

The Opportunities and Responsibilities of CES Teachers in the 21st Century

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An Evening with Elder M. Russell Ballard

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My dear brothers and sisters, thank you for your extraordinary efforts to bless the lives of our young members of the Church.

I recently reviewed the new book *By Study and Also By Faith: One Hundred Years of Seminaries and Institutes of Religion*. It is a remarkable story! As I browsed through it, I noted the roles my great-grandfather Joseph F. Smith and my grandfather Melv Ballard had in the creation and the expansion of Church education.

Today I am serving where they once served because of my own association with you. Since 1985, I have had the privilege of serving for 14 years on the Board of Education, 7 years of which I was on the Executive Committee, and almost 4 of those years I served as the Chair.

During my time on the Board, I developed great appreciation for the Church Educational System. Tonight I speak for all of our parents, grandparents, and even great-grandparents in the Church when I thank you teachers and administrators and your families for your faithful service. What CES has accomplished in the last 100 years is amazing. However, I am more interested in the next 100 years and how you can help your students face the ever-changing challenges of the 21st century.

In a General Authority training meeting, President Gordon B. Hinckley taught on the subject “keeping the doctrine pure and the Church on the right course.” He said, “We cannot be too careful. We must watch that we do not get off [course]. In our efforts to be original and fresh and different, we may teach things which may not be entirely in harmony with the basic doctrines of this restored Church of Jesus Christ. ... We had better be more alert. ... We must be watchmen on the tower.”¹

As Church education moves forward in the 21st century, each of you needs to consider any changes you should make in the way you prepare to teach, how you teach, and what you teach if you are to build unwavering faith in the lives of our precious youth.

Gone are the days when a student asked an honest question and a teacher responded, “Don’t worry about it!” Gone are the days when a student raised a sincere concern and a teacher bore his or her testimony as a response intended to avoid the issue. Gone are the days when students were protected from people who attacked the Church. Fortunately, the Lord provided this timely and timeless counsel to you teachers: “And as all have not faith, seek ye diligently and teach one another words of wisdom; yea, seek out of the best books words of wisdom; seek learning, even by study and also by faith.”²

This is especially applicable today because not all of your students have the faith necessary to face the challenges ahead because many of them are already exposed through the Internet to corrosive forces of an increasingly secular world that is host

faith, family, and gospel standards. The Internet is expanding its reach across the world into almost every home and into the hands and minds of your students.

You can help students by teaching them what it means to combine study and faith as they learn. Teach them by modeling this and approach in class.

President Harold B. Lee observed:

“We would remind you that the acquiring of knowledge by faith is no easy road to learning. It demands strenuous effort a continual striving by faith. ...

“In short, learning by faith is no task for a lazy man [or woman]. Someone has said, in effect, that such a process requires bending of the whole soul, the calling up of the depths of the human mind and linking it with God—the right connection must be formed. Then only comes ‘knowledge by faith.’”³

Knowledge by faith will produce a pure testimony, and a pure testimony has the power to change lives, as illustrated in these two brief stories.

First, Phoebe Carter left her home in Maine to gather with the Saints in Ohio in the 1830s. She recalled, “My friends marveled at my course, as did I, but something within impelled me on. My mother’s grief at my leaving home was almost more than I could bear; had it not been for the spirit within I should have faltered at the last.”⁴

Phoebe followed the prophet and gathered with the Saints in Ohio and eventually to Utah, where she died a faithful Latter-day Saint and equally yoked as the wife of Church President Wilford Woodruff.

This next story comes from Marion G. Romney’s biography.

As a college student, Marion had decided that he could not serve a mission because of his family’s financial situation. On one occasion, he heard Elder Melvin J. Ballard speak. The biography notes, “Little did [Marion] know that the course of his life, in a very short moment, was about to be completely changed.”

The story continues: “[Marion’s father] had told his children ... that there was as much difference between a man who lived under the inspiration of the Spirit and one who didn’t, as there was between a growing tree and a dead stump. For the first time Marion ... understood what it was [like] to be under the influence of inspiration. A piercing, tingling sensation filled his soul. He ... never had been so touched as he was now, listening to the words of this newest of the Apostles. ...

“Young Marion ... was electrified. The glow of the Apostle’s countenance and the sincerity of his testimony filled him with an irresistible desire to go on a mission. ... He knew that his plans for further education must be postponed.”⁵

Soon, Marion was on his way to Australia, where he served faithfully. Later, he became a mighty Apostle and a member of the Presidency.

The final story was told by President Boyd K. Packer about the impact of an aged teacher on William E. Berrett. The teacher, a convert from Norway, had imperfect English-language skills. Despite the teacher’s limitations, President Packer recalled that “Brother Berrett testified on more than one occasion, ‘We could warm our hands by the fire of his faith.’”⁶

Later, William became the head of seminaries, institutes, and Church schools.

For Phoebe, Marion, and William, hearing a pure testimony became the catalyst that changed their lives forever. The same can be true for your students. However, given the realities of today’s world, pure testimony may not always be enough. Phoebe, Marion,

William were clean and pure and were free from pornography and worldliness as they sat at the feet of inspired missionary teachers, and leaders. The Spirit easily penetrated their soft and pure hearts.

Today, the story is much different, as some of your students have already been infected by pornography and worldliness before ever reach your classes.

It was only a generation ago that our young people's access to information about our history, doctrine, and practices was basic limited to materials printed by the Church. Few students came in contact with alternative interpretations. Mostly, our young people lived a sheltered life.

Our curriculum at that time, though well-meaning, did not prepare students for today—a day when students have instant access to virtually everything about the Church from every possible point of view. Today, what they see on their mobile devices is likely to be faith-challenging as much as faith-promoting. Many of our young people are more familiar with Google than they are with the gospel. They are more attuned to the Internet than to inspiration, and more involved with Facebook than with faith.

In light of these challenges, the Board of Education recently approved an initiative in seminary called Doctrinal Mastery. Building on what already has been done in Scripture Mastery, this new initiative will focus on building and strengthening our students' faith in Jesus Christ and fortifying them with increased ability to live and apply the gospel in their lives. Drawing on the scriptures and words of the prophets, they will learn how to act with faith in Christ to acquire spiritual knowledge and understanding of His gospel. And they will have opportunities to learn how to apply the doctrine of Christ and gospel principles to the questions and challenges they hear and see every day among their peers and on social media.

This initiative is inspired and timely. It will have a wonderful influence on our young people. However, the success of Doctrinal Mastery, and of all the other programs of study in CES, will depend to an important extent upon you.

In the face of these challenges, what are your opportunities and responsibilities as CES teachers in the 21st century? Obviously, you must love the Lord, His Church, and your students. You must also bear pure testimony sincerely and often. Additionally, more than any time in our history, your students also need to be blessed by learning doctrinal or historical content and context by study and accompanied by pure testimony so they can experience a mature and lasting conversion to the gospel and a lifelong commitment to Jesus Christ. Mature and lasting conversion means they will “stay in the boat and hold on” throughout their entire lives.⁷

For *you* to understand the doctrinal and historical content and context of the scriptures and our history, you will need to study the “best books,” as the Lord directed. The “best books” include the scriptures, the teachings of modern prophets and apostles, the best LDS scholarship available. Through your diligent efforts to learn by study and faith, you will be able to help your students learn the skills and attitudes necessary to distinguish between reliable information that will lift them up and the half-truths and incorrect interpretations of doctrine, history, and practices that will bring them down.

Teach them about the challenges they face when relying upon the Internet to answer questions of eternal significance. Remind them that James did not say, “If any of you lack wisdom, let him Google!”⁸

Wise people do not rely on the Internet to diagnose and treat emotional, mental, and physical health challenges, especially threatening challenges. Instead, they seek out health experts, those trained and licensed by recognized medical and state boards. Even then, prudent people seek a second opinion.

If that is the sensible course to take in finding answers for emotional, mental, and physical health issues, it is even more so when eternal life is at stake. When something has the potential to threaten our spiritual life, our most precious family relationships, and our membership in the kingdom, we should find thoughtful and faithful Church leaders to help us. And, if necessary, we should ask them with appropriate academic training, experience, and expertise for help.

This is exactly what I do when I need an answer to my own questions that I cannot answer myself. I seek help from my Brethren the Quorum of the Twelve and from others with expertise in fields of Church history and doctrine.

You should be among the first, outside your students' families, to introduce authoritative sources on topics that may be less known or controversial so your students will measure whatever they hear or read later against what you have already taught them.

You know we give medical inoculations to our precious missionaries before sending them into the mission field so they will be protected against diseases that can harm or even kill them. In a similar fashion, please, before you send them into the world, inoculate your students by providing faithful, thoughtful, and accurate interpretation of gospel doctrine, the scriptures, our history, and those topics that are sometimes misunderstood.

To name a few such topics that are less known or controversial, I'm talking about polygamy, seer stones, different accounts of the First Vision, the process of translation of the Book of Mormon or the Book of Abraham, gender issues, race and the priesthood, and Heavenly Mother.

The efforts to inoculate our young people will often fall to you CES teachers. With those thoughts in mind, find time to think about your opportunities and your responsibilities.

Church leaders today are fully conscious of the unlimited access to information, and we are making extraordinary efforts to provide accurate context and understanding of the teachings of the Restoration. A prime example of this effort is the 11 Gospel Topics essays on LDS.org that provide balanced and reliable interpretations of the facts for controversial and unfamiliar Church-related subjects.

It is important that you know the content in these essays like you know the back of your hand. If you have questions about them, please ask someone who has studied them and understands them. In other words, "seek learning, even by study and also by faith" as you master the content of these essays.

You should also become familiar with the Joseph Smith Papers website and the Church history section on LDS.org and other resources by faithful LDS scholars.

The effort for gospel transparency and spiritual inoculation through a thoughtful study of doctrine and history, coupled with a burden of testimony, is the best antidote we have to help students avoid and/or deal with questions, doubt, or faith crises they may face in the information age.

As you teachers pay the price to better understand our history, doctrine, and practices—better than you do now—you will be prepared to provide thoughtful, careful, and inspired answers to your students' questions.

One way to know what questions your students have is to listen attentively to them.

Our first little girl, when she was five, climbed up on my lap while I was reading the newspaper. She was telling me something important to her, and I was not paying attention. So she reached up her little hands, pulled down the newspaper, clasped my face with her little hands, looked me squarely in the eyes, and said, "Daddy, you are not listening to me!" She was right—and I was wrong for not listening to her. All good teachers must be good listeners.

In addition to listening to your students, encourage them in class or in private to ask you questions about any topic.

One of the most important questions your students may ask is "Why?"

When asked with a sincere desire to understand, "Why?" is a great question. It is the question missionaries want their investigators to ask. Why are we here? Why do bad things happen to good people? Why should we pray? Why should we follow Christ? It is the "why" questions that lead to inspiration and revelation. Knowing our Heavenly Father's plan of salvation will help to answer them.

of the “why” questions. I will speak more about this in just a moment or two.

Here is one final note about answering questions. It is important to teach your students that although the gospel provides many, if not most, answers to life’s most important questions, some questions cannot be answered in mortality because we lack the information needed for a proper answer. As we learn in Jacob: “Behold, great and marvelous are the works of the Lord. How unsearchable the depths of the mysteries of him; and it is impossible that man should find out all his ways. And no man knoweth of his ways save as they shall be revealed unto him.”⁹

Now a word of caution: Please recognize you may come to believe, like many of your students do, that you are a scriptural, doctrinal, and history expert. A recent study revealed that “the more people think they know about a topic, the more likely they are to have an understanding beyond what they know, even to the point of feigning knowledge of false facts and fabricated information.”¹⁰

Identified as “overclaiming,” this temptation must be avoided by you CES teachers. It is perfectly all right to say, “I do not know.” However, once that is said, you have a responsibility to find the best answers to thoughtful questions your students ask.¹¹

In teaching your students and in responding to their questions, let me warn you not to pass along faith-promoting or unsubstantiated rumors or outdated understandings and explanations of our doctrine and practices from the past. It is always wise to make it a practice to study the words of the living prophets and apostles; keep updated on current Church issues, policies, and statements through mormonnewsroom.org and LDS.org; and consult the works of recognized, thoughtful, and faithful LDS scholars to ensure you do not teach things that are untrue, out of date, or odd and quirky.

The authors of the “overclaiming” study noted that “a tendency to overclaim, especially in self-perceived experts, may act to discourage individuals from educating themselves in precisely those areas in which they consider themselves knowledgeable.”

BYU’s academic vice president observed, “Being the expert on a subject can be exhilarating, with students and colleagues hanging on our every word. However, without a deep commitment to continued learning we will fall victim to overclaiming, and no one likes to be a ‘know-it-all.’”¹²

I repeat President Hinckley’s warning, “We cannot be too careful. We must watch that we do not get off [course].”¹³

In addition to becoming lifelong learners, you must also be doing those things in your personal life that allow the Holy Spirit to dwell within you. Such things include sincere daily prayer, faithful fasting, regular study and pondering of the scriptures and the words of the living prophets, making the Sabbath day a delight, partaking of the sacrament with humility and always remembering the Sabbath by worshipping in the temple as often as possible, and, finally, reaching out to the needy, poor, and lonely—both those close by and those across the world.

To properly fulfill your opportunities and responsibilities, my dear fellow teachers, you must practice what you preach!

Be courageous by seeking counsel and correction from those you trust—a spouse, priesthood leaders, or supervisors. Ask them where you can improve in your personal discipleship. This is especially important for our full-time employees, those supporting the sacred tithing funds of the Church. You must avoid anything that drives the Spirit away.

Additionally, may I suggest you hold a personal interview with yourself on occasion and review 2 Nephi 26:29–32, Alma 5:14–30, Doctrine and Covenants 121:33–46. That will help to identify the kinds of temptations we all may face. If something needs to change in your life, then resolve to fix it.

Avoid the temptation to question the motives of your co-laborers. Instead, look deeply into your own heart and search your own desires and motives. Only then can the Savior change your heart and align your own desires and motives with His.

The rising generation needs to know, understand, embrace, and participate in God’s plan of salvation. Understanding the plan

give them the divine insight through which to view themselves as sons and daughters of God, which provides a lens to understand almost every doctrine, practice, and policy of the Church.

As CES teachers today, you need to accept the opportunity and the responsibility to teach the 21st century's young people core principles about the plan, including the divinely sanctioned doctrine of marriage and the role of the family as defined in the proclamation on the family.¹⁴

The doctrine of eternal marriage and family is a crucial part of God's plan of happiness. It includes our own temple-sealed families as part of Heavenly Father's own eternal family in the celestial kingdom. Because it relates directly to His own family and to His spirit children, we are taught in Genesis that "male and female created he them" and that He commanded Father Adam and Mother Eve to "multiply, and replenish the earth."¹⁵

It has been said that the plan of happiness begins and ends with family. Indeed, the beginning of family was in the premortal world where we lived as members of our heavenly parents' family. And in the end, familial commitments and loving relationships will not only continue to exist but also proliferate through the process of procreation.¹⁶

The hinge point that connects it all—on which God's plan and our eternal destiny depend and on which all else pivots—is our Savior, Jesus Christ. His atoning sacrifice makes all things possible, including, but not limited to, a loving, caring, and eternal marriage and family.

The Lord teaches us that no single person, regardless of his or her righteousness, can obtain all that our Heavenly Father has for His children. A single individual is half of the equation, unable to dwell in the highest degree of the celestial kingdom.¹⁷

Your students need to understand that the purpose of mortality is to become more like God by gaining physical bodies, exercising agency, and assuming roles that previously belonged only to heavenly parents—roles of husband, wife, and parent.

The prophets have assured that all those who are worthy and who rely upon Jesus Christ but have not been able to be sealed to a companion or have children in this life may have those opportunities in the world to come.

Teach our young people that in the Lord's Church there is room for all to worship, serve, and grow together as brothers and sisters in the gospel. Remind them what Lehi taught, that God's goal and hope for all of His children can be summed up as follows: "And that men might be; and men are, that they might have joy."¹⁸

Heavenly Father wants us to accept His definition of marriage and obey His first commandment to "multiply and replenish"—not only to fulfill His plan but also to find the joy that His plan was designed to give His sons and daughters.

Church members are not the only ones to recognize this principle. *New York Times* columnist David Brooks observed, "People are better off when they are given maximum personal freedom to do what they want. They're better off when they are enshrouded in commitments that transcend personal choice—commitments to family, God, craft and country."¹⁹

As Church educators, help our youth to have a clear understanding of God's plan of happiness wherein real joy comes to His children. Help them to know it, embrace it, participate in it, and defend it. From my 40 years of experience as a General Authority, I am concerned about the large number of our Church members, young and older, that simply do not understand the plan for their eternal and divine destiny.

So, my fellow teachers, we should look for and relish these opportunities to explain, doctrinally and spiritually, why we believe that knowledge of God's great plan of happiness will answer most of the "why" questions we may be asked. Expressing our belief that we lived in the premortal life where we lived as the spirit children of a Heavenly Father and a Heavenly Mother allows us to explain why this earth was created. One essential purpose of mortal life is that we can replicate that family experience ourselves, only this time as parents.

rather than just as the children. Treasure your basic understanding of the doctrine and purpose of our Heavenly Father's plan for eternal happiness. And continue to teach it.

So, to conclude and to summarize: From Elder Kim B. Clark's comments earlier this evening we learned you are teachers sent God, filled with faith, hope, humility, and love.²⁰

The points I have shared with you are:

- Teach students to combine learning by study and faith with pure testimony. Teach them to stay in the boat and hang on!
- Teach students to control their mobile devices and focus on being connected more to the Holy Spirit than to the Internet.
- Inoculate students with the truths of the plan of salvation found in the gospel of Jesus Christ.
- Master the content of the Gospel Topics essays.
- Remember that "Why?" can be a great question that leads to gospel understanding.
- Don't overclaim, and don't be afraid to say, "I don't know."
- Become lifelong learners.
- Seek counsel and correction from those you trust.
- Consider holding a personal interview occasionally to review your spiritual preparation, your diligence, and your effectiveness.
- Teach that the plan of happiness begins and ends with family. Keep the plan of salvation in mind at all times.
- Teach that marriage and family bring long-lasting joy.
- Remember, combining learning by study, by faith, and by pure testimony brings about true and long and lasting conversion.
- Above all else, strong faith in the Atonement of the Lord Jesus Christ is essential for our spiritual strength and growth.

Now, my beloved, fellow teachers, may God bless each and every one of you. Whatever burden you may be carrying, may be lifted. May you find the joy and the peace that comes from knowing through your teaching that you have touched a life, you have lifted one of Heavenly Father's children on his or her journey to one day be embraced once again in His presence. I leave you with my witness and my testimony that we have the fulness of the everlasting gospel of Jesus Christ as restored through the Prophet Joseph Smith. The fulness of the gospel is in our hands. We must get it into our minds and into our hearts and teach it with power. May so bless each and every one of us is my humble prayer and blessing, in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

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Notes

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