



Teaching the Gospel

“The purpose of teaching . . . [is] that we might be an instrument in the hands of the Lord in changing the heart of an individual.”

From the Life of Howard W. Hunter

In the April 1972 general conference, Elder Howard W. Hunter, then a member of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, was one of the last speakers in one of the sessions. He had prepared a talk, but there was not enough time left in the session for him to give it. “Observing the clock,” Elder Hunter said, “I fold the notes that I have prepared and place them in my inside pocket. But let me take just a moment to mention a little incident that made an impression upon me when I was a boy. This came to my mind when it was mentioned that there are with us this afternoon a large group of dedicated people who teach our youth.

“It was on a summer day early in the morning. I was standing near the window. The curtains obstructed me from two little creatures out on the lawn. One was a large bird and the other a little bird, obviously just out of the nest. I saw the larger bird hop out on the lawn, then thump his feet and cock his head. He drew a big fat worm out of the lawn and came hopping back. The little bird opened its bill wide, but the big bird swallowed the worm.

“Then I saw the big bird fly up into a tree. He pecked at the bark for a little while and came back with a big bug in his mouth. The little bird opened his beak wide, but the big bird swallowed the bug. There was squawking in protest.

“The big bird flew away, and I didn’t see it again, but I watched the little bird. After a while, the little bird hopped out on the lawn, thumped its feet, cocked its head, and pulled a big worm out of the lawn.



Teaching children at church supports parents' teachings in the home.

“God bless the good people who teach our children and our youth.”

Elder Hunter’s brief message was later published under the title “A Teacher.”¹

Howard W. Hunter frequently emphasized the importance of good teaching in the Church. He presented principles—such as the importance of teaching by example, illustrated by the story of the birds—that could help teachers become more effective in blessing the lives of those they taught. Often he spoke to teachers of children and youth, helping them understand their sacred responsibility for those of the rising generation. In one such setting, he said:

“Before me now I see some of the choice spirits of the earth. . . . I try to visualize each [of you teachers] at work in your own specific assignment. I wonder what kind of fruit your labor will bring forth. Will some of that fruit be blighted because you have failed to till or cultivate the soil entrusted to your care; or will all the soil be cultivated so it will yield a maximum of good fruit?

“Out in your respective wards and stakes . . . reside many of our Father’s children. Like you, they are choice in his sight; but, unlike you, many are inexperienced and many are new in the Gospel. Your responsibility toward them is great indeed. Their lives are pliable, easily bent, easily molded, easily led, if you can gain their confidence and win their hearts. You are their ‘shepherd.’ You must guide them to ‘green pastures.’ . . .

“What a challenge, what a joyous task, what a sacred responsibility is yours now! . . . How thoughtful, how considerate, how kind, how tender, how pure in heart, how possessed of that unselfish love as our Lord possessed, how humble, how prayerful you must be as you assume anew your work to feed the lambs as the Lord is telling you to do!”²

Teachings of Howard W. Hunter

Help others develop confidence in the scriptures.

I strongly encourage you to use the scriptures in your teaching and to do all within your power to help the students use them and become comfortable with them. I would like our young people to have confidence in the scriptures, and I would like you to interpret that phrase two ways.

First, we want the students to have confidence in the strength and truths of the scriptures, confidence that their Heavenly Father is really speaking to them through the scriptures, and confidence that they can turn to the scriptures and find answers to their problems and their prayers. That is one kind of confidence I would hope you give your students, and you can give it to them if you show them daily, hourly, that you trust in the scriptures just that way. Show them that you yourself are confident that the scriptures hold the answers to many—indeed most—of life’s problems. So when you teach, teach from the scriptures.

[A second] meaning implied in the phrase “confidence in the scriptures” is to teach students the standard works so thoroughly that they can move through them with confidence, learning the essential scriptures and sermons and texts contained in them. We would hope none of your students would leave your classroom fearful or embarrassed or ashamed that they cannot find the help they need because they do not know the scriptures well enough to locate the proper passages. Give these young people sufficient experience in the Bible, the Book of Mormon, the Doctrine and Covenants, and the Pearl of Great Price that they have both of the kinds of confidence I have just mentioned.

I have often thought that our young people in the Church would be very much like other young people outside of the Church if they do not establish some mastery and command of the standard works. All of you remember the verses the Prophet Joseph wrote from his confinement in Liberty Jail. Among them he wrote, “For there are many yet on the earth among all sects, parties, and denominations, who are blinded by the subtle craftiness of men, whereby they lie in

wait to deceive, and *who are only kept from the truth because they know not where to find it*" (D&C 123:12; emphasis added).

We have a great responsibility as [teachers] in the Church to make sure our own members, our own young people, do not fall into that unfortunate category of being blinded, of being good, fine, worthy young men and women who are kept from the truths of the scriptures because they do not know where to find those truths and because they do not possess confidence [in using] their standard works.³



Teach with the Spirit.

Prepare and live in such a way that you have the Spirit of the Lord in your teaching. There is so much in our world that destroys the feeling of the Spirit and so much that would keep us from having the Spirit with us. We need to do all we can for these young people who are assaulted and barraged by worldliness all around them. We need to do everything possible to let them feel the sweet, reassuring presence of the Spirit of the Lord. . . .

In one of the most basic revelations of this dispensation, the Lord said, "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 42:14).

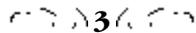
I take this verse to mean not only that we *should not* teach without the Spirit, but also that we really *cannot* teach without it. Learning of spiritual things simply cannot take place without the instructional and confirming presence of the Spirit of the Lord. Joseph Smith would seem to agree: "All 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" [*Teachings of Presidents of the Church: Joseph Smith* (2007), 332].

. . . I get concerned when it appears that strong emotion or free-flowing tears are equated with the presence of the Spirit. Certainly the Spirit of the Lord can bring strong emotional feelings, including tears, but that outward manifestation ought not to be confused with the presence of the Spirit itself.

I have watched a great many of my brethren over the years and we have shared some rare and unspeakable spiritual experiences together. Those experiences have all been different, each special in its own way, and such sacred moments may or may not be accompanied by tears. Very often they are, but sometimes they are accompanied by total silence. Other times they are accompanied by joy. Always they are accompanied by a great manifestation of the truth, of revelation to the heart.

Give your students gospel truth powerfully taught; that is the way to give them a spiritual experience. Let it come naturally and as it will, perhaps with the shedding of tears, but perhaps not. If what you say is the truth, and you say it purely and with honest conviction, those students will feel the spirit of the truth being taught them and will recognize that inspiration and revelation has come into their hearts. That is how we build faith. That is how we strengthen testimonies—with the power of the word of God taught in purity and with conviction.

Listen for the truth, hearken to the doctrine, and let the manifestation of the Spirit come as it may in all of its many and varied forms. Stay with solid principles; teach from a pure heart. Then the Spirit will penetrate your mind and heart and every mind and heart of your students.⁴



**Invite students to seek God the Father
and Jesus Christ directly.**

I am sure you recognize the potential danger of . . . your students build[ing] an allegiance to you rather than to the gospel. . . . That is why you have to invite your students into the scriptures themselves, not just give them your interpretation and presentation of them. That is why you must invite your students to feel the Spirit of the Lord, not just give them your personal reflection of that. That is why, ultimately, you must invite your students directly to Christ, not just to one who teaches his doctrines, however ably. You will not always be available to these students. . . .

Our great task is to ground these students in what *can* go with them through life, to point them toward him who loves them and



“Try the best you can to think of [students] individually, to let them feel something personal and special in the concern of you, their teacher.”

can guide them where none of us will go. Please make sure the loyalty of these students is to the scriptures and the Lord and the doctrines of the restored Church. Point them toward God the Father and his Only Begotten Son, Jesus Christ, and toward the leadership of the true Church. . . . Give them the gifts that will carry them through when they have to stand alone. When you do this, the entire Church is blessed for generations to come.⁵



Strive to reach the individual.

I have always been impressed that the Lord deals with us personally, individually. We do many things in groups in the Church, and we need organizations of some size to allow us to administer the Church well, but so many of the important things—the *most* important things—are done individually. We bless babies one at a time, even if they are twins or triplets. We baptize and confirm children one at a time. We take the sacrament, are ordained to the

priesthood, or move through the ordinances of the temple as individuals—as one person developing a relationship with our Father in Heaven. There may be others nearby us in these experiences, just as there are others in your classroom, but heaven’s emphasis is on each individual, on every single person.

When Christ appeared to the Nephites, he said:

“Arise and come forth unto me, that ye may thrust your hands into my side, and also that ye may feel the prints of the nails in my hands and in my feet. . . .

“And it came to pass that the multitude went forth, and thrust their hands into his side, and did feel the prints of the nails in his hands and in his feet; and this they did do, *going forth one by one* until they had all gone forth, *and did see with their eyes and did feel with their hands*, and did know of a surety and did bear record” (3 Nephi 11:14–15; emphasis added).

That experience took time, but it was important that each individual have the experience, that each set of eyes and each pair of hands have that reaffirming, *personal* witness. Later Christ treated the Nephite children exactly the same way. “He took their little children, *one by one*, and blessed them, and prayed unto the Father for them” (3 Nephi 17:21; emphasis added).

It will be hard for you to give all of the personal attention some of your students both want and need, but try the best you can to think of them individually, to let them feel something personal and special in the concern of you, their teacher. Pray to know which student needs what kind of help, and remain sensitive to those promptings when they then come. . . . Remember that the very best teaching is one on one and often takes place out of the classroom. . . .

In your search for individually teaching each student, you will most certainly discover that some are not doing as well as others and that some are not making it to class at all. Take personal interest in such students; give extra-mile effort to invite and help the lost sheep back into the fold. “Remember the worth of souls is great in the sight of God” (D&C 18:10). An incalculable price has been paid by our Savior for every one of us, and it is incumbent on us to do

all we can to assist him in his work. It is incumbent on us to make sure that the gift of the Atonement is extended to every young man or woman we have responsibility for. In your situation, that means keeping them in full activity in your classes.

Give special attention to those who may be struggling, and go out as necessary to find the lost sheep. A written postcard, a telephone call, or, if possible, a personal visit to a home in many cases will have a wonderful result. Personal attention to a young person just beginning to stray may save hours and hours—indeed, years and years—of effort later in our attempt to reclaim that person to activity. Do all you can to fortify the strong one and reanchor the wayward ones at this age.⁶



Teach by example.

It is so needful for us [as teachers] to set the proper example, to be diligent and vigilant in our own lives, to keep the Sabbath Day holy, to honor the leadership of the ward, the stake, and the Church. Nothing unseemly should come from our lips that would give any child the right or the privilege to do wrong. Surely if we say or do something wrong, the children have license to follow.

Example carries with it an influence much more forceful than precept. He who would persuade others to do right should do right himself. It is true that he who practices good precepts because they are good and does not suffer himself to be influenced by the unrighteous conduct of others will be more abundantly rewarded than one who says and does not. . . . Children are prone to imitate those in whom they place confidence. The greater their confidence, the more readily they are influenced for good or for evil. Every good Saint respects genuine goodness wherever it is seen and will try to imitate all good examples.⁷

The formula for a great teacher is not only to live the commandments of the Lord and to advocate the commandments of the Lord, but to obtain the spirit of teaching by prayer. When we obtain that spirit and observe the commandments of the Lord, walking in obedience before Him, then the lives of those whom we touch will be changed and they will be motivated to live lives of righteousness.⁸



Effective gospel teaching leads to “the transformation of the human soul.”

Every teacher must have a personal testimony that God lives, of the divine mission of Jesus Christ, and that the appearance to Joseph Smith of the Father and the Son was a reality. Not only must he have that knowledge and testimony, but he should be anxious to express his belief without equivocation to those who come to learn.⁹



Be an instrument in the Lord’s hands in helping students experience a miraculous change of heart.

When a teacher performs as the Lord intended, a great miracle does take place. The miracle of the Church today is not the healings which are so profuse, not that the lame shall walk, the blind see, the deaf hear, or the sick be raised up. The great miracle of the Church and kingdom of God in our day and in our time is the transformation of the human soul. As we journey throughout the stakes and missions of the Church, this is what we see—the transformation of the human soul because someone has taught the principles of truth.

It is as Alma proclaimed, in his day in teaching the people, when he said: “And now behold, I ask of you, my brethren [and sisters] of the church, have ye spiritually been born of God? Have ye received

his image in your countenances? Have ye experienced this mighty change in your hearts?” (Alma 5:14.) This is the purpose of teaching. This is the reason we labor so hard, seek the Spirit, and prepare our minds with good things as the Lord has commanded, that we might be an instrument in the hands of the Lord in changing the heart of an individual. Our aim is to plant in the hearts of children the desire to be good, the desire to be righteous, the desire to keep the commandments of the Lord, the desire to walk in humility before Him. If we can be an instrument in the hands of the Lord in bringing to pass this mighty change in the hearts of the children, then we have accomplished the great miracle of a teacher. And truly, it is a miracle. We do not understand how the Lord changes the hearts of men, but He does. . . .

I bear you my witness of the regenerating power of the Spirit in the lives of members of the Church. I plead with you . . . to labor unceasingly in righteousness and holiness before the Lord in accomplishing the task that has been assigned to you.”¹⁰

Suggestions for Study and Teaching

Questions

Note: You might want to discuss some of the following questions from the point of view of parents teaching their children.

- President Hunter encourages teachers to help students gain “confidence in the scriptures” (section 1). When have the scriptures helped you in your own life? When have you found answers to your questions in the scriptures? How can we help others, including those in our homes, learn to love the scriptures and benefit from their power?
- What can we learn from section 2 about teaching by the Spirit? What experiences have you had with teaching and learning by the Spirit? What are some things you can do to help you teach by the Spirit?
- How can a teacher help students build loyalty to the scriptures and the gospel, not to himself or herself? (See section 3.) How can a teacher help point students toward Heavenly Father and Jesus Christ? How can a teacher help students become grounded

in the gospel so they remain strong “when they have to stand alone”?

- Ponder President Hunter’s teachings about the importance of each individual (see section 4). How can you help those you teach develop a testimony that God knows and loves them individually? Consider what you, as a teacher, can do to reach those you teach individually.
- President Hunter emphasizes the importance of teaching by example (see section 5). Why is our example more powerful than our words? How have you been blessed by a teacher who was a good example? How does the example of parents teach their children?
- When have you experienced the “great miracle” that President Hunter describes in section 6, either as a teacher or a learner? Reflect on some teachers who have been a good influence in your life. What made them an effective influence? How can we teach the gospel with greater power—whether at home, in a classroom, or in another setting?

Related Scriptures

John 21:15–17; 1 Corinthians 12:28; 2 Timothy 3:14–17; 2 Nephi 33:1; Alma 17:2–3; 31:5; D&C 11:21–22; 50:17–22; 88:77–80

Teaching Help

On different pieces of paper, write questions from the end of the chapter or other questions that relate to the chapter. Invite class members to select a question and search the chapter for teachings that help answer it. Ask them to share what they learned.

Notes

1. “A Teacher,” *Ensign*, July 1972, 85.
2. *The Teachings of Howard W. Hunter*, ed. Clyde J. Williams (1997), 210–11.
3. “Eternal Investments” (address to CES religious educators, Feb. 10, 1989), 2; si.lds.org.
4. “Eternal Investments,” 3–4.
5. “Eternal Investments,” 2–3.
6. “Eternal Investments,” 4–5.
7. “Formula for a Great Teacher” (address given at Primary conference, Apr. 1965), 3–4, Church History Library, Salt Lake City.
8. “Formula for a Great Teacher,” 1.
9. *The Teachings of Howard W. Hunter*, 188.
10. “Formula for a Great Teacher,” 4–6.