

# Teaching and Learning by the Spirit

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If we teach and learn in the manner the Lord has prescribed, he will send his Spirit to edify and enlighten us as we do so.

In the 1831 revelation to the Prophet Joseph Smith known as “the law of the Church,” the Lord commanded, “If ye receive not the Spirit ye shall not teach” (D&C 42:14). A few months later, the Prophet received further instructions on this subject that are contained in the 50th section of the Doctrine and Covenants:

“Unto what were ye ordained?”

“To preach my gospel by the Spirit, even the Comforter which was sent forth to teach the truth. ...

“[And] he that receiveth the word by the Spirit of truth receiveth it as it is preached by the Spirit of truth. ...

“Wherefore, he that preacheth and he that receiveth, understand one another, and both are edified and rejoice together” (D&C 50:13–14, 21–22).

These familiar references portray the essence of all teaching in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. They are so familiar they are almost slogans, yet we are in danger of using them without understanding them. I, therefore, wish to discuss what it means to teach by the Spirit, the Holy Ghost, and how we can qualify ourselves to do so. I will also review some of the principles that govern communications from the Spirit of the Lord.

## The Importance of Teaching by the Spirit

The Lord described the importance of teaching by the Spirit when he said, “If ye receive not the Spirit ye shall not teach” (D&C 42:14). One easy-to-understand illustration of the importance of that direction is to remind ourselves of this fact: When we go out into the world to proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ, many of the people we teach have much more formal education than we do. Every minister we encounter has more education in theology than we do. We have no professional clergy. We have no school of theology. Some of us have never even heard of some of the subjects in which professional ministers have spent many years of professional preparation.

A few years ago I encountered an example of this. I was talking with a Protestant minister who taught in a seminary. When I asked what subject he taught, he said, “Hermeneutics.” I had never heard that word, so I said, “What is that?” My minister friend explained that hermeneutics is the art of interpreting and expounding the scriptures. I smiled and said, “Well, yes, I guess I understand a little bit about that, but I’ve never heard it called that.”

Our missionaries meet people who have studied philosophy and metaphysics, world history and languages, science and the arts. They meet people who are better educated than they are. In view of that, if they don’t have the Spirit of the Lord and if they don’t teach under the direction of the Spirit, how can they expect to accomplish their mission?

We cannot compete with the world on its terms. If we are to fulfill our calling, we must teach the Lord’s way.

If we have the Spirit of the Lord to guide us, we can teach any person, no matter how well educated, any place in the world. The Lord knows more than any of us, and if we are his servants, acting under his Spirit, he can deliver his message of salvation to each and every soul.

President Joseph Fielding Smith taught: “The Spirit of God speaking to the spirit of man has power to impart truth with greater effect and understanding than the truth can be imparted by personal contact even with heavenly beings. Through the Holy Ghost the truth is woven into the very fibre and sinews of the body so that it cannot be forgotten” (*Doctrines of Salvation*, comp. Bruce R. McConkie, 3 vols. [1954–56], 1:47–48).

The principal revelation on teaching by the Spirit is section 50 of the Doctrine and Covenants. There the Lord tells the elders of the Church that they were ordained “to preach my gospel by the Spirit, even the Comforter which was sent forth to teach the truth” (D&C 50:14).

Next the Lord asks this question of each who has been ordained or set apart to preach the word of truth by the Spirit: “Doth he preach it [the word] by the Spirit of truth or some other way?” (D&C 50:17). In other words, applying these words to our own situation, do we teach by the Spirit, or do we teach by our own intellect?

Section 50 explains that if we teach by the Spirit, then the person we teach can receive the word by the Spirit, and both the teacher and the learner “are edified and rejoice together” (see D&C 50:21–22).

In contrast, the revelation explains, if we teach by “some other way it is not of God” (D&C 50:20).

That is a powerful teaching. If we teach in the manner the Lord has prescribed, he can send his Spirit to edify and enlighten those whom we teach. If we do not teach in his way—if we teach according to our own knowledge and according to our own intellect, and if we slavishly tie ourselves to our own preparation or to someone else’s wisdom or text—our teaching “is not of God.”

Elder Bruce R. McConkie of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles taught that principle in these words: “If you teach the word of truth—now note, you’re saying what is true, every

thing you say is accurate and right—by some other way than the Spirit, it is not of God. Now what is the other way to teach than by the Spirit? Well, obviously, it is by the power of the intellect.

“Suppose I came here tonight and delivered a great message on teaching, and I did it by the power of the intellect without any of the Spirit of God attending. Suppose that every word that I said was true, no error whatever, but it was an intellectual presentation. This revelation says: ‘If it be by some other way it is not of God’ (D&C 50:18).

“That is, God did not present the message through me because I used the power of the intellect instead of the power of the Spirit. Intellectual things—reason and logic—can do some good, and they can prepare the way, and they can get the mind ready to receive the Spirit under certain circumstances. But conversion comes and the truth sinks into the hearts of people only when it is taught by the power of the Spirit” (*The Foolishness of Teaching* [pamphlet, 1981], 9).

If we rely on debate techniques or sales methods or group psychology, we are preaching the gospel in some other way, and it is not of God.

We must teach the gospel by the Spirit, and we must testify to the truth. When this is done, the Holy Spirit will testify to the sincere seeker that the things that have been said are true.

Intellectual things—reason and logic—can prepare the way, and they can help us in our preparation. But if we are tied to them instead of to the Spirit of the Lord, we are not teaching the gospel in the Lord’s way.

The Lord stressed that truth when he said: “Put your trust in that Spirit which leadeth to do good—yea, to do justly, to walk humbly, to judge righteously; and this is my Spirit” (D&C 11:12).

This is the way we must teach the gospel.

## How to Teach by the Spirit

Teaching by the Spirit requires first that we keep the commandments and be clean before God so his Spirit can dwell in our personal temples. This is taught in many scriptures, and it is taught by all the living prophets.

We know that the Spirit of the Lord will not dwell in an unclean temple (see 1 Cor. 3:16–17). We must, therefore, cleanse ourselves by repentance, by confession when necessary, and by avoiding impure actions and thoughts.

The need to keep the commandments and be clean is also evident in the sacramental prayers we hear every week. According to the words of these prayers, when we partake of the sacrament, we witness that we are willing to take his name upon us, a very sacred and solemn thing. We also witness that we will keep his commandments and that we will always remember him. Surely those who keep the promise to always remember the Son of God would not profane his name or use words of vulgarity or coarseness, or deliberately expose themselves to

surroundings or influences that are inconsistent with always remembering the Son of God.

We do all of this, the prayer pronounces, so that we “may always have his Spirit to be with [us]” (D&C 20:77).

We cannot have the companionship of the Holy Ghost—the medium of individual revelation—if we are in transgression or if we are angry or if we are in rebellion against God’s chosen authorities.

Similarly, the best way to have the spirit of revelation is to listen to and study words spoken under the influence of the Holy Ghost. In other words, we obtain the Spirit by reading the scriptures or reading or listening to the talks of inspired leaders.

In summary on this point, the Spirit of the Lord, which is the medium of revelation, will not dwell in an unclean temple, and if we are to have that Spirit with us, we must keep the commandments of God and keep ourselves clean in thought and deed.

## Preparation

As we devote ourselves to the Lord’s work, we must be involved in the hard work we call preparation.

Hyrum Smith learned this lesson in May 1829, just after the restoration of the Aaronic Priesthood and almost a year before the Church was organized. The Lord gave him a revelation through his brother, the Prophet Joseph Smith. In that revelation Hyrum was told that he was not yet called to preach. And until he was called, he should keep the commandments of the Lord and prepare himself. These are the Lord’s words:

“Seek not to declare my word, but first seek to obtain my word, and then shall your tongue be loosed; then, if you desire, you shall have my Spirit and my word, yea, the power of God unto the convincing of men.

“But now hold your peace; study my word which hath gone forth among the children of men, and also study my word which shall come forth among the children of men, or that which is now translating, yea, until you have obtained all which I shall grant unto the children of men in this generation, and then shall all things be added thereto” (D&C 11:21–22).

In the revelation on priesthood given a few years later in Kirtland, Ohio, the Lord instructed the Saints further on this subject: “Neither take ye thought beforehand what ye shall say; but treasure up in your minds continually the words of life, and it shall be given you in the very hour that portion that shall be meted unto every man” (D&C 84:85).

In short, the Lord’s instruction to teach by the Spirit does not relieve us in the slightest degree from the necessity of making personal preparation. Indeed, in view of the foregoing scriptures, the Lord has emphasized it.

We must study the scriptures. We must study the teachings of the living prophets. We must learn all that we can to make ourselves presentable and understandable to our children, our

students, and our investigators. That includes grooming, speaking clearly, and knowing how to avoid offending people through ignorance of their culture and their personal and family circumstances. All of this and much more is part of preparation. And preparation is a prerequisite to teaching by the Spirit.

## Being Led by the Spirit

The next principle after preparation is the requirement that we desire to be led by the Spirit and so are willing to put aside all our preparation and follow the Spirit's direction. That is a difficult principle to understand and an even more difficult one to apply.

When I have tried to teach that principle in the past, I have observed that some people use it as an excuse for not preparing. Some will say, "Since the Spirit may prompt me to cast away my prepared talk, perhaps I don't need to prepare at all." That approach is not "treasuring up in [our] minds continually the words of life."

We should be in constant general preparation by "treasuring up" in our minds the teachings of the gospel, and when invited to give a talk or to present a lesson, we should make specific preparations. Most of the time we will carry through with our preparations. But sometimes there will be an authentic impression to leave something out or to add something. We should make careful preparation, but we should not be exclusively bound to that preparation.

## Communication from the Spirit

I have discussed some principles that govern us in teaching by the Spirit. Now I will examine some principles that apply to all communications from the Spirit—to the person who teaches, to the person who seeks to learn, and to every member of the Church.

### *In His Own Time and in His Own Way*

First, we should recognize that the Lord will speak to us through the Spirit in his own time and in his own way. Many people do not understand this principle. They believe that when they are ready and when it suits their convenience, they can call upon the Lord and he will immediately respond, even in the precise way they have prescribed. Revelation does not come that way.

About 15 years ago when I was at Brigham Young University, we were making plans to persuade the president of the United States to speak at the university. We had particular times that would suit our convenience, and we had in mind some things we wanted him to say and do while he was there. But all of us were wise enough to know that we could not contact the highest authority in the United States and invite him to come to the BYU campus—even to speak to 26,000 people—and put conditions on his appearance.

We knew that he would not come if we did not invite him, but we also knew that in inviting him we had to say, in effect: "We will welcome you whenever you can come and for whatever

time you choose to be here, and for whatever you choose to say and do while you are here. We will accommodate our schedules and our arrangements entirely to your visit.”

If that is the way a community of 26,000 people must approach the highest authority of one nation, it should not be surprising that one person—however important—is in no position to put conditions or impose personal timing upon a visit or communication from the highest authority in the universe.

Indeed, this is the principle the Lord revealed to his children in the great revelation printed in the 88th section of the Doctrine and Covenants. The Lord said: “Draw near unto me and I will draw near unto you; seek me diligently and ye shall find me; ask, and ye shall receive; knock, and it shall be opened unto you” (D&C 88:63).

Next, the Lord declared that if our eye is single to his glory, our whole bodies will be filled with light and we will be able to comprehend all things. Then, his instruction continued with this great promise: “Therefore, sanctify yourselves that your minds become single to God, and the days will come that you shall see him; for he will unveil his face unto you, and *it shall be in his own time, and in his own way, and according to his own will*” (D&C 88:68; emphasis added).

The principle stated in that revelation applies to every communication from our Heavenly Father: “It shall be in his own time, and in his own way, and according to his own will.” We cannot force spiritual things.

In most cases, “his own way” is not the thunderous interruption or the blinding light, but what the scriptures call “the still small voice” (1 Kgs. 19:12; 1 Ne. 17:45; D&C 85:6). Some have misunderstood this principle. As a result, some have looked exclusively for the great manifestations that are recorded in the scriptures and have failed to recognize the still, small voice that is given to them. This is like making up our minds that we will learn only from a teacher who shouts and that we will refuse to listen to even the wisest teaching when it comes in a whisper.

We need to know that the Lord rarely speaks loudly. His messages almost always come in a whisper.

### ***Revelation As Enlightenment and Peace***

One of the greatest explanations of being taught by the Spirit is in the revelation given to Oliver Cowdery at Harmony, Pennsylvania, in April 1829. In this revelation, printed in section 8 of the Doctrine and Covenants, the Lord told Oliver Cowdery:

“Yea, behold, I will *tell you in your mind and in your heart*, by the Holy Ghost, which shall come upon you and which shall dwell in your heart.

“Now, behold, this is the spirit of revelation” (D&C 8:2–3; emphasis added).

Similarly, the Prophet Joseph Smith referred to the spirit of revelation as “pure intelligence,” which “may give you sudden strokes of ideas” (*Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, sel. Joseph Fielding Smith [1976], 151).

In another revelation, Oliver Cowdery was reminded that he had inquired of the Lord and

that “as often as thou hast inquired thou hast received instruction of my Spirit” (D&C 6:14). How did that instruction come? The Lord said, “Behold, thou knowest that thou hast inquired of me and I did *enlighten thy mind*” (D&C 6:15; emphasis added). The Lord repeated that same teaching in a revelation given to Hyrum Smith, wherein the Lord said: “Verily, verily, I say unto you, I will impart unto you of my Spirit, which shall *enlighten your mind, which shall fill your soul with joy*” (D&C 11:13; emphasis added). These are great descriptions of the way the Lord communicates with us by his Spirit.

In further instruction to Oliver Cowdery, the Lord reminded him of the time he had prayed that he might know “the truth of these things” (D&C 6:22). And the Lord described how he had answered that prayer and given Oliver a revelation: “Did I not *speak peace to your mind* concerning the matter? What greater witness can you have than from God?” (D&C 6:23; emphasis added.)

From these revelations we learn that God teaches his sons and daughters by the power of his Spirit, which *enlightens their minds* and *speaks peace* to them concerning the questions they have asked.

### ***Revelation Is a Feeling***

We also learn from these revelations that being taught by the Spirit is not a passive thing. Often the Lord’s communication does not come until we have studied matters out in our own minds. Then we receive a confirmation.

The Lord explained that process to Oliver Cowdery in another revelation received at Harmony, Pennsylvania, in April 1829. The Lord was describing why Oliver had not been able to translate the Book of Mormon:

“Behold, you have not understood; you have supposed that I would give it unto you, when you took no thought save it was to ask me.

“But, behold, I say unto you, that *you must study it out in your mind*; then you must ask me if it be right, and if it is right I will cause that your bosom shall burn within you; therefore, *you shall feel that it is right*” (D&C 9:7–8; emphasis added).

This may be one of the most important and misunderstood teachings in all the Doctrine and Covenants. The teachings of the Spirit often come as feelings. That fact is of the utmost importance, yet some misunderstand what it means. I have met persons who told me they have never had a witness from the Holy Ghost because they have never felt their bosom “burn within” them.

What does a “burning in the bosom” mean? Does it need to be a feeling of caloric heat, like the burning produced by combustion? If that is the meaning, I have never had a burning in the bosom. Surely, the word “burning” in this scripture signifies a feeling of comfort and serenity. That is the witness many receive. That is the way revelation works.

Truly, the still, small voice is just that, “still” and “small.”

“The language of peace, as spoken by the Lord, embraces a sense of quiet confidence,

comfort, and warmth. It is gentle and calm, amiable and sweet; it is temperate and kind; it is orderly and identified by happiness, joy, and feelings of love” (Joseph Fielding McConkie and Robert L. Millet, *The Holy Ghost* [1989], 14).

A personal experience illustrates how the Spirit teaches us through our feelings, even those persons who may not be familiar with the process of revelation.

About nine years ago three elected deputies of the Supreme Soviet visited Salt Lake City. I helped host them on Temple Square. I took them into the North Visitors’ Center to see the paintings and the *Christus* statue. Then I took them into the Tabernacle, where they heard the Sunday morning Tabernacle Choir broadcast.

Afterward a few of us met with them in a conference room on Temple Square. We told them a little bit about the Church. Then Konstantin Lubenchenko, the senior in the delegation, spoke to us. I made notes of his remarks as they were relayed through an interpreter:

“Before I came here I thought the Mormon Church was a very conservative organization of fanatics. But after seeing the beautiful pictures and statue in your visitors’ center and the beautiful setting where the choir sang and hearing the choir and organ, I have a new understanding of your church.”

What interested me most was his account of what he felt:

“Since I have come to the United States, people have asked me what is my strongest impression in the United States. I can tell you now. It is the singing of your choir. I love organ music and choirs and have gone to hear them many times in my country. As the choir sang, I had a very strong feeling. Although I do not speak English, I felt with my heart that they were sincerely expressing my feelings. My relation with God was expressed in earthly feelings through their singing.”

This Soviet lawmaker had a feeling and could describe it well enough for me to realize that he had received a witness from the Spirit.

### ***Revelation Is Not Constant***

The Lord’s way also puts limits on how often he will speak to us by his Spirit. Not understanding this, some have been misled by expecting revelations too frequently.

Commenting on the workings of the Spirit, Elder Boyd K. Packer of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles said: “I have learned that strong, impressive spiritual experiences do not come to us very frequently” (*That All May Be Edified* [1982], 337).

Revelations from God—the teachings and directions of the Spirit—are not constant. We believe in continuing revelation, not continuous revelation. We are often left to work out problems without the dictation or specific direction of the Spirit. That is part of the experience we must have in mortality. Fortunately, we are never out of our Savior’s sight, and if our judgment leads us to actions beyond the limits of what is permissible and if we are listening to the still, small voice, the Lord will restrain us by the promptings of his Spirit.

To illustrate that point, consider what happened to our first parents after they were cast out of



the Garden of Eden and shut out from the presence of the Lord. The Lord had given Adam a commandment that he should sacrifice the firstlings of his flocks for an offering unto the Lord. Adam obeyed. Did the Lord communicate with him immediately? The scripture says: “*And after many days an angel of the Lord appeared unto Adam*” (Moses 5:6; emphasis added).

William E. Berrett, one of our finest gospel teachers, said this about the matter of continuous revelation:

“Those who pray that the Spirit might give them immediate guidance in every little thing throw themselves open to false spirits that seem ever ready to answer our pleas and confuse us. ... The people I have found most confused in this Church are those who seek personal revelations on everything. They want the personal assurance from the Spirit from daylight to dark on everything they do. I say they are the most confused people I know because it appears sometimes that the answer comes from the wrong source” (quoted in *The Holy Ghost*, 29–30).

I also agree with the following comment: “There are great dangers associated with those who profess a constant outpouring of the spirit of revelation. Frequently, those so professing place themselves above the need to listen to the counsel and direction of their priesthood leaders. Often they are above correction. It is natural for those who suppose they are having regular conversations with angels and diverse exalted beings to be a little bemused at the counsel of bishops and stake presidents. With but a bit of polish, such an attitude ripens into the cultist’s mentality in which one is above the laws of both church and state” (*The Holy Ghost*, 31).

### ***Revelation and Testimony***

Visions do happen. Voices are heard from beyond the veil. I know this. But these experiences are exceptional. And those who have these great and exceptional experiences rarely speak of them publicly because we are instructed not to do so (see D&C 63:64) and because we understand that the channels of revelation will be closed if we show these things before the world.

Most of the revelation that comes to leaders and members of the Church comes by the still, small voice or by a feeling rather than by a vision or a voice that speaks specific words we can hear. I testify to the reality of that kind of revelation, which I have come to know as a familiar, even daily, experience to guide me in the work of the Lord.

Not understanding these principles of revelation, some people postpone acknowledging their testimony until they have experienced a miraculous event. They fail to realize that with most people—especially those raised in the Church—gaining a testimony is not an event but a process. That was the description of Elder Bruce R. McConkie of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, who observed: “Being born again is a gradual thing, except in a few isolated instances that are so miraculous that they get written up in the scriptures. As far as the generality of the members of the Church are concerned, we are born again by degrees, and we are born again to added light and added knowledge and added desires for righteousness as we keep the commandments” (“Jesus Christ and Him Crucified,” *1976 Devotional Speeches of the Year* [1977], 399).

## In Summary

Teaching by the Spirit is the Lord's way. How do we do this? First, we must keep the commandments, especially the commandment to keep our thoughts and actions clean. Second, we must prepare. Third, we must desire to be led and be willing to be led by the Spirit.

The Lord will speak to us in his own time and in his own way. This is usually by what the scriptures call the "still small voice" of enlightenment. We are often obliged to act upon our best judgment, subject to the Spirit's restraining impressions if we have strayed beyond permissible limits. Revelation is a reality. It comes in the Lord's way and according to the Lord's timetable.

I testify that these things are true. We have the gift of the Holy Ghost, the right to the constant companionship of the Spirit of the Lord to testify of the Father and the Son, to lead us into truth, to teach us all things, and to bring all things to our remembrance (see John 14:26; John 16:13).