

# Gospel Doctrines—Anchors to Our Souls

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## Of the Seventy

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I'm honored to be here with my wife, Kathy, tonight. Perhaps the schooling I have received at the hands of a very strong and wonderful mother, an accomplished and caring wife, and six charming but opinionated daughters is my greatest qualification for participating in this women's conference. At the very least, I feel well briefed regarding women's issues! And I must admit that their lives and love (and that of our two sons) are my greatest inspiration and (next to my relationship with God) my strongest motivation to do right.

I begin my portion of our joint presentation with a disclaimer: what I will talk about tonight is something I feel strongly about and see great value in, not something I necessarily exemplify. Many times in recent years I have been encouraged by President Spencer W. Kimball's wise observation that "we would not have much motivation to righteousness if all speakers and writers postponed discussing and warning until they themselves were perfected" (*The Miracle of Forgiveness* [Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1969], xii).

### *Doctrine Shapes Behavior*

Although my formal training was not in the behavioral sciences, like many of you, the gospel has caused me to spend a good deal of my time in this life trying to understand and change my own behavior and that of those around me. From the scriptures I have learned that gospel teachings, sometimes called doctrines, are powerful shapers of human behavior. President Boyd K. Packer stated the principle beautifully in a recent conference address: "True doctrine, understood, changes attitudes and behavior."

### *Joseph and Potiphar's Wife*

A good example of this truth is found early in the Old Testament in the story of Joseph, one of Jacob's twelve sons. You will no doubt remember how Joseph was sold into Egypt by his jealous brothers. He ended up being blessed by the Lord and becoming the prosperous overseer of the household and business affairs of Potiphar, an officer of Pharaoh.

In the midst of this good fortune, Joseph is confronted with a moral temptation in the person of Potiphar's wife. Finding herself alone with Joseph, Potiphar's wife cast her eyes upon him and said, "Lie with me."

Joseph's response to her is a classic and provides a model for all who encounter moral temptation. The record simply says, "He refused."

Joseph then explained his refusal. "Behold," he said, "[Potiphar knoweth] not what is with me in the house, and he hath committed all that he hath to my hand; there is none greater in this house than I; neither hath he kept back any thing from me but thee, because thou art his wife; *how then can I do this great wickedness, and sin against God?*" (Genesis 39:8–9; emphasis added).

Joseph's rhetorical question not only speaks volumes about his sterling character but also helps explain why he had one. Can there be any doubt that Joseph had been taught the doctrine that God is our Father, that we are his children, and that he has created a plan for our lives? In this telling moment, as Joseph wisely exercised his agency, he obviously wasn't worried about the possibility of disease, unwanted pregnancy, or even incurring the wrath of disappointed parents. His thoughts and motives were much higher, much more noble—what would his Heavenly Father think? How could he possibly offend Him? The influence of doctrine on our behavior can be great and eternally beneficial.

### *Learning the Doctrines of the Kingdom*

Perhaps that is why early in this dispensation the Lord said to the Saints, "And I give unto you a commandment that you shall teach one another the doctrine of the kingdom" (D&C 88:77). Since we can't teach what we haven't learned, an important implication of this commandment is that we all must acquire a basic knowledge of gospel doctrine.

### *Elder Bruce R. McConkie's Mormon Doctrine*

For many years in our house, as in many of yours, Elder Bruce R. McConkie's book *Mormon Doctrine* has been a much-used reference work. It is a comprehensive and valuable compendium of gospel teachings.

Over thirty years ago, when Sister Jensen and I were in our first year of marriage, we attended an evening institute class taught by Elder McConkie at the University of Utah. I still have my class notes containing Elder McConkie's comments explaining how the book *Mormon Doctrine* came to be. He told of his love for the teachings of the scriptures and how, as a young college student, he would walk to and from the campus giving himself talks on various gospel topics. In time, he began to organize and write these down, and eventually he compiled the book, which has guided countless Saints in their study of gospel truths.

### *Our Own Personal Mormon Doctrine*

I have often thought that as helpful and remarkable as Elder McConkie's book is,

there is one compilation of doctrine that for me is more important than his, and that is my own personal book of Mormon doctrine—the one I have written in my own head and heart and in the margins of my scriptures; the one I can draw on in my moments of need and when I want to teach the doctrines of the kingdom to others. Elder McConkie's knowledge of saving truths will help save him; mine will help save me. I must pay the price to acquire such knowledge just as he did. So must you.

### *Paying the Price for Knowledge*

This principle was forcefully illustrated for me early in my experience as a Seventy when I served on a committee at Church headquarters with Elder Marion D. Hanks. The committee met weekly, and our meetings usually began with prayer and an invitation by Elder Hanks for committee members to share gospel insights we had acquired during the preceding week. Being new and unsure of myself, I was very quiet for the first few months. Then one week through my personal scripture study I gained an insight I felt was worthy of sharing. When Elder Hanks called for our participation that week, I ventured to share what I felt was a fairly impressive morsel of truth. To my surprise and chagrin, positive feedback from the other committee members was totally lacking. As I looked pleadingly at Elder Hanks, I asked: "Is what I have shared perhaps something you had already thought about?"

"Well, yes," said Elder Hanks, with a spreading grin, "probably for the first time in about 1948!" Then, seeing my crestfallen countenance, he came with great charity to my rescue. "But that doesn't matter," he said, "*you* needed to think about it too!"

That is wisdom worth remembering. We all need to individually discover, think about, and store up gospel doctrines in our own way and in our own time. To do so, we may need to get up a littler earlier, stay up a little later, or consistently sneak a few precious moments for study during the day. Whatever price we have to pay, it will be worth the effort.

### *Applying the Doctrine*

When we learn and begin to internalize the doctrines of the gospel—in Jeremiah's words, to put them in our "inward parts, and write [them] in our hearts" (Jeremiah 31:33)—it will not be long before we and those around us begin to notice changes in our behavior.

A controlling parent who comes to understand the doctrine of agency will cease that control.

A selfish and self-centered spouse who is touched by the power of the doctrine of charity will no longer seek his or her own (see Moroni 7:45).

An honest investigator who comes to fully understand the doctrine and blessings of baptism, as taught by the missionaries, will not only accept their invitation to be baptized but will eagerly await performance of the ordinance.

All of us who truly come to comprehend the matchless doctrine of the Atonement will appreciate the enormity of our debt to the Savior and will seek diligently to repay that debt with offerings of repentance and Christian service.

As we personally study and apply the doctrines of the gospel in our lives, we will come to understand them in their relationship and necessary balance to each other. We will learn, for instance, that justice cannot be respected without a knowledge of the limitations of mercy; that agency operates best in a climate of unfeigned love; and that "repentance cannot come unto men except there were a punishment" (Alma 42:16).

A determined effort to study gospel doctrine will also have the benefit of immersing us in the best source of that doctrine—the scriptures. As we study the "Good Books" consistently, we will eventually come to see a striking harmony in the doctrines of the gospel as they have been revealed through the ages to the prophets. We will come to know with certainty that the Spirit truly is the same, yesterday, today, and forever (2 Nephi 2:4).

### *Teaching the Doctrine*

Perhaps the best measurement of how well we understand the doctrines of the gospel is how clearly and simply we can teach them. And teach them we must!

"And again, inasmuch as parents have children in Zion, or in any of her stakes which are organized, that teach them not to understand the doctrine of repentance, faith in Christ the Son of the living God, and of baptism and the gift of the Holy Ghost by the laying on of hands, when eight years old, the sin be upon the heads of the parents" (D&C 68:25).

Can "the sin" spoken of in this passage, which will be upon the heads of the parents, be anything other than the failure to teach the saving doctrines of faith, repentance, baptism, and the gift of the Holy Ghost to our eight-year-olds? And if that omission is a sin, how about our failure to teach the law of chastity to our fourteen-year-olds? Or the doctrine of eternal marriage to our sixteen-year-olds? Or the Plan of Salvation to our friends and neighbors not yet of our faith?

Since we all love our families dearly, is there a better way tangibly to express that love than by teaching them the saving doctrines of the gospel? This certainly seems to be what Nephi tells us good parents do. "Having been born of goodly parents, *therefore* I was taught somewhat in all the learning of my father" (1 Nephi 1:1).

I must admit I wish Nephi had added: "And of my mother!" My own observation is that women teach the gospel, especially to children, with love and compassion. Thus, doctrinal teachings that are transferred intergenerationally by mothers have unusual longevity.

### *The Power of Doctrine*

The teaching of doctrine is accompanied by a special spirit and power that aren't

usually present when the more mundane aspects of life are discussed. At the April 1991 general conference, Elder Carlos E. Asay gave a talk about the Prophet Joseph Smith. For some reason his talk tugged at my heartstrings in an unusually forceful way. When I encountered Elder Asay a few days after conference and expressed my feelings about the power his words had seemed to carry, he taught me a valuable lesson: "Haven't you learned," he asked, "that there are certain gospel topics about which one can never give a poor talk?" (His question really caught my attention because I have managed to give quite a few substandard talks in my life!) He continued: "You can never give a poor talk about Joseph Smith."

I have come to know that what Elder Asay taught me about Joseph Smith is true of every doctrine of the gospel. When we teach doctrine, there will be an accompanying power and spirit that will carry our teachings deep into the hearts of those we teach and will also bring those teachings to their remembrance at appropriate and critical times.

Examples of this truth in scripture are numerous. I cite my favorite, which is young Alma's recounting of his conversion in the 36th chapter of Alma. He gives us a vivid description of the depth of his torment related to past transgressions and then says: "And it came to pass that as I was thus racked with torment, while I was harrowed up by the memory of my many sins, behold, I remembered also to have heard my father prophesy unto the people concerning the coming of one Jesus Christ, a Son of God, to atone for the sins of the world" (Alma 36:17).

Whenever I read this passage and realize that in his moment of extreme need young Alma remembered his father's teachings concerning the Atonement, I quietly wonder what, if anything, our children will ever remember of the doctrines Kathy and I have attempted to teach them. Wouldn't it be a wonderful thing to be remembered and quoted in this way by our children?

But the truly noteworthy element in Alma's story isn't just that he remembered his father's doctrinal teachings; it's the behavioral change that followed. Listen to his own words:

"And from that time [meaning the time he remembered his father's teachings on the Atonement] even until now, I have labored without ceasing, that I might bring souls unto repentance; that I might bring them to taste of the exceeding joy of which I did taste; that they might also be born of God, and be filled with the Holy Ghost." (Alma 36:24.)

Alma's experience also illustrates the important fact that so much of the behavior we hope for in our own life and in the lives of others is related to our personal convictions and understanding regarding Christ's atonement.

### *A Home Teaching Experience*

I have recently had a very confirming experience of my own concerning the transforming power of doctrine. It involves a so-called less-active family I have home taught

for many years. (By the way, I have long felt that there are two main weaknesses with both home and visiting teaching—the first is that we sometimes fail to go, and the second is that when we get there, we fail to teach!) In the case of this family, I had been going to their home quite regularly for many years and usually shared a "warm and fuzzy" message, of some description, but never really taught them the doctrines of the kingdom. All the while this good couple was working on the challenges of a second marriage for each of them and the resulting financial and family stresses such arrangements inevitably bring. They were good, honest people with no real background in the gospel and a social life that centered on a bowling league, western dancing, and the out-of-doors.

When Kathy and I returned home from a two-year mission in Rochester, New York, three years ago and I had gained a better understanding of what I am trying to teach tonight, I asked this family if my young companion and I could teach them the doctrines of the gospel. The reply of the wife still haunts me: "We always hoped you would do that," she said!

Since I was a recently returned mission president, I determined we would teach them the six basic missionary discussions. I'll never forget the first night we really taught them the doctrines of the kingdom. We had a brief prayer and then I began with the first principle of the first missionary discussion, the one given perhaps thousands of times a day all over the world by the full-time missionaries. "You should know," I said, "that God is our Father; that we are His children; that He loves us, and because of that love has created a plan for our lives."

In that moment, as I for the first time taught that eager couple the doctrines of the kingdom, a spirit and power came into their home which in all my years of trying I had never been able to create.

To make a very heartwarming story short, it wasn't long before this couple began coming to church—doctrine does change behavior! There they were directed to a terrific gospel essentials class and more doctrine, and exposed in sacrament meeting to even more gospel teachings. Two irrepressible sister missionaries were invited to teach them the six new-member discussions and more doctrine. A perceptive bishop extended a call to them to become our ward food storage coordinators. They accepted the call and became so enamored with our local cannery and the good people there that they agreed to serve a one-year welfare services mission, giving about twenty hours of service each week. They spoke recently of their mission in sacrament meeting and have a date scheduled on their anniversary this October to seal their marriage in the Salt Lake Temple. They are now attempting by precept and example to teach their own children and grandchildren the doctrines of the kingdom. The husband, by the way, recently became one of our family's home teachers!

My message tonight has been plain and simple. An understanding of gospel doctrine changes behavior. Therefore, we must learn doctrine and teach it. If we do that, we will increasingly be found in our homes and elsewhere, as Nephi observed, talking of Christ, preaching of Christ, prophesying of Christ, and writing according to our prophecies, that our

children may know to what source they may look for a remission of their sins (2 Nephi 25:26). That is the greatest favor we could ever do our families or anyone and the surest anchor to all our souls.

Of this I testify, in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.