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The Word Made Flesh: Teaching the Gospel Concretely

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The Doctrine of the Body and Gospel Learning

When compared to other Christian denominations, the restored gospel emphasizes the role of the body in unique ways.¹ For Latter-day Saints, obtaining a body is not just a footnote in the plan of salvation; it is central to the very purpose of life. Joseph Smith taught, “We came to this earth that we might have a body and present it pure before God in the celestial kingdom. The great principle of happiness consists in having a body.”²

As religious educators seek to more effectively teach their students, it may be useful for them to consider the implications of teaching embodied students. Elder David A. Bednar has said that “our physical bodies make possible a breadth, a depth, and an intensity of experience that simply could not be obtained in our premortal estate.”³ One of the fundamental aspects of this “intensity of experience” is its concrete nature. In other words, embodied involvement in the world is characterized by specific experiences in time and space. As one professor of preaching explained, “The plain fact of the matter is that we are seeking to communicate with people whose experiences are

concrete. Everyone lives inductively, not deductively. No farmer deals with the problem of calfdom, only with the calf. The woman in the kitchen is not occupied with the culinary arts in general but with a particular roast or cake. The wood craftsman is hardly able to discuss intelligently the topic of ‘chairness,’ but he is a master with a chair.”⁴

Teaching with concrete material means using stories, images, specific names or places, parables, and details and experiences from contemporary life and the scriptures. When a religious educator wishes to teach concretely, he or she does not occasionally decorate their lesson material with illustrations or a “good story”; rather, the lesson material *primarily* consists of the concrete.⁵ To suggest that religious educators should teach concretely is not to propose that they should be prescriptive. Elder Dallin H. Oaks has taught that gospel teachers “should generally forgo teaching specific rules or applications.”⁶ Rather, teaching concretely seeks to reflect and illustrate everyday experience in the light of the gospel.⁷ It is descriptive rather than prescriptive.⁸ In what follows hereafter, I will suggest that students learn more effectively when gospel teaching and learning reflect concrete experience. First, I will discuss why teaching primarily with concrete material better aligns with how humans naturally learn and interact with the world. At the end of the first section, I will also briefly explain the possibility of creating “vicarious” concrete experiences in the classroom. In the second half of the article, I will offer four practical suggestions for making gospel teaching more concrete.

The Advantages of Teaching and Learning Concretely

Learning general abstract rules, ideas, and principles actually plays a vital role for students by helping them (especially beginners) identify the most important features of a learning task.⁹ For example, after studying Doctrine and Covenants 4:6 in class, a seminary student may learn that it is important to be “humble” as they engage in missionary work. Of the infinite number of possibilities one could choose to embrace, identifying the principle of “humility” helps the student prioritize which attributes are most important when participating in missionary work. This principle can be applied throughout time to any follower of Jesus Christ engaged in missionary work in any circumstance. These kinds of core values, attributes, and principles extracted from scripture help disciples of the Savior know which applications are appropriate in a variety of different situations.

However, “as the competent [learner] becomes more and more . . . involved in his tasks, it becomes increasingly difficult to draw back and to adopt the detached rule-following stance of the beginner.”¹⁰ The number of gospel principles that can be applied to different situations can become overwhelming. The image of an institute student having a list of memorized values and principles to be applied in the right circumstance does not really fit the nuanced picture of what it means to live as an embodied agent in an experiential world. Of course, gospel principles should guide us generally, but nothing can substitute the lessons we learn experientially and concretely in a body. As we practice living these principles, they can become a part of our fundamental nature and thus manifest themselves in tacit behaviors. A similar process has been described as “embodied familiarization” or “the learner’s shift from self-conscious and relatively uninformed, uncoordinated, and unskilled approximations to increasingly smooth, capable, and often tacit action—giving rise to what might be thought of as embodied familiarity with a certain task or in a given circumstance.”¹¹

Some may wonder how anyone could sense what is morally right without *first* thinking of values, rules, or principles. C. Terry Warner explained, “What’s defective is not our capacity to discern whether we’re doing right or wrong, but our ability to formulate rules for doing it. Keep in mind that we can’t formulate rules for doing many of the utterly simple things we do daily, like raising our arm, making our vocal cords work, and remember a name.”¹² For many of the decisions we make, we may not be able to first verbalize what gospel principle or standard best fits a situation, but we are still able to sense what is right. As children of God we are endowed with the light of Christ and are thus given the capacity to discern between good and evil as part of our fundamental nature (see Moroni 7:16). Also, those who have received the gift of the Holy Ghost can experience his constant guidance, comfort, and protection. With these gifts in mind, gospel principles and values can act as a guide and check on our spiritual intuitions. Writing on a related subject, Elder Neal A. Maxwell taught, “Rules are useful, . . . but these must merely mark where the borders of conscience end.”¹³

There is still a lot of research that needs to be done regarding the limits of learning concretely without participating in “real-life” activity. For example, how much *can* one learn about proper worship in a sacrament meeting without actually attending church? Regardless, gospel teachers can help students learn as concretely as possible in the environments afforded to them.

In a classroom, students can have “vicarious” concrete experiences. In an article exploring the relationship between aesthetics and instruction, Patrick Parrish said, “In works of art, we vicariously experience the events along with a protagonist and are led to a similar revelation.”¹⁴ Speaking of the power of teaching with stories (one among many techniques that could be considered concrete), Ruth Aylett said, “Story is a specific mechanism through which the real world can be created in the imagination of learners so as to take on a virtual existence in the classroom.”¹⁵ In this sense, not only does concrete teaching better reflect how humans engage in the world, it also makes lesson material more experiential. Classrooms, therefore, provide a risk-free, low-cost environment for students to vicariously experience the scriptures and learn how the gospel works concretely in their lives.

Practical Suggestions for Teaching the Gospel Concretely

When teachers consider the importance of their students learning “in the flesh” as embodied agents, they may begin to question their role. How can they offer anything but the abstract when they teach within the walls of a classroom? A culinary arts teacher can bake a cake during class time, but a gospel educator cannot practice repentance with students. Some may argue for more classroom activities, occasions to role-play, or specific opportunities to learn gospel study skills. These types of learning activities can help students practice the principles they are learning in class. However, whether one is learning in groups or participating in a writing assignment, he or she may be engaging with material that is still primarily abstract in nature. Therefore, teachers need not change the type of outward activities they do with students; rather, they should seek to consider making the content they teach more concrete. What follows are some practical ways teachers can incorporate concrete material throughout their lessons.

Share the Details of the Scriptures

The scriptures use specific people, events, and cultures to communicate gospel principles. There is a temptation sometimes to skim scriptural details in order to teach principles or application.¹⁶ However, if the particulars of a text are ignored, the power of teaching the concrete is lost. Appropriately blending concrete modern experience and concrete ancient experience connects our world to the world of the scriptures. Teachers can get into trouble when they sacrifice scriptural details for modern-day applications and vice versa. Also,

students will probably see the scriptures more meaningfully when they see the word as a body of experiential material rather than primarily as a collection of abstract concepts. What follows are some ways gospel educators can teach the scriptures concretely.

Biography. People are influenced in profound ways when they come in contact with other inspirational beings, even when those people encounter us through the words of a page. C. Terry Warner explained, “Like love, the light or guidance or truth that influences us exists only in living form, not in principles or rules or expectations or advice, however widely circulated.”¹⁷ Speaking of a related idea, Dr. Warner said, “[These] are beings seen or unseen, factual or fictional, living or dead. They have perhaps respected us, believed in us, possibly counseled us. . . . We might know them personally or might have only read or heard about them.”¹⁸ As teachers of the scriptures, we want our students to be influenced by the *people* in the scriptures and ultimately by the Savior. As James Ferrell said, “Salvation is not in a sentence, or in a string of sentences, however profound. It is rather in a person—in the Messiah, come to earth, to deliver man from his sins.”¹⁹

In order to help students be influenced by the people in the scriptures, teachers can keep the details of the individuals in the text at the forefront of the students’ minds. Teaching the backgrounds, character traits, unique contributions, and biographical turning points of the people in scripture helps students to identify with a concrete person and not just ideas. Grant Hardy offered a particularly poignant example of this technique when he described Zeniff. Hardy writes that Zeniff “resists easy categorization. He is a basically decent fellow, yet despite his good intentions nearly everything he attempts turns out disastrously. . . . His morally indeterminate status, along with the self-reflection that leads him to write candidly about his mistakes and weaknesses, makes him one of the most intriguing personalities in the Book of Mormon, at least according to modern sensibilities.”²⁰

Learning about specific people can have a powerful effect on students. Speaking of a teacher who influenced him greatly as a young man, President Thomas S. Monson said, “She brought to her classroom as honored guests Moses, Joshua, Peter, Thomas, Paul, and, of course, Christ. Though we did not see them, we learned to love, honor, and emulate them.”²¹

Historical details. In Doctrine and Covenants 94:10–11 the Lord commanded the Saints in Kirtland, Ohio, to build a printinghouse. The revelation reads, “Verily I say unto you, the second lot on the south shall be dedicated

unto me for the building of a house unto me, for the work of the printing of the translation of my scriptures, and all things whatsoever I shall command you. And it shall be fifty-five by sixty-five feet in the width thereof and the length thereof, in the inner court; and there shall be a lower and a higher court.” When teaching these verses, an instructor may quickly skip over the details because he or she may feel students will not be interested in these kind of specifics. Or some may go beyond an acceptable interpretation of these passages and find “hidden meanings” in the numbers used in the dimensions (i.e., what the numbers represent in Hebrew). Both of these approaches miss the power of teaching the scriptures concretely. By briefly helping the students visualize the dimensions of these buildings (roughly two-thirds the length of a basketball court), instructors can encourage listeners to make connections to their experience. Or, using another example, rather than overemphasizing any “allegorical” meanings of the oil and wine used by the good Samaritan, perhaps simply mentioning these specifics of the parable can help create the effect the story was originally meant to have. If one were to skip these details and focus mainly on abstract words, ideas, and terms, then the story cannot be experienced. As Fred Craddock taught, “We don’t want to get lost in all of those long words that end in ‘-ity,’ ‘-ship,’ and ‘-ness’: responsibility, stewardship, righteousness, and all of those similar words. We have to use them some, but . . . can I taste it, smell it, see it, and feel it?”²² There is a significant difference between “bring forth the best robe, and put it on him; and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet: and bring hither the fatted calf, and kill it, and let us eat, and be merry” (Luke 15:22–23) and the bland phrase: “they had a party.”

Geography. In some literature, elaborate maps are created and used by authors in order to invite a powerful effect on the reader. These “maps stimulate the reader’s imagination and enable her or him to visualize the space produced by the narrative from a bird’s-eye-view perspective; this . . . allows the reader to move into the space-time continuum of the narrative.”²³ In other words, the “world” of the narrative becomes more concrete and experiential when the reader has a strong sense of its geography.

Quickly mentioning relevant geographic details when teaching scripture helps to orient the student in the concrete world of the ancient text. For example, hearing that Mary and Joseph travel a south-southeast direction from Nazareth to Bethlehem and then learning that Bethlehem is south of Jerusalem helps the Christmas story become more vivid in the minds of the

students. These small insights do not take much time to explain, yet they can make learning from the scriptures a substantially more concrete experience.

Parables, Metaphors, and Word Images

Much has been said about gospel teaching and the value of stories. Some of the most powerful teachers in this dispensation have also had the skill set of effective storytelling. Although there are dangers associated with relying too much on one method, it is easy to see how a story captures attention and makes the gospel concrete. Some teachers may wish to tell more stories but feel that they cannot always think of enough stories to tell or are justifiably worried about some of the other dangers associated with storytelling. For those with these concerns, they may want to consider using more parables, metaphors, and word images as they teach. These techniques can create a very similar response to stories without depending too heavily on one technique.

Parables. “A parable is an extended simile and metaphor. It is a short story that uses familiar characters, conditions, and customs to teach a single point or lesson.”²⁴ When told effectively, parables are worth sharing rather than simply stating a concept because they help learners discover concrete gospel truths. As New Testament scholar C. H. Dodd explained, “[Parables] are the natural expression of a mind that sees truth in concrete pictures rather than conceives it in abstractions. . . . Thus instead of saying, ‘Beneficence should not be ostentatious,’ [Jesus] says, ‘When you give alms, do not blow your trumpet’; instead of saying, ‘Wealth is a grave hindrance to true religion,’ He says, ‘It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the Kingdom of God.’”²⁵ Parables are particularly effective at staying in the realm of the concrete because their message is contained in the parables themselves. As one preaching professor pointed out, “Recent biblical studies suggest . . . that a parable doesn’t *have* a point, it *is* a point.”²⁶

Suppose an institute teacher was trying to help his or her students sense the significance of the following statement by the Prophet Joseph Smith: “A man filled with the love of God, is not content with blessing his family alone, but ranges through the whole world, anxious to bless the whole human race.”²⁷ Before reading the quote, a teacher could share the following parable with little previous explanation:

And it came to pass that a family got up one morning and had family devotional. After eating breakfast together and quickly planning out their day, the father went to work, the older children went to school, and the mother

stayed home with the younger children. During the day, the mother read to her kids, taught them how to wash dishes, brought them to the park, and told them stories about their ancestors. After school, the older children did their chores following a soft reminder from their mother. Around 5:45 p.m., the father arrived home from work as everyone was standing in the kitchen laughing and helping to prepare dinner. Several minutes after sitting down to eat, the family heard a knock on the door. The slightly awkward neighborhood kid asked if one of the children could come outside and play. It was obvious to the father that this neighborhood friend really wanted to come in and eat.

“Sorry,” said the father, “we are eating dinner.”

That night, after playing catch with her sons, helping with homework, and reading to the younger children, the mother received a text from her Relief Society president (the mother was the first counselor).

“Can you come do a visit with me real quick? Sister Robinson is in the hospital.”

“Sorry, I’ve got to put the kids to bed.”

The next day, Saturday, the family woke up and went through its routine. They noticed on the calendar that one of the boys from church was doing his Eagle project. The whole ward was invited to help this young man assemble humanitarian kits. But the family decided to go boating instead; they had a great time.

A parable like this may help to illustrate what it looks like to focus on our families to the exclusion of serving others in the Church or our communities. Also, rather than just reading the quote from the Prophet Joseph Smith, a concrete parable helps students to experience and identify with the principle being taught.

Metaphor. “A metaphor is not simply a way of prettifying what is already known, but is a medium of knowing more fully.”²⁸ A simple, quick metaphor can pull listeners back to the world of the concrete and help them vicariously experience the material being taught.²⁹ When using a metaphor, it is helpful to remember to not dwell on the metaphor too long or let it draw a lot of attention to itself. Also, cumbersome language, such as “Let me use a metaphor” or “this object could be compared to,” should be avoided.³⁰ It may be best to simply state the metaphor and let it stand on its own.³¹

The Brethren have incorporated metaphors into their teaching in powerful ways. For example, in speaking about the dangers of not eating healthy,

President Ezra Taft Benson said, “To a significant degree, we are an overfed and undernourished nation digging an early grave with our teeth.”³² Elder Neal A. Maxwell described the Book of Mormon this way: “The book is like a vast mansion with gardens, towers, courtyards, and wings. There are rooms yet to be entered, with flaming fireplaces waiting to warm us.”³³ Elder Richard G. Scott said, “The inspiring influence of the Holy Spirit can be overcome or masked by strong emotions, such as anger, hate, passion, fear, or pride. When such influences are present, it is like trying to savor the delicate flavor of a grape while eating a jalapeño pepper.”³⁴

Word images. Word images are shorter than parables and do not form a comparison like a metaphor. Word images create mental pictures that are used quickly (often in succession) to illustrate a concept, feeling, or experience. Rather than only saying something like “life is full of trials,” a teacher might offer this series of images:

1. A husband comes home from work, hangs his jacket up, softly puts the keys down on the kitchen counter, turns to his wife, and says, “I lost my job today.”
2. A woman in her forties who has never married finishes a date with yet another man she is not interested in. She sits on the end of her bed before going to sleep and listens to the clock tick.
3. During the afternoon, a young married couple learn from a doctor that they will never be able to have children. Later in the evening, they show up to the neighborhood Christmas party. Throughout the night, people keep asking them how many children they have.

These examples were created, but their intent is to accurately represent concrete experiences. With a few word images, metaphors, and an occasional parable spread throughout a lesson, students will see the gospel as something that touches their everyday reality.

Use Common Human Experience

When sharing the concrete, it is also helpful to remember to share the common.³⁵ Speaking on gospel teaching, President Henry B. Eyring said, “It is tempting to try something new or sensational.”³⁶ Attention can be gained by relating the dramatic, but it comes at the cost of losing touch with the listener’s experience. Dr. Jason McDonald, an instructional designer, performed a qualitative study by interviewing film directors in order to see what insights they had regarding teaching. Authenticity was discussed as a key element in

effective movies because it “helps viewers feel empathy for characters, and recognize themselves (their emotions and their reactions) in those characters. And when viewers can identify with a character they often imagine how they would react to the circumstances they see that character face.”³⁷ The identifiable is more meaningful than the unusual.³⁸

Consider this simple and powerful example of President Henry B. Eyring illustrating the principle of priesthood diligence: “Just a few weeks ago, I saw a new deacon start on that path of diligence. His father showed me a diagram his son had created that showed every row in their chapel, a number for each deacon who would be assigned to pass the sacrament, and their route through the chapel to serve the sacrament to the members. The father and I smiled to think that a boy, without being asked to do it, would make a plan to be sure he would succeed in his priesthood service.”³⁹ This common everyday experience helps listeners concretely understand what it looks like to magnify one’s Church responsibilities.

Limit Explanation

In an honest effort to help students understand the gospel, some teachers can fall into the trap of excessively explaining an idea or concept. The Savior was a master of using economical language. Elder Neal A. Maxwell asked, “Would we cherish the Sermon on the Mount if it filled three volumes?”⁴⁰

Perhaps limited explanations reflect concrete experiences effectively because life does not come with explanations for each of our experiences. We arrive here on earth and have to learn to how make sense of our mortal probation. When a student interprets concrete experiences by choosing to see them in the light of the Plan of Salvation, they have exercised one of the most important aspects of their agency. However, when a teacher excessively explains what someone is supposed to think about a scripture, experience, or parable, the students are robbed of the chance to make their own connections.⁴¹ As Thomas G. Long said, “For a piece of oral or written communication to ‘work’ there must be cooperative interaction between what is said or written and those who read or hear it.”⁴²

Elder Howard W. Hunter illustrated this principle in the April 1972 general conference. He started his short address by saying, “Observing the clock, I fold the notes that I have prepared and place them in my inside pocket.” Elder Hunter then shared an experience he had of watching a small bird witness a larger bird eat a worm and an insect. Both times the larger bird ate,

the smaller bird would open his mouth and “squawk in protest.” Eventually, after the larger bird left the scene, the smaller bird “hopped out on the lawn, thumped its feet, cocked its head, and pulled a big worm out of the lawn.” Immediately finishing the story and without unnecessary explanation, Elder Hunter finished his talk by saying, “God bless the good people who teach our children and our youth, I humbly pray, in Jesus’ name. Amen.”⁴³

Those who were listening to Elder Hunter’s talk that day were invited to draw conclusions for themselves regarding how this short message might be applied. In referring to a similar kind of teaching method, Dr Fred Craddock said, “[The] congregation cannot shake off the finished sermon by shaking the minister’s hand. The sermon, not finished yet, lingers beyond the benediction, with conclusions to be reached, decisions made, actions taken, and brothers sought while gifts lie waiting at the altar. Those who had ears heard, and what they heard was the Word of God.”⁴⁴ This kind of experience closely resembles what it means to make sense of concrete experiences under the influence of the Holy Ghost.

Conclusion

Elder David A. Bednar said, “In the classroom of mortality, we experience tenderness, love, kindness, happiness, sorrow, disappointment, pain, and even the challenges of physical limitations in ways that prepare us for eternity. Simply stated, there are lessons we must learn and experiences we must have, as the scriptures describe, ‘according to the flesh’ (1 Nephi 19:6; Alma 7:12–13).”⁴⁵ When gospel teaching reflects what life is like as an embodied agent in an experiential world, students are able to vicariously connect the gospel to their concrete reality.

Perhaps the ultimate example of concrete teaching was the incarnation.⁴⁶ Elder Jeffrey R. Holland said, “In word and in deed Jesus was trying to reveal and make personal to us the true nature of His Father, our Father in Heaven.”⁴⁷ This supreme revelation of God was not a list of rules, attributes, or ideas, rather it was the word made flesh (John 1:14). In other words, the primary way God has chosen to teach us about himself was through the life of Jesus Christ: a specific, embodied, concrete ministry that occurred in time and space. ■ RE

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