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THE POWER OF TEACHING DOCTRINE

How can we increase our ability to teach doctrine with power and authority?

As a new mission president, I arrived at our assigned mission with great anticipation of missionary meetings being filled with the Spirit like I remembered as a young missionary. But after completing our first round of zone conferences, I was disappointed. The Spirit was not as abundant as I had hoped, and some missionaries seemed unengaged.

As my wife and I pondered and prayed about how to invite a greater spirit into our lives and the lives of the missionaries, we were led to focus our teaching on the doctrine of Christ and its power to change us. As we pursued this course over the following months, several missionaries came to me sharing regrets about past behaviors and expressing a desire to be more diligent in keeping mission rules and living the gospel.

What Caused This Change?

President Boyd K. Packer (1924–2015), President of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, frequently 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.”¹



I knew this before, but following this experience with my missionaries, I had a much greater appreciation for the power and virtue of the word of God to change hearts (see Alma 31:5). As our mission progressed and we



continued to focus on teaching doctrine, their hearts changed and so did ours. Because we understood doctrine, we understood the “why” of obedience, not simply the “what” and “how.”

Why Is Teaching Doctrine So Powerful?

President Henry B. Eyring, First Counselor in the First Presidency, taught that “the word of God is the doctrine taught by Jesus Christ and by His prophets.”² True doctrine is centered in Christ. His doctrine, when taught and received by the Spirit, will always increase faith in Jesus Christ (see Alma 32:28–43; Moroni 7:25, 31–32).³ Faith is “the moving cause of all action” or behavior.⁴ As the Father and Son are revealed to us through Spirit-filled words, our faith grows, our desires to repent and obey increase, and we are changed.

The power to change hearts is not in the teacher but in “the virtue of the word of God” (Alma 31:5). Letters on a page or sound waves coming out of a mouth have no inherent power to change hearts, but when true words are charged by the Holy Spirit of God, they can bring about a mighty change of heart (see 1 Corinthians 2:4; 1 Thessalonians 1:5; Mosiah 5:2; Alma 5:7; D&C 68:4). When we teach His word by the Spirit, the Holy Ghost carries light and truth unto the heart of the learner (see John 6:63; 2 Nephi 33:1; D&C 84:45). When learners open their hearts to receive the word, the Spirit enlightens their minds and

changes their hearts—their motives and behaviors.

The Book of Mormon is a powerful witness that “true doctrine, understood, changes attitudes and behaviors.” Here are just a few examples:

- King Benjamin taught the words he received from an angel to his people, and the Spirit brought a mighty change to their hearts that they had “no more disposition to do evil, but to do good continually” (Mosiah 5:2).
- As Alma the Elder taught the people, “their souls were illuminated by the light of the everlasting word,” and they were saved (Alma 5:7; see also verse 9).
- The sons of Mosiah, “because of the power of his word” (Alma 26:13), helped bring about a complete change of heart in thousands of the Lamanites (see Alma 17:14–17; 53:10).

How Can We Improve?

There are things all of us can do to increase our ability to teach doctrine with power and authority (see Alma 17:3; Helaman 5:18). We don’t have to earn a doctoral degree in teaching or in religious studies, but we do have to pay a price. The following ideas may help as you seek to invite the power of doctrine into your teaching.

1. *Treasure up and live by the word.* To teach doctrine with power and authority, we need to know the doctrine. The Savior told Joseph and



SIMPLICITY BRINGS UNDER- STANDING

“Preach the first principles of the Gospel—preach them over again: you will find that day after day new ideas and additional light concerning them will be revealed to you. You can enlarge upon them so as to comprehend them clearly. You will then be able to make them more plainly understood by those [you] teach.”

Hyrum Smith, in *History of the Church*, 6:323.

Hyrum Smith that before they sought to declare His word, they must first seek to obtain it. Then they would have His Spirit and His word, “the power of God unto the convincing of men” (D&C 11:21). This kind of understanding “requires more than casual reading,” as President Howard W. Hunter (1907–95) taught. It requires daily, concentrated study.⁵

Study alone is not enough. If we are to know the doctrine, we must also live it (see John 7:17; Alma 12:9). Diligent study and application of the scriptures and the words of living prophets is the way we come to have the power of His word “in us” (Alma 26:13; see also Alma 17:2–3; 32:42).

2. *Teach doctrine.* We must be careful to teach only true doctrine. The Holy Ghost is “the Spirit of truth” (John 15:26). Learners can feel His confirming witness when we declare “none other things than the prophets and apostles” (D&C 52:36) and avoid speculation and personal interpretation. One of the best ways to avoid even getting near false doctrine is to keep our teaching simple (see Mosiah 25:22; 3 Nephi 11:39–40). In addition, we should tie the comments and experiences that class members share back to

the doctrines we are studying.

3. *Teach by the Spirit.* We must remember that teaching is never about us. Our eye must be single to God. We are not to entertain or set ourselves up as a light. Paul told the Corinthians that he was with them “in weakness, and in fear, and in much trembling” (1 Corinthians 2:3; see also verse 4). That does not sound like Paul used a well-rehearsed and scripted presentation.

If we are to be an instrument in God’s hands to change hearts, we need to get out of the way and let the Holy Ghost teach truth. As you prepare to teach, remember the thing that will matter most in your class is the presence of the Holy Ghost. Do all you can to invite the Spirit into your class. As you teach, don’t be afraid to pause so that you can listen to and feel the Spirit’s direction.

As we feast on and live by every word of God and teach only true doctrine by the power of the Holy Ghost, we will discover the Lord changing our hearts and the hearts of those we teach. I thank God each day for the change His word has brought to my heart and for teachers who taught me true doctrine with power and authority. ■

NOTES

1. Boyd K. Packer, “Little Children,” *Ensign*, Nov. 1986, 17.
2. Henry B. Eyring, “The Power of Teaching Doctrine,” *Ensign*, May 1999, 73.
3. President Russell M. Nelson, President of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, taught, “The doctrine of Jesus Christ was designed by the Lord to help us increase our faith” (“Let Your Faith Show,” *Ensign*, May 2014, 29).
4. *Lectures on Faith* (1985), 1–2.
5. See Howard W. Hunter, “Reading the Scriptures,” *Ensign*, Nov. 1979, 64.