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Teaching by the Spirit

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This week a young bush pilot in the community of Yellowknife in the Northwestern Territories of Canada is prayerfully preparing to teach his priesthood quorum on Sunday. An office worker in Darwin, Australia, has called his companion and they are planning to go home teaching. Two missionaries in Tokyo, Japan, are about to teach a lesson to an investigator, and a housewife in Stuttgart, Germany, is already looking forward to another Primary class.

By the thousands, from one end of this earth to the other, a virtual army of men and women, the teachers of the Church, are doing a most important work. Each one has answered a call to teach the gospel. And teach they do—to members and nonmembers, to children and youth, to men and women in every stake and district and every ward and branch throughout the Church.

We cannot praise these faithful teachers enough for the good they are doing. They are not just passing along information. Their calling is much greater than that. They are teaching the gospel by the power of the Spirit. They are lifting those who hear them—inspiring them to good works.

The ideal teaching situation is given us by the Savior: "When ye are assembled together ye shall instruct and edify each other, that ye may know how to act." ([D&C 43:8.](#)) To instruct is one thing, but to instruct and edify is something more. To edify would be to instruct by the power of the Spirit. When a person edifies or teaches by the Spirit, it inspires those who hear to want to do better—to in some way act on what they have been taught.

Teaching the gospel by the Spirit, then, is the first responsibility of every Church teacher. The world, teaching according to the precepts of men, simply exchanges interesting information or additional facts. But when one teaches by the Spirit, it is a different experience—he speaks to the souls of those who listen. The speaker and the listener are edified and enlightened. There is an inner feeling of joy and of wanting to live better.

There are a number of ways a Church teacher can prepare. Among these are to enroll in the teacher training course and to follow the suggestions and helps found in each of the Church manuals. Yet, a teacher's most important preparation is spiritual, and this must be done on an individual basis.

We are told, "If ye receive not the Spirit ye shall not teach." ([D&C 42:14.](#)) This can be applied in two ways. First, in order to answer a call to teach the gospel, we must be baptized and have conferred upon us the gift of the Holy Ghost, which is the source of truth. Second, we must live and act and pray so that gift of the Spirit can come alive in our lives which, in turn, will edify or uplift us and those whom we have been called to teach. In confirmation of this, the Lord, in answer to the question, "Unto what were ye ordained?" answered, "To preach my gospel by the Spirit, even the Comforter which was sent forth to teach the truth." ([D&C 50:13–14.](#))

This seems to be the scriptural commission for all teaching in the Church. The importance of this is emphasized a few verses later when the Lord says: "He that is ordained of me and sent forth to preach the word of truth by the Comforter, ... doth he preach it by the Spirit of truth or some other way?

"And if it be by some other way it is not of God." ([D&C 50:17–18.](#))

There is a spiritual preparation that every Church teacher needs to make in order to ensure his or her success as a teacher of the gospel. This preparation is not always connected with education or experience or how much one knows. If one prepares, the Spirit will illuminate what he or she teaches, and increased faith will be the result. The teacher will be able to get his message into the heart of the listener, and all will be “edified and rejoice together.” ([D&C 50:22](#).) It will bring forth righteous acts by those who have been so inspired.

For such teachers, it is just as important to have the experience of being faithful as it is to know the principle of faith, it is as important to enjoy the blessings of upholding the priesthood as it is to be able to teach priesthood principles. The Spirit comes to the person who lives what he teaches.

To teach by the Spirit is not just a matter of telling inspirational stories or relaying experiences that appeal to the emotions. It is much more than this. In fact, some might confuse an emotional appeal with the gentle working of the Holy Spirit, but they are not necessarily the same. The quiet, peaceful confirmation that comes into one’s heart as he is being taught by a faithful teacher may not be emotional at all in terms of what the world might call an emotional experience. But it will edify or spiritually uplift the teacher and the student. Both will rejoice as they learn and relearn spiritual truths. “Behold, I will tell you in your mind and in your heart,” and “you shall feel that it is right.” ([D&C 8:2](#); [D&C 9:8](#))

A teacher who teaches by the power of the Holy Spirit has certain **characteristics**. Some of these are as follows. Notice how closely they are **interrelated**.

1. **Graciousness.** The Savior opened his ministry with these words from Esaias: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he hath appointed me to preach the gospel to the poor; he hath sent me to heal the brokenhearted, ... to set at liberty them that are bruised.” ([Luke 4:18](#).)

To those in the synagogue, the Savior then said, “This day is this scripture fulfilled in your ears.

“And all ... wondered at the gracious words which proceeded out of his mouth.” ([Luke 4:21, 22](#).)

There is a graciousness about those who teach the gospel by the Spirit. It seems to be influenced by individual humility, personal faith, and a deep and abiding love for people.

A few years ago, when we were living in New Zealand, we were fortunate, when duties did not call us elsewhere, to attend the Gospel Doctrine class in the Mount Roskill Eight Ward. At the time the teacher was Joan Armstrong, a convert to the Church. Her lessons reflected a prayerful preparation. She was teaching us the principles of the gospel using the manual as a guide.

But Sister Armstrong was also teaching from the backdrop of her own individual faith. The spirit of her teaching reflected her life’s experiences and how the Lord had inspired and guided her. Sister Armstrong was not an outwardly dynamic teacher, nor was she outspoken. But she was prepared, and all of this brought a graciousness to her that was borne of the Spirit. That same Spirit governed the class. There was participation, but not rancor. There was discussion, but little controversy. She did not dwell on mysteries or speculation. She did not have to, because she had prepared herself. People left the class uplifted and edified.

We have thousands of teachers in the Church just like Sister Armstrong. They yield themselves to the enticings of the Spirit, and it develops in them a graciousness which is borne of the Spirit and touches those they teach.

This is true although they may use their individual personalities to approach a lesson in different ways. This is the common ground that binds together those with extensive gospel scholarship and those who are called to be teachers but are just beginning an earnest study of the gospel.

2. **Testimony.** “For I will forgive you of your sins with this commandment—that you remain steadfast in your minds in solemnity ... bearing testimony to all the world of those things which are communicated unto you.” ([D&C 84:61](#).)

The teacher-training classes can and will do a marvelous job in helping to develop teachers. The manuals have been prepared to help teachers present the gospel from the scriptures and from the prophets and to show how to apply the lessons in everyday life. But none of these can make a teacher of the gospel out of a person unless he brings to his teaching the most important ingredient, and that is his own testimony. The combined ability of the entire Church cannot produce a gospel manual good enough to compensate for a teacher who has not developed a testimony or does not use his testimony to teach. How grateful we are for the thousands of teachers in the Church who teach the gospel by the power of their own testimony.

3. **Scriptures.** “And they had waxed strong in the knowledge of the truth; for they were men of a sound understanding and they had searched the scriptures diligently, that they might know the word of God.” ([Alma 17:2](#).)

The Lord has given the scriptures to the Church as a guide. By scriptures, we not only refer to the four standard works but also to the inspired writings of modern Apostles and prophets and other Church leaders as they are “moved upon by the Holy Ghost.” ([D&C 68:4](#).)

A few years ago I was privileged to be at an investigator fireside at the Parramatta stake center in Sydney, Australia. The main speaker was a member of the Quorum of the Twelve. The audience was made up of many long-time investigators who had been taught the principles but did not have a testimony sufficient to do anything about it. The member of the Twelve was especially blessed that night as he unfolded the restoration of the gospel in a most powerful way. Step by step, he unfolded the scriptures to those present. The Spirit bore witness that what he was teaching was true. At the meeting's end, seven of those long-time investigators set their baptismal date.

Members of the First Presidency and the Quorum of the Twelve are examples to the entire Church of the importance of using the scriptures to teach the gospel and to edify those who seek the truth.

Joseph F. Smith said: “That which characterizes above all else the inspiration and divinity of the scriptures is the spirit in which they are written and the spiritual wealth they convey to those who faithfully and conscientiously read them. ... They are intended to enlarge man's spiritual endowments and to reveal and intensify the bond of relationship between him and his God. (*Juvenile Instructor*, Apr. 1912, p. 204.)

4. **Prayer.** “And the Spirit shall be given unto you by the prayer of faith.” ([D&C 42:14](#).)

The most important step in spiritual preparation is prayer. Prayer is a means of seeking help and understanding. It is recognition that “man doth not comprehend all the things which the Lord can comprehend.” ([Mosiah 4:9](#).)

Prayerfully go over the material you are to teach. When you feel you have a direction to your lesson in mind, take it to the Lord in prayer. In this prayerful mood, allow your impressions to guide you. He tells us, “If we shall ask with a sincere heart, with real intent, having faith in Christ, he will manifest the truth of it unto you, by the power of the Holy Ghost.” ([Moro. 10:4](#).) If there is a feeling of peace and assurance, then proceed. If there is confusion and doubt, then change your approach and take it again to him in prayer. Humbly ask him that you might have his spirit in all that you do, especially as you stand before those you are called to teach.

President Spencer W. Kimball tells us: “He stands and knocks. If we do not listen, he will not sup with us nor give answer to our prayers. We must learn how to listen, grasp, interpret, understand. The Lord stands knocking. He never retreats. But he will never force himself upon us. If our distance from him increases, it is we who have moved and not the Lord. And should we ever fail to get an answer to our prayers, we must look into our lives for a reason. We have failed to do what we should do, or we have done something we should not have done. We have dulled our hearing or impaired our eyesight.” (*Faith Precedes the Miracle*. Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1972, p. 208.)

And so we see the great governing principle for all teachers in the Church is to teach the gospel by the

power of the Spirit. In fact, Joseph Smith said that “all are to preach the Gospel by the power and influence of the Holy Ghost; and no man can preach the Gospel without the Holy Ghost.” (*History of the Church*, 2:477.)

Teachers in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints have as much influence as any group of people in the Church. May the Lord bless them with joy and success in their callings, and may they always be found teaching the gospel by the Spirit.

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