help guide us. How do you let the scriptures speak for themselves when we have so many guides to understanding scripture?

McConkie: We are all blessed by teachers. If you were to ask me what the single most important gospel or scriptural understanding that I have learned from my father is, my answer would be to go to the fountainhead of the scriptures and listen to what the Spirit is teaching you the scripture is saying. Let me give you an example. I was up at my father’s place with my brothers and sisters, and we were having family home evening. My father was giving us a lesson on one of his favorite scriptural texts. He was teaching us from the scriptures. I am sure if the point was to tell a lot of personal experiences, he would be the man to do it, but that is not what he told his family when we got together. He taught us from the scriptures. A particular text came up, and I said, “Look, when you teach that, you teach it with greater clarity, greater power, greater force than anybody else in the Church. But if I say the same kind of thing at BYU, my colleagues jump on me and tell me to slow down. They say, ‘You’re going beyond the period that ends the sentence.’” My father said, “Look, if you cannot go beyond the period at the end of the sentence, it means you do not have the Holy Ghost. And if you do not have the Holy Ghost, you have no business teaching in the first place.”

Now, let me take that story and combine it with another story. Many years ago, my dad came down and spent a day with the faculty. During the course of the question-and-answer session, he was asked a particular question. In response to the question, he gave some background on how he wrote
his Messiah series. He said that when he wrote *The Promised Messiah* (1978), “I took the scriptures and read the standard works from cover to cover as if I had never read them before in my life. Then I listed everything that I learned about the Messiah, and then I wrote the book. And when I wrote *The Millennial Messiah* (1982), I took the standard works and read them from cover to cover as if I had never read them before, and I listed everything I learned, and then I wrote the book.” Now, a little commentary—if anyone on that faculty had been given a research grant to write *The Promised Messiah* or *The Millennial Messiah*, they would have hired some research assistants. They would have collected everything that everybody who is anybody in a position of authority had said on the subject. Then they would collate all the information, put it together, and write it in a book. But that really is not the way Bruce McConkie thought. He never bothered to look up what anybody else had said on the subject, save the scriptures themselves. So he went back and drank at the fountainhead. He added this comment: “Now, I have to be responsible for what I write and how I came to that knowledge. I never quote another man unless he said it better than I could and unless I could justify what he said from the scriptures.” Then he added, “Last week, for the first time in my life, I quoted Parley P. Pratt, and I did so because he said it better than I could, and I can justify what he said from the scriptures.”

**Holzapfel:** In response to that, somebody might say, “He was a General Authority, and the First Presidency and Quorum of the Twelve have the exclusive right to interpret doctrine. As a teacher, my job is to teach the scriptures as the current General Authorities interpret them. And so, maybe for him, he could go ‘past the period,’ but I don’t know that I should.”

**McConkie:** Going back to that story, I think that if my father was sitting across the table from you and responding to your questions, he would take exception with the basic premise that he had an exclusive right to interpret doctrine. I do not think he would have believed that for a moment. In fact, in the context of getting answers and getting instructed by them, I would often go to him and ask, “What about this?” and he would say “Look, you have access to the same sources that I do.” He sincerely believed that I had the same right to get the same answers from the scriptures he did and that getting answers was not the exclusive providence of a particular office. In fact, I think that although this is an idea that we use to keep everybody in line, it is potentially dangerous and destructive to gospel scholarship because in a way, what we are saying is, “OK, Richard, you can be an echo, but you cannot be an independent witness.”
The scriptures do not teach me that. The scriptures teach me that I have an obligation to be an independent witness. I used to teach the class for the CES graduate program on the Doctrines of the Restoration. I would often pose these questions: “What does it mean to follow the Brethren? Does it mean you can only think what they have thought and quote what they have said, or does it mean that you should have an independent spiritual experience and an independent testimony and get it the way they got it?” Their response was the first.

In a sense, we have raised a generation who do not realize that they have the right to think and to get answers. This is a little facetious, but it is almost as if when you are eight years of age you receive the gift of the Holy Ghost on the condition that you will not use it unless whatever you receive has been cleared through general Church channels. And in that mentality I see a very real danger. I saw that danger when a stake president called me and said, “Hey, I have this problem in my stake. Can you help me find a quotation that says thus and thus?” And I said, “President, you are the leader of the stake, just teach them. Just say it. The Spirit has borne witness to you what they need to be taught.” And he said, “Oh, I can’t do that. I have got to have a General Authority statement.”

We sometimes go to sacrament meeting in which all the speakers are assigned to repeat the same general conference talk. What we get are the best-crafted talks in the history of the Church and fewer people listening than ever before. In my judgment, the reason we have fewer people listening is not because of the quality of what is being said, but because the speaker is bringing nothing to the altar that constitutes his own offering. It is just a handoff: this man said something, and we have picked it up and handed it to you as though nothing went through us.

A fellow temple worker shared his impression about how sweet temple work was and what a wonderful spirit attended it. He told how he had thought of a friend who is not a member of the Church and sat down and wrote his friend a letter, telling him, “You ought to be here with me. There is a great spirit here.” His friend, in response, got on the Internet and found all the prewritten objections to the need for temples and sent them to him. My colleague then got on the Internet and found an article that responded to the objections of his friend, which he sent back to him. The problem is that nothing had gone through either one of them; it was just passed along. We have gotten really good at handing things off.

Holzapfel: The Internet has really facilitated that.
McConkie: It has. Again, I believe that one of the greatest needs we have is to drink at the fountainhead once again. Get off the Internet and get into the scriptures. Get into the Sacred Grove. We need personal experience. Frankly, that is what Elder Jeffrey R. Holland was talking about in his recent conference talk on the Book of Mormon (October 2009). Some of our members have not laid their foundation on scriptural understanding but on information from the Internet. Then, when faced with objections to the Church, they do not know how to handle them. They have not laid the foundation that they should have, and they are jumping off the good ship Zion. It is a terrible tragedy. So Elder Holland offers this solution: get back into the Book of Mormon. Opponents of the Church may be able to write some question that we cannot answer, but they cannot answer the Book of Mormon. They cannot crawl around it, and they cannot climb over it—it is there. And when you put your foundation on that, you do not jump off the good ship Zion.

The Internet has greatly facilitated our ability to find things, but it has not facilitated our ability to understand things. I am from the old generation of teachers who taught without PowerPoint presentations; and frankly, in my judgment, many PowerPoint presentations are without power or point! They can be an excellent tool, but sometimes they allow us to get lost in the presentation. We might be greatly blessed if we went into a classroom and turned off all the media helps except the lights.

Holzapfel: So master teachers go to the fountainhead—read their scriptures—and do not let anyone get between them and the scriptures.

McConkie: That would certainly be one of the characteristics.

Holzapfel: What else does a master teacher do?

McConkie: The same thing all over again, doing it consistently. When I begin a New Testament class, I tell them the text for the class will be the New Testament. And when I teach a Pearl of Great Price class, I say that the text for the class will be the Pearl of Great Price and that anyone who cites a source outside of the scriptures will lose credit. I build that wall because that is the course where we retell the story of Creation. As soon as we begin to retell the story of the Creation, people revert to all the quotations they have heard, and I must then engage the quotes. I refuse to play that game. I want the students, for this one experience, to get the story from the scriptures, and to deal with it the way that the scriptures taught it.

And so, for instance, the way I teach the Creation is to go into class and say, “Now, in a moment I am going to snap my fingers. And when I snap my fingers,
you are going to go into a state of rapture. In that state of rapture, all you can
do is pay perfect attention to everything that I say. You can ask no questions.
You cannot be diverted or have your attention taken away by anything else.
Then I am going to lay out for you some basic principles. I am going to teach
you what you can learn about the Creation and the history of the earth from
the revelations of the Restoration, from revelations that no one else in the
world has. This cannot be taught at Harvard or at Yale or at Berkeley or any-
where else in the world. This is the School of the Prophets, and I am going to
give you information that you can acquire only on a high mountain. And then,
when you have the information, I will snap my fingers again and bring you out
of rapture, and then you may begin to ask whatever questions you want.”

I have learned that I cannot get them into the scriptures unless I establish
those rules. So I absolutely insist that for this occasion in their lives, they get
the story of the history of the earth from the revelations and no other source,
and then we will get commentary and help them sharpen their understanding.
Before that point, all other quotes are inadmissible. For the purpose of the
class, they cannot quote any other source on the story of the Creation than
the scriptures.

Holzapfel: I completely agree with you on that. What about the message of
the revelations themselves, “Seek ye out of the best books” (D&C 88:118)?

McConkie: First, let us operate with the understanding that the pri-
mary reference for this statement is the scriptures themselves. Now, we need
help in understanding the scriptures. If you are in a New Testament class,
you need a good Bible dictionary. We need good aids that articulate the cus-
toms, traditions, historical setting, context, and other things that sharpen our
understanding and appreciation of what was taking place. Certainly we do
not want to exclude those aids and helps. I wrote a little book on the how of
gospel study, and I have a cousin who, in true McConkie form, said to me,
“Why on earth would I need any help in understanding the scriptures? I just
read the scriptures.” Well, that is fine, but if you take your Latter-day Saint
Bible, you will notice that you have over a thousand pages of aids and helps.
Obviously, somebody somewhere thought we needed some help. There are
maps, cross-references, a Bible dictionary, and so forth. It is a given that we
will always need help of some kind. If you are preparing a Sunday School les-
son on 1 Nephi chapter 13, you should first sit down and read it. Then you
think about it, you pray about it, and you draw your conclusions about it.
And it is not until you have done all of that that you look to see what anyone
else has said. If I wait until after I have done my own studying before I read a commentary, then when I come across something that I had missed, I am more appreciative of it. Or I come across something and say, “Wait a minute! That doesn’t fit.” But if I read the commentary first, the course of the river is already set. I am not saying that we should not read commentaries; I am just saying that there is an important order to follow.

_Holzapfel:_ Yes, it makes a big difference. It seems to me that often we are busy people, and whether we are giving a sacrament talk, teaching Relief Society, or anything, we have limited time. So if we spend our whole time reading what everybody else says about it, sometimes it is a while before we actually get back to reading the scriptures.

_McConkie:_ Let me give you an example of how that works. I was in a stake presidency where we had a large enough stake that not everyone fit in our stake center, so we would have two sessions of stake conference. The talks in the morning and afternoon sessions would be on the same subject but given by different speakers. Amazingly, they would all give almost the same talks, with the same examples, the same quotations, and the same words because they were all studying the same material on the Internet.

Everybody wants to talk about what the Book of Mormon is, what it means, and they sit in their counsels as bishoprics or amongst themselves and tell everyone to read the Book of Mormon again. They say to mark the name _Jesus_ in a certain color whenever they see it. I’m thinking, “Why don’t we mark the word _covenant_ this time?” My brother, Stanford, called the other day and said, “Hey, my wife and I are reading the Book of Mormon again. We just read 1 Nephi, and we counted thirty-nine references to the Abrahamic covenant.” The greatest evidence we have that the Book of Mormon is true is the way it picks up the promises of the Old Testament, continues the story, and extends the promise. It is the reference to the Abrahamic covenant. If you want the great evidence that Joseph Smith is a prophet, it is not that he restored New Testament Christianity. There were a host of small groups on the frontier seeking to replicate New Testament Christianity. What Joseph Smith restored was the Abrahamic covenant. That is the genius of the whole thing—that is who we are.

_Holzapfel:_ So you go to the fountainhead—read your scriptures—and do not let someone else be a lens for you initially. It is all right once you have read the scriptures. This is discernment—looking for the best books, people who are citing doctrine, and then judging that by what you have read.
McConkie: It is always based on your own reading. You are adding to the light you have gained. You are always more appreciative of others’ insights after you have worked out your own by doing the best you can. Then you can read something that reaches far beyond what you were thinking, and you can say, “How did I miss that?” or “That’s wonderful.” I do not think you have that experience if you have not done your own reading first. I have had this happen many times when teaching a class. We read a passage as a class and ask, “Now what is this saying?” You get programmed responses that have been handed down from generation to generation—responses that have nothing to do with the text but that students have accepted as the answers. I have to say, “Oh my goodness, come on! Read the text again, and comment on it.” Sometimes I have to ask two or three or more times before I get somebody who finally does not give a canned response and actually considers what the text is saying. If you and I have been hired to go into a classroom and teach the Book of Mormon or the Doctrine and Covenants or the Pearl of Great Price, then that is really what we ought to teach.

Let me give you a classic illustration. A son-in-law said, “We had elders quorum today, and we talked about Abraham chapter 3. Now, every time there is a lesson on Abraham 3, particularly if there is somebody with a scientific mind teaching, you end up with a lesson on astronomy. We get lost in the ethereal blue. It is almost as if the first principles of the gospel are faith, repentance, baptism, and astronomy.” So if you have the blessing of not knowing anything about astronomy, you just have to stick with the text and discover what took place. Here we use the order in heaven as a teaching device to say, “See the order of the stars in the heaven? The same order is here on earth, and it is found in the Church.” We get the great priesthood lesson on organization and order, which is invariably lost if we are too anxious to get something else in the scriptures and show how sophisticated we are, how much we have learned about astronomy, and how that proves Abraham was a prophet. But if astronomy is the focus, we miss the whole lesson, the whole purpose of the chapter.

Holzapfel: So far we have the fountainhead, reading the scriptures unfiltered, and being careful about what sources you are going to read as aids to your own understanding. But using these other sources comes only after you have read the text yourself. That seems like a very academic approach. Where does the Spirit play a role in all of this?
McConkie: I think if that was just an academic experience, we would miss the whole experience.

Holzapfel: How does someone move from studying the Civil War or biology or something else strictly academic? If we were studying the Civil War, we would go to the sources. We would go to the documents—the Gettysburg Address and such. You want to make sure you do not let a Marxist, for example, interpret what was going on in the Civil War. So that primary document approach works for history. But what, then, would you teach somebody when it comes to the scriptures and the added element of the Holy Ghost? What has been your experience?

McConkie: My experience is that the Spirit will inevitably enlighten your mind and direct you not only to see how something relates with other texts but also to see how it ought to be applied in the lives of those you are teaching.

Holzapfel: But how did you learn that? What were you taught? What did you experience growing up?

McConkie: When you say “growing up,” I interpret that to mean growing up in my ability to teach from the scriptures. I will give an example. In the stake presidency, while preparing stake conference, I would say, “President, we’ve got this meeting pretty tightly timed, but let’s allow about ten minutes for the Holy Ghost.” It was always remarkable what would happen in the meeting. If you are teaching things that are attractive to the Holy Ghost, then the Holy Ghost is going to be there and what should happen will happen. So my suggestion is not to prepare a detailed outline or follow it slavishly. If I can’t go into class and remember long enough to tell you what it is that I wanted you to know, how in the world do I have the right to expect you to remember it for the rest of your life? What we should be doing is connecting with a feeling and an experience and an expansion of mind and thought.

Going back to our Abraham 3 illustration, I realized what was taking place when I read verse 18 where it says “as, also.” At first I was reading about the stars, and then it says “as, also” and I was reading about spirits. I realized that the Lord was likening the order among the stars to the order among the spirits. This discovery happened in the classroom. My father used to say, “I learned the gospel by paying attention to what I said when I taught.” He learned to pay attention to what the Spirit was saying.

Holzapfel: Like the Marion G. Romney quote: “I always know when I am speaking under the inspiration of the Holy Ghost because I learn something from what I’ve said.”
McConkie: Yes, teaching by the Spirit. And maybe doing that takes on the form of figuring out how to liken what we are learning unto ourselves. Or maybe it is just its relationship to other principles.

Holzapfel: I do not want to make it sound like a five-step program to becoming a master teacher, but what is the process? How is it different than mechanical scripture reading? I pull out my Sunday School manual and see that this is the scripture block for this week. Next I am going to close my manual and read it myself. Now, once I have read it, I am going to read the manual.

McConkie: And I do my best to understand it and see how it applies to the students and why I am teaching this at this time to this class.

Holzapfel: I have a scripture block. Do I bypass the chapter introduction material, go right to the scriptures we are reading, and then go back to the chapter introduction to see what insights there are?

McConkie: I do not think there is one right answer to that. In fact, a moment ago you said you did not want to make this a step-by-step program, and there is a little bit of a danger even with constructing a scripture block. We build these artificial boundaries. Be careful of the artificial boundaries that constrain or restrict what might be very helpful in understanding. I had the experience once where I was teaching something and someone did not quite understand. I told that person that if they took out the chapter breaks and just let the story flow, they would get it. Often the aids, helps, and chapter headings are very helpful and the chapter and verse divisions are necessary, but sometimes they get in the way.

Holzapfel: Where does a master teacher get spiritual strength? What kind of things does one do? You have to have confidence that the Holy Ghost can speak to you, so what do you do?

McConkie: You must trust it. This is what I keep telling my wife and others. When you get up to speak, you have to trust the Spirit. People resist and say, “Oh, I cannot do that. I have to have a prepared text. I have to have my notes.” Well, at some point, we have to venture out and trust the Spirit. Really good things happen when we trust the Spirit. Frankly, it takes some time and experience to learn that the Spirit is trustworthy, that he is going to be there. You tell yourself, “I’ve got something prepared so that I’m not going to be embarrassed to death, but I’m going to go up there and be flexible enough so that if the Spirit starts to move me in a particular direction, I can follow it.” This is what you do when giving a priesthood blessing. You do not want to predetermine the blessing. What you do is lay your hands on a
person’s head and restate promises that belong to everybody or give general, 
good counsel and feel your way until the Spirit gets hold of you and gives you 
some particulars, but you have to be willing to trust the Spirit.

Holzapfel: So what you are suggesting is that maybe our classes should be 
more Spirit-directed and perhaps fewer prescribed PowerPoint presentations out-
lined, “At 2:15, I should be at this point. At 2:20, I should be at this point.”

McConkie: Yes, we need to quit doing that.

Holzapfel: To review—master teacher, fountainhead, prioritize, read the 
scriptures first and then look for aid, and let the Holy Ghost speak. Would you 
add anything to that review?

McConkie: I think a teacher inherently has an obligation to teach. I 
do not have any business going into the classroom and saying, “Now, here 
is today’s lesson. Richard, what do you think about? So-and-so, what do you 
think about it? I am glad that everyone came with their own personal plan of 
salvation; let’s evaluate them all and discuss them.” Rather, I walk into class 
and say, “Look, here is the subject that we are dealing with. Let me review. Let 
me highlight. Let me read again with you what the scriptures are saying about 
it. Let’s get clearly in mind what has been revealed to us on this matter. Okay 
now, with that background, let’s stop for you to ask whatever questions you 
ought to ask to make sure that you can focus in on this, you can apply this, 
you can believe this and it makes sense to you.” It is not that we get to redecide 
the gospel together. Sadly, we do too much of that. I can remember in semi-
nary when the supervisor would come by with a chart he would mark to show 
how many students said something in class. There was this feeling that every-
one in the class had to say something to be involved, everyone had to have an 
opinion, and class discussion was extremely important. Superimpose Jesus as 
the teacher, and it would be as if he were asking: “Peter, what do you think 
about baptism? Do you think it ought to be by immersion?” This is the wrong 
approach. If you are a teacher, you go prepared to teach. You go in and say, 
“This is the subject. Here is what the scriptures clearly teach. Let’s review it 
together; then let’s struggle with it together to make sure that we understand 
it as well as we possibly can.” But we are not inviting everybody to bring their 
own plan of salvation, listen to them all, and decide as a class which one we 
like best, based on who is the most persuasive or how we think it ought to be.

Holzapfel: In one sense, the manual is a guide and protection that keeps 
people from believing outlandish rumors. But the manual is still just a guide, 
and we need to use the scriptures and the Spirit.
McConkie: I remember when I was a stake president in a student ward, a young man poked his head in my office and said, “Hey, I just wanted to introduce myself to you. I’m a member of your stake.” I asked him what he did. He told me that he was the elders quorum instructor. I said, “I hope you are doing a good job.” He told me, “Oh, I never depart from the lesson manual.” I told him, “If all the Lord wanted was for the manual to be repeated, then we would have sent a tape recorder. But we didn’t send a tape recorder. We sent you because you have the Holy Ghost and you have the priesthood and you have some marvelous experience.”

Holzapfel: Let me ask you one final question. After all these years you have been teaching, imagine you are reborn and you are going to start your teaching career all over again. What one thing would you change, would you do differently now that you have experienced teaching and have learned the skills of a master teacher and have come to these conclusions?

McConkie: I think the answer is that I do not know yet, and I will not know until I get into the classroom. That is the exciting thing about it. I know fairly well what we are going to talk about and what we are going to cover, but how we are going to respond to questions and what we are going to teach—we just do not know these things. So, that is what I know: I do not get to know until I get there.

Holzapfel: So master teachers go to their scriptures first and then look for the helps, the footnotes, Topical Guide, Bible Dictionary, and other good sources, but ultimately the master teacher is someone who is led by the Spirit.

McConkie: Yes, this is the difference between teaching a lesson and teaching a class. So if I could answer your question about what I would do in advance, then I would be teaching a lesson. But if I cannot answer it until I get there, then I teach people. That is why it is always fun to be a teacher: it never ceases to be exciting.

Holzapfel: If you had one last thing to say to your children or grandchildren about becoming a master teacher, what would it be?

McConkie: You cannot teach what you do not know, and you should never waste time teaching what does not matter.

Notes

Joseph’s multiple accounts have been examined and questioned. Are they credible? To answer that question, seekers need to know all the evidence and examine it for themselves.
Joseph Smith’s First Vision may be the best documented theophany, or vision of God, in history. The known historical record includes five different accounts in eight statements (three of the statements are nearly identical) of the vision in Joseph’s papers, and a few other hearsay accounts in the papers of people who heard him tell of it. Critics contend that the multiple accounts of Joseph Smith’s vision are inconsistent with each other or with historical facts and find in them an evolving story that becomes more elaborate over time. The very same evidence sustains a more faithful view that finds Joseph’s vision well and richly documented. The multiple accounts do not compel one to disbelieve Joseph Smith. For some the richly documented First Vision is a good reason to believe him.

It is vital to recognize that only Joseph Smith knew whether he experienced a vision of God and Christ in the woods in 1820. He was the only witness to what happened. His own statements are the only direct evidence. All other statements are hearsay. With so much at stake, Joseph’s accounts have been examined and questioned. Are they credible? To answer that question satisfactorily, seekers need to know all the evidence and examine it for
themselves, independent of anyone else. For several decades now the Church and various scholars have repeatedly published and publicized the known accounts of Joseph’s First Vision, and images of the documents containing his own direct statements are available in the Selected Collections from the Archives of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. But efforts to publish and publicize the historical record of the vision have not been widely read. Relatively few people have learned of these vital historical documents and their contents. Critics, especially with the pervasive use of the Internet, prey upon that ignorance to try to undermine faith in the vision. The antidote to that is to study the accounts Joseph left us.

Each of the accounts has its own history. Each was created in circumstances that shaped what it says, how it was recorded, and thus how it was transmitted to us. Each account has gaps and omissions. Each adds detail and richness. For example, Joseph described a highly personalized experience in his earliest account (1832). Using the language of the revivals, he says he became “convicted of my sins,” but he could find no place for forgiveness since “there was no society or denomination that built upon the gospel of Jesus Christ as recorded in the new testament and I felt to mourn for my own sins.” This account describes how the Lord appeared and filled Joseph “with the spirit of God,” and “spake unto me saying Joseph my son thy sins are forgiven thee.” It emphasizes the Atonement of Christ and the personal redemption it offered Joseph. He wrote in his own hand that as a result of the vision, “my soul was filled with love and for many days I could rejoice with great Joy and the Lord was with me.”

Three years later, in 1835, an eccentric visitor from the east inquired of Joseph, whose scribe captured some of Joseph’s response in his journal. In this account Joseph cast the vision as the first in a series of events that led to the translation of the Book of Mormon. He emphasized the opposition he felt in the grove, how he made “a fruitless attempt to pray” but couldn’t speak until he knelt and was enabled. This account tells that one divine personage appeared in a pillar of fire, followed shortly by another. “I saw many angels in this vision,” Joseph added as an afterthought, noting, “I was about 14 years old when I received this first communication.” A week later Joseph told another inquirer of the vision, though his scribe recorded only that Joseph gave the fellow an account of his “first visitation of Angels,” rather than describing the vision itself. Both of these 1835 accounts were also incorporated into a draft of Joseph’s history.
Joseph published two accounts of the vision during his lifetime. The first of these to be written and the best known is in Joseph’s manuscript history, written in 1838 or 1839 before being published in the Church’s newspaper in 1842 and now excerpted in the Pearl of Great Price. The first to be published is Joseph’s response to Chicago Democrat editor John Wentworth’s request for a “sketch of the rise, progress, persecution and faith of the Latter-day Saints” as source material for a friend, George Barstow, who was writing a history of New Hampshire. The original manuscript of this account is missing. Many of Wentworth’s papers are thought to have been destroyed in the 1871 Chicago fire, and there is no known evidence that Barstow used Joseph’s account, but Joseph had it printed in March 1842 in the Church’s Times and Seasons newspaper, making it the first account published in the United States.

Joseph and scribe Frederick Williams wrote the earliest account a decade before those two accounts were published, and the Church’s historians brought this document across the plains to Utah, but it became unknown to Latter-day Saints until Paul Cheesman published it in his master’s thesis in 1965. Similarly, the two accounts Joseph’s scribe Warren Parrish penned into Joseph’s journal in November 1835, which were later copied into a draft of Joseph’s history, were generally unknown to Latter-day Saints until LDS historians published them in the late 1960s.

There are also a handful of contemporary hearsay accounts, meaning that they were written by people who heard Joseph describe his vision. Orson Pratt wrote one of these and published it in Scotland in 1840 as A[n] Interesting Account of Several Remarkable Visions. It echoes passages from Joseph’s earlier accounts and prefigures passages in later ones. Orson Pratt must have had access to Joseph’s tellings, either in person or through the documents of the pre-1840 accounts (or both), and possibly to an unknown document that prefigured the 1842 Wentworth letter. Alternatively, Orson’s own rendering of the vision may have shaped the account in the Wentworth letter. The two accounts clearly share phrasing.

Pratt’s account of the vision is the most thorough of the third-person accounts. Other hearsay accounts include Orson Hyde’s 1842 German publication of an account very much like Orson Pratt’s, the first translated publication of a first vision account. Levi Richards wrote in his journal of hearing Joseph relate the vision in June 1843. David Nye White, editor of the Pittsburgh Weekly Gazette, similarly wrote in his paper of his August 1843 interview with Joseph, including an account of the vision. Alexander
Neibaur, a German convert to Mormonism, wrote in his journal of hearing Joseph relate the vision in May 1844, just a month before Joseph’s death. All of Joseph’s accounts and the hearsay accounts have been published again recently, together with scholarly analysis, in the first two chapters of the book Opening the Heavens: Accounts of Divine Manifestations, 1820–1844.

Joseph’s several accounts tell a consistent story of teenage angst followed by a comforting heavenly vision, a theophany. It is a fact, however, that the accounts vary in emphasis and disagree on some points. In 1832 Joseph declared that “the Lord opened the heavens upon me and I saw the Lord,” perhaps referring to two separate heavenly beings each as the Lord, but not explicitly describing two personages as his later accounts declare. His 1835 account says he saw one personage, then another, as well as “many angels.” In one account Joseph called the experience his “first visitation of Angels,” in another he “saw two glorious personages.” Joseph’s 1835 and 1838 accounts emphasize opposition from an unseen power. The other accounts do not mention that part of the experience. In the 1832 account, Joseph’s scribe Frederick Williams inserted a clause saying that Joseph was sixteen when the vision came, whereas his 1835, 1842, and the 1843 hearsay account all say “about 14” and his 1838 account says “in my fifteenth year,” or fourteen.

Those are the objective facts; interpretations of their meaning vary among subjective interpreters. Suspicious interpreters decide that Joseph is unreliable, perhaps even scheming. Trusting interpreters decide that the variability in the accounts makes sense in terms of the particular ways Joseph remembered and related the experience, and the diverse settings and circumstances in which his accounts were communicated, recorded, and transmitted.

Two writers, Fawn Brodie and Wesley Walters, have largely shaped the skeptical interpretations of Joseph’s first vision. They first articulated the criticisms that others have since adopted and published and that circulate widely today. Critical interpretations of Joseph’s vision share a common hermeneutic or explanatory method. They assume how a person in Joseph’s position must have acted if his story were true and then show that his accounts vary from the assumed scenario. Sometimes they postulate an alternative to Joseph’s own explanation. In the first edition of her biography of Joseph, Fawn Brodie cited his 1838 history, the one excerpted in the Pearl of Great Price. She did not draw on Joseph’s 1835 journal or the undiscovered 1832 account and therefore concluded that no one had spoken of the vision between 1820 and
about 1840. For Brodie, that meant that Joseph concocted the vision “when
the need arose for a magnificent tradition.”

Fawn Brodie did not change her assumptions when she revised her
biography of Joseph after the 1832 and 1835 accounts were discovered and
published. She did not reconsider her interpretation in the light of evidence
that showed that Joseph had written and spoken openly of the vision on more
than one occasion earlier than 1838. Rather, she simply substituted “1830”
for “1834” in this sentence about the vision: “It may have been sheer inven-
tion, created some time after 1830 when the need arose for a magnificent
tradition.” She also noted the differences in details between the accounts,
suggesting that their inconsistencies evidenced Joseph’s invention and embel-
ishment of the story.

Wesley Walters was a Presbyterian minister. Beginning in the 1960s he
published articles that claimed that there was no religious revival in Palmyra,
New York, in the spring of 1820, and therefore Joseph’s claim to have been
influenced by such religious fervor must be false.12 Historians of the First
Vision have credited Walters with awakening them to investigate the con-
text of Joseph’s accounts, but they fault him for forcing his thesis.13 Joseph’s
accounts do not claim that the revivalism centered in Palmyra itself, as Walters
argues. Rather, Joseph located the “unusual excitement on the subject of reli-
gion” around Manchester, New York, and used a Methodist term to describe
a wider geographical scope than Walters’s emphasis on the village of Palmyra.
Joseph said that “the whole district of country seemed affected” by the revival-
ism (Joseph Smith—History 1:5; emphasis added). To nineteenth-century
Methodists, a district was somewhat akin to an LDS stake or a Catholic
diocese.

It is not hard to empathize with Fawn Brodie or Wesley Walters. Brodie
was raised as a Latter-day Saint but chose to leave the faith. For her and
like-minded souls, that painful reorientation process requires a reinter-
pretation of Joseph Smith’s First Vision. Walters had just as much at stake.
Joseph’s most definitive account of his vision relates how he told his mother,
“I have learned for myself that Presbyterianism is not true.” He also quoted
the Savior saying that the Christian creeds “were an abomination” (Joseph
Smith—History 1:19–20). Latter-day Saints who feel defensive about
Walters’s efforts to undermine the vision should be able to empathize with
his response to Joseph’s testimony. In one sense, his determined and enduring
devotion to his cause is admirable. Even so, the critics and some believers lack
the open-mindedness that seekers try to cultivate in their quest to learn the veracity of Joseph’s accounts.

The critics’ preconceived certainty that the vision never happened as Joseph said it did prevents them from exploring the variety of possibilities that the historical documents offer. All of the unbelieving accounts share a common hermeneutic or interpretive method, sometimes called the hermeneutic of suspicion. It means, simply, that you don’t believe what you’re being told. One historian (who doesn’t believe Joseph Smith) said that he couldn’t trust the accounts of the vision because they were subjective and that it was his job to figure out what really happened. By what power is this historian going to discover what actually happened when he is unwilling to trust the only eyewitness? Such historians give themselves godlike abilities to know. They don’t seem to grasp the profound irony that they are replacing the subjectivity of historical witnesses with their own subjectivity. Their method is subjectivity squared. Like it or not, they are limited to the historical documents. But they dismiss the plainest readings of the documents in favor of skeptical interpretations. They severely limit possible interpretations by predetermining that Joseph’s descriptions cannot be possible. When Joseph’s 1832 account was discovered in the 1960s, opening new interpretive possibilities to Brodie, she did not respond with willingness to consider that Joseph might be telling the truth. She simply fit the new evidence into her previous conclusion.

Similarly, the discovery of considerable evidence of revivalism in and around Palmyra, and especially in the region Joseph described, did not alter the argument Wesley Walters continued to make. No matter what evidence came to light, he interpreted it according to his original conclusion. He chose not to see the possibilities available to those who approach Joseph’s accounts on a quest to discover if he could possibly be telling the truth. Even today, though much evidence has been discovered, it is common for some skeptics to contentedly repeat the Walters thesis that Joseph’s 1838 account is anachronistic, or out of historical order, since they have long since concluded that no unusual religious excitement occurred to catalyze the vision as Joseph’s 1838 account suggested. There is evidence that an intense revival stirred Palmyra in 1816–17 when Joseph moved there with his family. It may have catalyzed Joseph’s 1832 description of his mind becoming seriously concerned for the welfare of his soul “at about the age of twelve years.” About 1818 Joseph’s family purchased a farm in Manchester, a few miles south of Palmyra. A Methodist minister wrote in his diary of attending a camp meeting in Palmyra that June. The
next summer, Methodists of the Genesee Conference assembled at Vienna (now Phelps), New York, within walking distance of the Smith farm. The Reverend George Lane and dozens of other exhorters were present. One participant remembered the result as a “religious cyclone which swept over the whole region.” Joseph’s contemporary and acquaintance Orsamus Turner remembered that Joseph caught a “spark of Methodist fire” at a meeting along the road to Vienna. A Palmyra newspaper documents a revival there in June 1820, which is perhaps not too late to qualify as early spring since it snowed heavily on May 28. The diaries of Methodist minister Benajah Williams show that Methodists and others were hard at work in Joseph’s district all the while. They combed the countryside and convened camp meetings to help unchurched souls like Joseph get religion. Joseph’s accounts are consistent with this evidence. He said that the unusual religious excitement in his district or region “commenced with the Methodists” and that he became “somewhat partial” to Methodism (Joseph Smith—History 1:5–8). The Walters thesis, though heartfelt and tenaciously defended by him and uncritically accepted and perpetuated by others, no longer seems tenable or defensible.

Similarly, parts of Fawn Brodie’s thesis are not as compelling as they once were. The evidence she analyzed in her second edition suggested to her that Joseph embellished each telling of the vision until it matured into the canonized 1838 account. But even later accounts do not continue to become longer, more detailed, or elaborate. Rather, these accounts return to sounding like Joseph’s earlier, less-developed accounts. This evidence can be interpreted as Joseph’s intention to make his 1838 account definitive and developed for publication, whereas some of the less-developed accounts, including ones later than 1838, were created for other purposes. Some were delivered on the spur of the moment and captured by someone remembering and writing later.

For those who choose to read Joseph’s accounts with the hermeneutic of suspicion, the interpretation of choice is likely to remain that Joseph elaborated “some half-remembered dream” or concocted the vision as “sheer invention.” Those are not historical facts. They are skeptical interpretations of the fact that Joseph reported that he saw a vision. There are other ways to interpret that fact. Indeed, all of the scholars who have studied the accounts of the vision for decades and written the seminal articles and the only scholarly book on the vision share what one of them described as a hermeneutic of trust.

One will arrive at the same conclusions as the skeptics if one shares their assumptions about what the facts mean. But if one is open-minded, other
meanings for the same facts are possible. The danger of close-mindedness is as real for believers as for skeptics. Many believers seem just as likely to begin with preconceived notions rather than a willingness to go where Joseph’s accounts lead them. They might assume, for instance, that Joseph told his family of the vision immediately or wrote it immediately, that he always understood all of its implications perfectly or consistently through the years, that he would always remember or tell exactly the same story, or that it would always be recorded and transmitted the same. But none of those assumptions is supported by the evidence. Some believers become skeptics in short order when they learn of the accounts and find that their assumptions of what would happen if Joseph told the truth are not supported by the historical record.

There is an alternative approach to the evidence. It is humble, believing, and thoroughly informed. It does not assume that one already knows how Joseph would respond to and tell a heavenly vision. Instead it allows his accounts to shape that understanding. This is the historical method. It is the method of the believing scholars who study all of the accounts and the context in which Joseph lived and wrote or told them. Richard L. Bushman, one such scholar, wrote:

Behind the simplest event are complex motives and many factual threads conjoining that will receive varying emphasis in different retellings. In all accounts of his early religious experiences, for example, Joseph mentions the search for the true church and a desire for forgiveness. In some accounts he emphasizes one, in some the other. Similarly, in the earliest record of the first vision he attributes his question about the churches to personal study; in the familiar story written in 1838 or 1839 he credits the revival and the consequent disputes as raising the issue for him. The reasons for reshaping the story usually have to do with changes in the immediate circumstances. We know that Joseph suffered from attacks on his character around 1834. As he told Oliver Cowdery when the letters on Joseph’s early experiences were about to be published, enemies had blown his honest confession of guilt into an admission of outrageous crimes. Small wonder that afterward he played down his prayer for forgiveness in accounts of the vision. Such changes do not evidence an uncertainty about the events, as Mr. Walters thinks, as if Joseph were manufacturing new parts year by year. It is folly to try to explain every change as the result of Joseph’s calculated efforts to fabricate a convincing account. One would expect variations in the simplest and truest story.22

Several scholars read Joseph’s accounts with a hermeneutic of trust and find them consistent where it counts. These are not bumpkins. They include Ivy League–educated historians who have authored prize-winning books and have studied the documents and their context for decades.
Such scholars are open to historical possibilities. For instance, Joseph may have purposely or unconsciously conflated events. Such compression or blurring is common when people remember and tell their histories. Joseph may have had a hard time remembering exactly when the vision occurred and, thus, how old he was at the time. Some of his accounts use the word “about” to describe his age or when his father moved to Palmyra or later the Manchester farm or other details of the story. As we all do, Joseph may have mixed information from his explicit episodic memory (the kind that consciously recalls events from the past) with semantic memory (the kind that knows what it knows without remembering how it knows, as in remembering one’s name or phone number).

It was Joseph’s vision and thus the accounts are undeniably subjective. All remembered things are. “Memories,” wrote a foremost scholar of memory, “are records of how we have experienced events, not replicas of the events themselves.” If two people had witnessed it together, their memories of it would be independent and different. Each would remember it a bit differently from the other and a bit differently each time they remembered it. Their memories would be mixtures of past and present. That is, whatever they were thinking about in the present to catalyze their memory of the vision would influence the nature of the memory.

One scholar of memory wrote that “just as visual perception of the three dimensional world depends on combining information from the two eyes, perception in time—remembering—depends on combining information from the present and the past.” Another scholar used the same analogy. He explained that “merely to remember something is meaningless unless the remembered image is combined with a moment in the present affording a view of the same object or objects. Like our eyes, our memories must see double; these two images then converge in our minds into a single heightened reality.” Another memory scholar calls this heightened reality “insight” and acknowledges that it “may sound a bit magical.” Historian Richard Bushman described the process of finding insight in memory. “When we have a strange experience,” he said, “something that is new, we have to understand it in terms of what is old. Events and experiences do not carry their meaning on the surface. We have to look around in the inventory of ideas that we have in order to make sense of what has occurred to us. And so [Joseph had] to enlarge his inventories . . . in order to make sense of an experience that he had before.”
Some assume that anyone who had such a heavenly experience could not possibly forget the date or their age, but who is qualified to make such an assumption? How do they know how a person responds to or remembers a heavenly vision? Those who choose the hermeneutic of trust do not prejudice the issue but rather listen to Joseph carefully with an open mind and make an informed decision about the veracity of his accounts. One who did that was the literary scholar Arthur Henry King. He wrote:

When I was first brought to read Joseph Smith’s story, I was deeply impressed. I wasn’t inclined to be impressed. As a stylistician, I have spent my life being disinclined to be impressed. So when I read his story, I thought to myself, this is an extraordinary thing. This is an astonishingly matter-of-fact and cool account. This man is not trying to persuade me of anything. He doesn’t feel the need to. He is stating what happened to him, and he is stating it, not enthusiastically, but in quite a matter-of-fact way. He is not trying to make me cry or feel ecstatic. That struck me, and that began to build my testimony, for I could see that this man was telling the truth.28

Many people who hear or read one or more of Joseph’s accounts arrive at the same conclusion. Others, of course, do not. It is not therefore the historical facts or the accounts of the vision that compels the conclusion one makes about it. Believing or not in one of the best-documented theophanies in history is ultimately a conscious, individual decision. One must decide whether to trust or be suspicious of the historical record created by Joseph Smith. That decision reveals much more about the subjective judgments of its maker than it does about the veracity of the claims Joseph made in historical documents.

Notes


3. Welch, Opening the Heavens, 4–7.
4. Welch, Opening the Heavens, 7–8.
5. Welch, Opening the Heavens, 10–11.
6. Welch, Opening the Heavens, 17.
14. Welch, Opening the Heavens, 4.
18. Diaries of Benajah Williams, in possession of Michael Brown, Philadelphia.
New Publications

To purchase any of the following publications, please visit www.byubookstore.com and search by book title or ISBN number or call the BYU Bookstore toll-free at 1-800-253-2578.

My Redeemer Lives!
Edited by Richard Neitzel Holzapfel and Kent P. Jackson

This volume brings together talks from two Brigham Young University Easter Conferences. Presentations address the Savior, his life, his mission, the Atonement, and his influence in our lives today. The contributors include Elder John H. Groberg, Elder Gerald N. Lund, Robert L. Millet, and others. The topics range from the infinite sweep of the Atonement to its personal reach in perfecting individuals.

“It is always a challenge to talk or write about the Atonement of Jesus Christ,” notes Elder Lund. “First of all, it is infinite in its scope. It is the most profound and pivotal event in all of eternity. And we are so totally and utterly finite. We can but glimpse its importance and come only to a small understanding of its full meaning for us.”

Converging Paths to Truth
Edited by Michael D. Rhodes and J. Ward Moody

Many great scientists such as Newton and Einstein spoke and wrote freely of their religious thoughts and feelings, seeing no fundamental conflict between them and their science. Today there is a tendency to emphasize conflict more than harmony. Sometimes people of faith are criticized as blind, naive, or shallow, while scientists are painted as arrogant, unfeeling, or deceived.

Truth is not in conflict with itself. Religious truth is established through revelation, and scientific inquiry has uncovered many facts that have thus far stood the test of time. It is incumbent upon us to seek insights into all truth to mesh together, where possible, its parts at their proper interface. We discover bridges between scientific and religious knowledge best if we pursue them through study, faith, and ongoing dialogue. The Summerhays lectures and this book are dedicated to discover and share insights on how the truths of revealed religion mesh with knowledge from the sciences.


A Firm Foundation
Edited by David J. Whittaker and Arnold K. Garr

How did a church that started with just six official members blossom into a global organization of over fourteen million members? Authors such as Richard L. Bushman, John W. Welch, and Susan Easton Black show how Joseph Smith, Brigham Young, and other leaders established the foundation upon which the Church was built. According to Welch, the Book of Mormon provides the foundational administrative principles of the restored gospel of Jesus Christ, “not only its doctrines and instructions for personal living but also its many administrative guidelines. The administrative character and personality of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints has indeed grown directly from the genetic material found in the Book of Mormon.” This book teaches
how individuals were inspired to restore and establish Christ’s Church in the latter days.

*The Voice of My Servants: Apostolic Messages on Teaching, Learning, and Scripture*

Edited by Scott C. Esplin and Richard Neitzel Holzapfel

Seasoned by time and coupled with an endowment of spiritual light, the prophets, seers, and revelators of our time offer messages with special meaning for all who seek gospel insight. Fulfilling their divine mandate, the prophets in this dispensation have authored a large collection of essays, articles, and addresses expounding issues related to gospel teaching, learning, and scripture.

The Religious Studies Center (RSC) at BYU has regularly published landmark scholarship on Latter-day Saint scripture, doctrine, history, and culture. What is sometimes overlooked is that more than seventy significant essays by General Authorities appear in its collection of publications. This book contains selections from that collection, authored by prophets, seers, and revelators and published by the RSC over the past thirty-five years.

*Banner of the Gospel: Wilford Woodruff*

Edited by Alexander L. Baugh and Susan Easton Black

Wilford Woodruff was different from his predecessors and successors in one particular way—he left an incredibly detailed handwritten record, spanning over sixty years. He is one of the most important figures in LDS church history after Joseph Smith, who began Mormonism, and Brigham Young, who led the Saints to Utah and supervised the early colonization of the Intermountain West.

Through his skillful, inspired leadership and direction, Wilford Woodruff helped bring about accommodation and
change, leading the Church into the social, cultural, and religious mainstream of American society.

This book is a compilation of presentations selected from the annual BYU Church History Symposium hosted by BYU Religious Education to honor Wilford Woodruff, to explore his life and the many roles he filled, and to celebrate the two-hundredth anniversary of his birth.


Preserving the History of the Latter-day Saints

The pattern of keeping records dates back to the earliest days of the Church, when Joseph Smith, the Church’s founding prophet, announced the divine decree, “Behold, there shall be a record kept among you” (D&C 21:1). Leaders of the Church have strived to obey that command. Contemporaneous records were kept of revelations received by the prophet, the calling and interaction of early leaders, missionary assignments, the building of temples, and much more.

The Latter-day Saints continue to be a record-keeping people. In fact, there may be no other people on earth of comparable size who have a richer record-keeping tradition than the people nicknamed Mormons. It is a part of the Church’s administrative system, reaching from small committees to the Church’s general conferences and from new members to the most senior leaders. Because of this tradition, scholars can readily evaluate Latter-day Saint history from a wealth of primary documents.

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Student Symposium

The 2011 Religious Education Student Symposium will be held Friday, February 18, 2011, in the Wilkinson Center on BYU campus from 9 a.m. until 3 p.m.

Church History Symposium

The 2011 Church History Symposium, sponsored by Religious Education and the Religious Studies Center, will be held Saturday, March 5, 2011, in the Harmon Building on BYU campus. The Brigham Young University Church History Symposium was established to explore annually a topic of special interest in the experience of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Each year historians meet to share the fruits of their research with each other and with a general audience of interested Latter-day Saints and friends. The symposium has become the premier symposium for scholarship on Church history. Selected papers from each symposium are published in a book by the Religious Studies Center. Hundreds of people attend each year to be enlightened and edified. This symposium is free to attend, and registration is not required. For more information, please visit http://rsc.byu.edu/symposia/churchhistory.

The BYU Easter Conference

Elder John H. Groberg will be the keynote speaker at this year’s BYU Easter Conference. The conference will be held Saturday, April 9, 2011, in the Joseph Smith Building auditorium on BYU campus at 9 a.m. All presenters will speak about the Savior, his life, his mission, the Atonement, and his influence in our lives today. The conference will feature notable Church leaders, historians, scholars, educators, and authors. The conference also features special instrumental and vocal presentations. Attending the BYU Easter Conference is an ideal way to celebrate Easter Sunday. For more information, please visit http://easterconference.byu.edu for more information.
The Fortieth Annual Sidney B. Sperry Symposium

Scheduled for October 28–29, 2011. The keynote speaker will present in the Joseph Smith Building auditorium Friday, October 28, at 6:30 p.m. The Sidney B. Sperry Symposium at Brigham Young University has become one of the premier venues for Latter-day Saint religious study. Over the past four decades, both the conference and its corresponding publications have expanded in scope and outreach, extending the impact of Religious Education at BYU. Like Sperry himself, today’s Sperry Symposium influences thousands through seminars and publications. more information, please visit http://rsc.byu.edu/symposia/sperry.
Staff Spotlight

Editor

Robert L. Millet is Abraham O. Smoot University Professor of Ancient Scripture at Brigham Young University. Before joining the BYU faculty in 1983, he worked with LDS Social Services as a marriage and family counselor and with the Church Educational System as a religious instructor. Dr. Millet received his bachelor’s and master’s degrees from BYU in psychology and his PhD from Florida State University in religious studies. He has served as chair of the Department of Ancient Scripture, dean of Religious Education, and Richard L. Evans Professor of Religious Understanding. He and his wife, Shauna, have six children and ten grandchildren and live in Orem, Utah.

Jacob F. Frandsen was born and raised in American Fork, Utah. As an undergraduate at BYU, Jake studied linguistics and had an editing minor. Currently he is pursuing a master’s degree in linguistics. He edited and designed the Gospel Study Journal and also worked as an editorial intern for the Church’s Liahona magazine. Jake enjoys working at the RSC, where he has edited numerous manuscripts and also designed book covers and other material. He has studied German, American Sign Language, Basque, and Spanish at BYU and also sung with BYU Men’s Chorus. He currently lives in Orem with his wife, Chelsea, and two-year-old son, Grant.

Student Intern

Annalise Belnap is a senior from Mesa, Arizona. She will graduate in August with a bachelor’s degree in vocal performance. She has been singing from the time she could speak. In August 2010, she gave a recital as a guest artist during a summer voice program for Spanish and Latin American Song in Granada, Spain. In October 2010, she performed the role of Pamina in BYU’s operatic production Die Zauberflöte. She began her work at the RSC as a research assistant in fall 2009. She currently helps with the electronic articles project. Annalise has a deep love for all things musical, and because of this love, she plans to pursue a graduate degree in opera performance.
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Manuscripts must be word processed in double-spaced format, including quotations. A minimum of embedded word-processing commands should be used. Authors should follow style conventions of The Chicago Manual of Style, 16th edition, and the Style Guide for Publications of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 3rd edition, as reflected in a recent issue of the Religious Educator.

Those manuscripts that meet all criteria and appear to fill current needs will be peer reviewed and will receive a friendly, but careful, review. Authors will then be notified of the decision about publication. This process generally takes four to six months, and publication will generally occur within a year after acceptance has been received.

If an article is accepted, authors will be notified and asked to provide photocopies of all source materials cited, arranged in order, numbered to coincide with endnotes, and highlighted to reflect the quotations or paraphrases. Photocopies of source material must include title page and source page with the used quotations highlighted.

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—ELDER GLENN L. PACE