



OBTAINING AND MAINTAINING SCRIPTURAL AND DOCTRINAL INTEGRITY

Edward J. Brandt

Director, Evaluation Division, Correlation Department

I have been asked by the Church Educational System administration to discuss with you the topic “Obtaining and Maintaining Scriptural and Doctrinal Integrity,” or in other words, “striving to keep the doctrine pure.”

I know that most of you are sincere and earnest and endeavor to give your best effort to teach the gospel of Jesus Christ as has been restored in these latter days through the Prophet Joseph Smith. I have known and observed some, however, who while being sincere were sometimes wrong or in error. If false doctrine or misinterpretation of scripture or prophetic statements is given, it is usually unintentional. Sometimes we misspeak ourselves. Sometimes our preparation is lacking. We attempt to instruct in ignorance, that is, “to wing it” maybe too often. There are occasions when we have been misinformed. Sometimes, however, we assume an expertise or authority for which we have not a right. All of these factors must be carefully accounted for along with our good intentions in fulfilling our responsibilities.

Aberrations or departures from truth always have a way of surfacing to the attention of others. Departures from the truth are made manifest in a variety of ways. There stands a host of witnesses of what we are about and what we say and what we do.

When teachings seem out of order or somehow strange, they come to the attention of the Church Educational System through a variety of complaints and voices. Many of our students have a spiritual sensitivity to that which is not legitimate or seems out of order. This is often passed on to parents, or it may be observed by parents from the comments made by their children of things that seem troubling. Parents’ reports are passed on to priesthood leaders. Priesthood leaders have the opportunity to regularly interview young people and receive reports from them or others concerning things that do not seem right.

Reports are also received by principals, directors, and the administrators of the Church Educational System. Some of these matters are brought forward to the General Authorities and Area Authorities of the Church. While the Brethren turn most of these matters

of concern over to the Church Educational System administration for resolution, they are matters of note and concern to them.

Many items are also brought to the attention of the Correlation Department of the Church for review and evaluation. I have been asked to offer some suggestions as a guide and a caution that may be helpful to you in obtaining and maintaining scriptural and doctrinal integrity in your teaching.

The foundation source we turn to are the scriptures. The Lord has said that we should “teach the principles of my gospel, which are in the Bible and the Book of Mormon, in the which is the fulness of the gospel.

“And they shall observe the covenants and church articles to do them, and these shall be their teachings, as they shall be directed by the Spirit.

“And the Spirit shall be given unto you by the prayer of faith; and if ye receive not the Spirit ye shall not teach” (D&C 42:12–14).

President Gordon B. Hinckley has said that:

“‘The Standard Works’ . . . are the reservoir of our doctrine from which flows the waters of gospel light. They provide the standard by which all gospel doctrine is measured. All other [materials] should spring from the word of the Lord as set forth in these volumes” (“Cornerstones of Responsibility” [regional representatives’ seminar, 5 Apr. 1991], 2).

The next building block upon which our teaching should be established is spoken of in the revelations that instruct that we should teach “none other things than that which the prophets and apostles have written, and that which is taught them by the Comforter through the prayer of faith” (D&C 52:9).

And again that we should declare “none other things than the prophets and apostles” (D&C 52:36).

What is the unique place of the prophets and apostles as it affects our opportunities to teach?

Many years ago President J. Reuben Clark Jr., speaking to Church education instructors, taught the following:

“Some of the General Authorities [the Apostles] have had assigned to them a special calling; they

possess a special gift; they are sustained as prophets, seers, and revelators, which gives them a special spiritual endowment in connection with their teaching of the people. They have the right, the power, and authority to declare the mind and will of God to his people, subject to the over-all power and authority of the President of the Church. Others of the General Authorities are not given this special spiritual endowment.” This resulting limitation “applies to every other officer and member of the Church, for none of them is spiritually endowed as prophet, seer, and revelator” (“When Are Church Leader’s Words Entitled to Claim of Scripture?” *Church News*, 31 July 1954, 9–10).

They [the prophets, seers, and revelators] have a special spiritual endowment in connection with their teaching of the people. You and I, no other officer or member, has that same special spiritual endowment. So as we assess our primary resource materials, we need to ask ourselves as did the Apostle Paul of Timothy:

“Continue thou in the things which thou hast learned and hast been assured of, knowing of whom thou hast learned them” (2 Timothy 3:14).

“Knowing of whom thou hast learned them.” What are your primary sources? Are the scriptures the primary source? For Paul wrote:

“All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness:

“That the man of God may be perfect, throughly furnished unto all good works” (2 Timothy 3:16–17).

There is a spirit and power in the scriptures. Use scriptural language or expressions as you teach. Do not substitute modern jargon, clichés, or your own interpretative paraphrases. Let the scriptures speak for themselves.

Proof texting—taking scriptural phrases or verses, usually out of context, and sometimes wresting them to prove a point or to establish so-called scriptural basis for our own private interpretation of something—is one of the most common ways that we can go doctrinally amiss.

The following principles taught by Elder Boyd K. Packer can be helpful in our teaching of the basic doctrines of the Church:

“First: instruction vital to our salvation is not hidden in an obscure verse or phrase in the scriptures. To the contrary, essential truths are repeated over and over again.

“Second: every verse, whether oft-quoted or obscure, must be measured against other verses. There

are complementary and tempering teachings in the scriptures which bring a balanced knowledge of truth.

“Next: there is a consistency in what the Lord says and what He does. . . .

“Fourth: not all that God has said is in the Bible. Other scriptures—the Book of Mormon, the Doctrine and Covenants, and the Pearl of Great Price—have equal validity, and they sustain one another.

“Fifth: while much must be taken on faith alone, there is individual revelation through which we may know the truth. . . . What may be obscure in the scriptures can be made plain through the gift of the Holy Ghost. We can have as full an understanding of spiritual things as we are willing to earn” (in Conference Report, Oct. 1984, 81; or *Ensign*, Nov. 1984, 66).

It should also be noted that “many elements of truth come only after a lifetime of preparation” (Boyd K. Packer, in Conference Report, Apr. 1974, 138; or *Ensign*, May 1974, 95).

There is an order or design we should follow in our preparation and teaching that will provide the gospel’s perspective and power for that which we are trying to accomplish. Again, Elder Packer instructs us:

“The course we follow is not of our own making. The plan of salvation, the great plan of happiness, was revealed to us, and the prophets and Apostles continue to receive revelation as the Church and its members stand in need of more. . . .

“ . . . The scriptures provide the pattern and the basis for correct doctrine.

“From doctrine, we learn principles of conduct, how to respond to problems of everyday living” (in Conference Report, Apr. 1994, 25–26; or *Ensign*, May 1994, 20).

“A principle is an enduring truth, a law, a rule you can adopt to guide you in making decisions. Generally principles are not spelled out in detail. That leaves you free to find your way with an enduring truth, a principle, as your anchor” (Boyd K. Packer, in Conference Report, Apr. 1996, 22; or *Ensign*, May 1996, 17).

Scripture then is the basis for doctrine. From the scriptures we are taught correct doctrine. From doctrine we are taught principles. From principles and with the help of the Spirit we can find how they might apply to our needs and circumstances today.

The result of such teaching provides a basis for personal improvement and growth:

“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” (Boyd K. Packer, in Conference Report, Oct. 1986, 20; or *Ensign*, Nov. 1986, 17).

Programs and processes and presentations without scriptural foundation and doctrinal understanding are diluted and do not have the potential and power to change people’s lives. It is upon this basis we must help our students find the application to their own lives.

Recently Elder Dallin H. Oaks illustrated the power of this:

“Teachers who are commanded to teach ‘the principles of [the] gospel’ and ‘the doctrine of the kingdom’ (D&C 88:77) should generally forgo teaching specific rules or applications. For example, they would not teach any rules for determining what is a full tithing, and they would not provide a list of *do*’s and *don*’ts for keeping the Sabbath day holy. Once a teacher has taught the doctrine and the associated principles from the scriptures and the living prophets, such specific applications or rules are generally the responsibility of individuals and families.

“. . . When we teach gospel doctrine and principles, we can qualify for the witness and the guidance of the Spirit to reinforce our teaching, and we enlist the faith of our students in seeking the guidance of that same Spirit in applying those teachings in their personal lives” (in Conference Report, Oct. 1999, 102; or *Ensign*, Nov. 1999, 79–80).

In summary then, Elder Harold B. Lee taught:

“Our best hope of maintaining doctrinal purity rests with a membership that knows and understands doctrinal implications because they have ‘witnessed for themselves’” (“Special Challenges Facing the Church in Our Time” [regional representatives’ seminar, 3 Oct. 1968], 7).

That is, they have followed the admonition of the Savior: “If any man will do his will, he shall know of the doctrine, whether it be of God, or whether I speak of myself” (John 7:17).

Adhering to these principles can be a safety net of protection to keep one from wandering from the established way, the straight and narrow path. So ask yourself the question, “Have I ever taught false doctrine?” I am sure we all have, but as we grow and learn and strive to have the Spirit of the Lord in our lives, we can correct ourselves.

Elder Boyd K. Packer has taught us:

“A member, at any given time, may not understand one point of doctrine or another, may have a misconception, or even believe something is true that in fact is false.

“There is not much danger in that. That is an inevitable part of learning the gospel. No member of

the Church should be embarrassed at the need to repent of a false notion he might have believed. Such ideas are corrected as one grows in light and knowledge.

“It is not the *belief* in a false notion that is the problem, it is the *teaching* of it to others” (in Conference Report, Apr. 1985, 43–44; or *Ensign*, May 1985, 35).

And so there is an imperative that President Harold B. Lee gave to Church education personnel many years ago. It should be a hallmark of our endeavors to teach. He said:

“Now you as teachers are not being sent out to teach new doctrine. You’re to teach the old doctrines, not so plain that they can just understand, *but you must teach the doctrines of the Church so plainly that no one can misunderstand*” (“Loyalty” [address to religious educators, 8 July 1966], 9; see also *Charge to Religious Educators*, 3rd ed. [1994], 119).

An essential ingredient in teaching the principles of the gospel is to be sensitive to the needs, the spiritual preparation, and the maturity of the students you are working with. Elder Boyd K. Packer, a master teacher, has given this wise counsel:

“Some things that are true are not very useful. . . .

“Teaching some things that are true, prematurely or at the wrong time, can invite sorrow and heartbreak instead of the joy intended to accompany learning.

“. . . The scriptures teach emphatically that we must give milk before meat. The Lord made it very clear that some things are to be taught selectively, and some things are to be given only to those who are worthy.

“It matters very much not only *what* we are told but *when* we are told it. Be careful that you build faith rather than destroy it” (*The Mantle Is Far, Far Greater than the Intellect* [address to the fifth annual Church Educational System religious educators symposium, 1981], 4–5).

In addition, Elder Lee has said:

“We face a tremendous task in our time in maintaining doctrinal purity. . . . *The doctrines of the Church are not ‘ours,’ but His, whose Church this is!* That we must impress upon all. Failure to keep the doctrines given by Christ pure and simple would cause much human misery here and in eternity. For this reason, fruitless speculation, fascination with the mysteries, and the tendency of some teachers to add their own personal embroidery to the fabric of the Gospel, must be resisted” (“Special Challenges Facing the Church in Our Time,” 6).

Two areas seem to cause the most difficulty for teachers who have challenges doctrinally:

One is sharing things that are inappropriate. Some think they have a higher insight, a deeper interpretation. You must examine yourself to make sure that you are not teaching something just to demonstrate that you think you know something that someone else does not, or that you are not trying to impress them or to provide information that is beyond what some call the “standard boring stuff.” Remember the warning given to one who assumed knowledge and understanding and was seeking recognition:

“And with my servant Almon Babbitt, there are many things with which I am not pleased; behold, he aspireth to establish his counsel instead of the counsel which I have ordained, even that of the Presidency of my Church; and he setteth up a golden calf for the worship of my people” (D&C 124:84).

If you have questions arise in your mind about things you are teaching, and they come back again and again, something is amiss. Leave it alone, or at least test it with others—some of your colleagues or knowledgeable others. Ask them for honest, open impressions about what you are proposing. You may know more than it is right and proper to share. You should only teach that which you have the permission and authorization of the Holy Ghost to teach. Do not try to get ahead of the Brethren. You will become lost without the Spirit. Experience should teach you that you are not exempt from using common sense.

Other areas of concern are those matters that are tangential to the heart and soul of the gospel. They cause the teacher to deviate from that which is most important and to wander or depart from the course. Sometimes there is the temptation to entertain or to amuse. Usually these are nice to know items. Be sure to substantiate and validate from *reliable* sources what you teach. Never provide to students information based on hearsay or rumor. Things taught only for interest by and large are a waste of time.

It is important to maintain balance in what we do. Preoccupation on a particular topic or theme causes a view to be given that is improper and distorted in relationship to the other elements of the gospel. It is the playing one key over and over syndrome that some practice. For example, some have a preoccupation with Book of Mormon geography. Elder James E. Faust has said:

“It is important to know what the Book of Mormon is *not*. It is not primarily a history, although much of what it contains is historical. . . .

“[President] George Q. Cannon stated that ‘the Book of Mormon is not a geographical primer. It was not written to teach geographical truths. What is told us of the situation of the various lands or cities . . . is

usually simply an incidental remark connected with the doctrinal or historical portions of the work.’ . . .

“The test for understanding this sacred book is preeminently spiritual. An obsession with secular knowledge rather than spiritual understanding will make its pages difficult to unlock” (in Conference Report, Oct. 1983, 10–11; or *Ensign*, Nov. 1983, 10).

Concerning the Book of Mormon, President Hinckley has said:

“The evidence for its truth, for its validity in a world that is prone to demand evidence, lies not in archaeology or anthropology, though these may be helpful to some. It lies not in word research or historical analysis, though these may be confirmatory. The evidence for its truth and validity lies within the covers of the book itself. . . .

“. . . It stands as another witness to a doubting generation that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the Living God” (in Conference Report, Oct. 1984, 69; or *Ensign*, Nov. 1984, 52).

And so in summary, President J. Reuben Clark Jr., in *The Charted Course of the Church in Education*, gave these warnings:

“Great is the burden and the condemnation of any teacher who sows doubt in a trusting soul. . . .

“. . . You are not . . . to intrude into your work your own peculiar philosophy, no matter what its source or how pleasing or rational it seems to you to be. . . .

“You are not . . . to change the doctrines of the Church or to modify them as they are declared by and in the standard works of the Church and by those whose authority it is to declare the mind and will of the Lord to the Church. The Lord has declared that he is ‘the same yesterday, today, and forever’ (2 Nephi 27:23)” (rev. ed. [1994], 3, 10).

Elder Mark E. Petersen in instructing Church education personnel on one occasion said:

“Our authorities are the scriptures, the four standard works. Joseph Smith and the other Presidents and leaders are likewise our authorities. They are our file leaders. We must teach as they do. We must avoid the doctrines which they avoid” (“Avoiding Sectarianism,” in *Charge to Religious Educators*, 2nd ed. [1982], 118).

Some argue, “But we are to teach by the Spirit; and I have prayed fervently, and I feel as though the Spirit has given me this additional insight, this new perspective, this greater or higher truth.”

Many years ago one of the First Presidencies of the Church issued this warning:

“Be not led by any spirit or influence that discredits established authority . . . or leads away from

the direct revelations of God for the government of the Church. The Holy Ghost does not contradict its own revealings. Truth is always harmonious with itself. Piety is often the cloak of error. The counsels of the Lord through the channel he has appointed will be followed with safety” (Joseph F. Smith, Anthon H. Lund, and Charles W. Penrose, “A Warning Voice,” *Improvement Era*, Sept. 1913, 1149).

Remember, the Holy Ghost (the Spirit of the Lord) does not contradict itself.

It is hoped that this review of some basic fundamentals will help you in your focus as teachers in the Church Educational System. What a marvelous

opportunity you have to instruct our Father in Heaven’s spirit sons and daughters here in mortality and to teach them of the eternal truths.

Continue to be prayerful, be prepared, be focused by keeping it simple and direct. And make sure everything you teach is built upon the scriptures and the teachings of the prophets and apostles, for they have a special spiritual endowment in connection with their teachings. Follow these scripturally based doctrinal principles, for there is safety in doing so, and the blessings of heaven will attend your teaching. Remember too, you teach what you are. Keep your personal, temporal, and spiritual affairs in order.