

Insights on Church Leadership

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***Eternal Truths:
Spiritual Nutrition***

One of the requirements any individual has to fill before being called to serve in a leadership capacity is that he or she must know at least a little about the basic doctrines of the restored gospel of Jesus Christ. Why is it so important? Because of our nature as eternal beings, and also because of the potential damage we may cause in the lives of those we were called to serve.

Feeding Spirits With Knowledge

At this stage of our mortal experience we know very little about our eternal nature, or the anatomy and physiology of our spiritual bodies. We know a great deal about our mortal bodies, understanding the complex chemical processes involved in digestion and dialysis; the electrical, mechanical, and chemical processes employed by our hearts and lungs. And we are beginning to understand the extraordinary and once mysterious electrochemical processes involved in our brain.

However, as children of Heavenly Parents, each one of us is actually an eternal spirit temporarily housed in an imperfect mortal frame. Because of the temporarily fallen nature of our mortal bodies and of the world where we have been placed, under normal conditions we cannot see or feel our spirits.

We don't remember anything about our eternal selves: how our spirit bodies look like, or what they are composed of, or how they work. But from the revelations given through latter-day prophets we learned two important concepts: First, that our spirit bodies affect our mortal bodies. And second, that the capacity our spirit bodies have to learn and move is far greater than our mortal bodies' present capacities¹. President Brigham Young taught that just like our mortal bodies, our spiritual bodies need constant care and nourishment:

"... the spirit is influenced by the body, and the body by the spirit. ... The Lord has planted within us a divinity; and that divine immortal spirit requires to be fed. Will earthly food answer for that purpose? No; ... That divinity within us needs food from the Fountain from which it emanated. It is not of the earth, earthy, but is from heaven. Principles of eternal life, of God and godliness, will alone feed the immortal capacity of man and give true satisfaction."²

¹ See Discourses of Brigham Young, pp.248 (March 4, 1860), 380 (September 16, 1871). President Young taught that in the spirit world our spirits would "... learn with greater facility ..." and "... move like lightning ..." and that after the resurrection we would "... learn a thousand times more in a thousand times less time ..."

² *ibid.*, pp.70 (April 6, 1855), 165 (December 18, 1859)

By developing good study habits we can exercise our mental faculties so that we can narrow the distance between our mortal mind and our spiritual mind. This narrowing may be called "spirituality". President Spencer W. Kimball said: "... if I immerse myself in the scriptures the distance narrows and the spirituality returns."³ Spirituality also implies communion with the Lord; it means to be immersed in the Holy Spirit, that eternal substance that connects us with the source of all truth. Then, in whatever interests we have, whether we are studying gospel doctrine, engineering, art, management, chemistry, or anthropology, we will be able to find knowledge through the Holy Spirit, and the scriptures can help us enter into this spiritual communion.

Nephi counseled us to "... feast upon the words of Christ; for ... the words of Christ will tell you all things what ye should do ..."⁴ Unfortunately, most of the time we don't fully realize how much an effect the scriptures can have in our lives. In the words of the Brother of Jared, the Lord is "... able to show forth great power, which looks small unto the understanding of men."⁵ Nephi said that the scriptures will tell us all things. Do we believe in Nephi's words, or do we think that maybe he was exaggerating a little? We might also think that Nephi knew little about mathematics, chemistry, or physics, and that only out of his lack of that type of scientific knowledge he could make such a statement⁶. But if we consider that what we call physical, chemical, mathematical or biological principles and laws are mortal manifestations of the same principles and laws governed by the Lord through His priesthood, then we will have to recognize that he is the source of this knowledge, and certainly he is willing to teach us about these matters. President Joseph F. Smith taught:

"I believe that the Lord has revealed to the children of men all that they know. I do not believe that any man has discovered any principle of science, or art, in mechanism, or mathematics, or anything else, that God did not know before man did. Man is indebted to the source of all intelligence and truth, for the knowledge that he possesses; and all who will yield obedience to the promptings of the Spirit, which lead to virtue, to honor, to the love of God and man, and to the love of truth and that which is ennobling and enlarging to the soul, will get a cleaner, a more expansive, and a more direct and conclusive knowledge of God's truths than anyone else can obtain. I tell you this, because I know it is true."⁷

By guiding our mental process the Lord will give us the power to get as many answers by ourselves as possible. The words in the scriptures are not magic; but since they invite, or put us in tune with the Spirit of the Lord, these words have the power to stimulate the faculties of our spiritual minds, to the extent that our mortal minds also become stimulated. This way we can achieve greater levels of understanding and consequent performance.

³ Teachings of Spencer W. Kimball, p.135. July 11, 1966.

⁴ 2 Nephi 32:3

⁵ Ether 3:5

⁶ I find it hard to believe that Nephi didn't have some knowledge of those sciences. He wrote that he had been educated in the "learning of the Jews and language of the Egyptians" (1 Nephi 1:2). Lehi was so wealthy that Laban, considered a powerful man, coveted his wealth (1 Nephi 3:24-25,31). Therefore, we could assume that Nephi and his brothers might have received the best education available at that time, perhaps including a period of studies in Egypt, where he could have seen wonders in architecture, engineering, and chemistry. Whether that was so is not clear at this time, but we do know that he built a ship (1 Nephi 18:1-4) fit for a transoceanic voyage that could have lasted about a year (Ether 6:11), and later a temple (2 Nephi 5:15-16). Those types of enterprise require a lot of math and physics ...

⁷ Gospel Doctrine, p.5. April, 1902.

As result of experiences that I had while translating the Book of Mormon, today I have the impression that there is much more in the sacred texts—especially the Book of Mormon—than what has been printed on those pages. The Lord suggested that His word is spirit⁸; thus, beyond those printed words are those that no mortal language can transmit⁹. The printed words, then, are "tools" to guide us in the process of putting our minds in tune with that spiritual sphere in which the knowledge of God is dominant. One day this earth will also be filled with that knowledge¹⁰, but while that does not fully happen, we need those "immersions" in spiritual element, by which we will receive the pure intelligence that will make us, according to the prophet Joseph Smith, learn more about heaven—and about God—than we would by reading all books ever written about it¹¹.

Finding a New Dimension in Earthly Life

Elder Bruce R. McConkie stated: "... people who study the scriptures get a dimension to their lives ... that can't be gained in any [other] way ... There is an increase in faith and a ... feeling of inspiration and understanding ..."¹²

It is still difficult for mortal minds to see things under an eternal perspective. Let's consider this word, "perspective" (or "dimension") for a moment. In spatial geometry we learn that a geometric shape on a sheet of paper can be seen as the representation, like a shadow, of an object floating in space. I had a geometry teacher in my junior high school who would say to the students: "Get your minds out of the paper and imagine these things floating in space."

This concept is quite interesting. A gray square on a piece of paper could be understood as that shade of a pyramid floating in the air and projecting a perfectly vertical shadow. Without an additional perspective (or dimension) we might have thought that the square was the shadow of a cube, and not of a pyramid.

The same happens with our understanding of this life. We also have to "get our minds out of the ground" and observe this life with an eternal perspective to understand how the Lord deals with his children. The Lord's own words explain this concept, and he also promises that with patience we will eventually get to the point of fully understanding eternal matters:

"Ye cannot behold with your natural eyes, for the present time, the design of your God concerning those things which shall come hereafter, and the glory which shall come after much tribulation. For after much tribulation come the blessings. Wherefore the day cometh that ye shall be crowned with much glory ... Verily, verily, I say unto you, ye are little children, and ye have not as yet understood how great blessings the Father hath in his own hands and prepared for you; And ye cannot bear all things now; nevertheless, be of good cheer, for I will lead you along."¹³

⁸ D&C 84:45

⁹ 3 Nephi 19:31-34; 28:13-15

¹⁰ Isaiah 11:9

¹¹ TPJS, p. 324. October 9, 1843

¹² Church News, 24 Jan 1976, p.4

¹³ D&C 58:3-4; 78:17-18

The Risks of Personal Opinions and Beliefs

Our personal opinions and beliefs are important, but we must be very careful to not present them as the mind and the will of the Lord. When we teach a true doctrine, any person can inquire the Lord about what we taught and receive a testimony of the truthfulness of that doctrine. If we teach something that is not in accordance with the word of the Lord no testimony will be received, but instead, a stupor of thought¹⁴ (or confusion of mind) will take place.

One simple test: whenever in a class there is a heated debate, we can be certain that it is because a false principle--or a wrong interpretation of an aspect of a correct principle--was taught. In these cases, the best attitude is to acknowledge our lack of knowledge about that principle. We should not be ashamed of doing so; after all, none of us knows everything. We may then ask those present in the class to study and pray about the matter during the week. Then, in the next class, that point will certainly be clarified.

The Spirit of the Lord will never give us a testimony of a false doctrine, even though some of these may make us "feel good" about them because of their either logical or emotional appeal. We must remember that human logic does not always agree with the mind of the Lord: "For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, saith the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts."¹⁵

The teaching of personal beliefs as if they were an approved doctrine is something that brings me a few sad memories. I remember that during my youth I was taught a few false doctrines about people of black ancestry. At that time one of those "personal doctrines" stated that blacks probably had not been valiant in the pre-mortal existence, and that they would never receive exaltation. This doctrine was apparently well accepted and it seems to me that very few individuals ever took the time to search the scriptures to verify that idea.

The paternalistic attitudes towards "those poor black souls" were sometimes almost unbearable. I still remember vividly that when I was about seventeen years old (a couple of years before President Kimball's revelation that extended the priesthood to all worthy men) one good brother told me that because I could not hold the priesthood I would never be admitted into the celestial kingdom. He then suggested that I should not marry the young lady I was dating (who was not black and eventually became my wife), because, in his opinion, marrying her would jeopardize her future exaltation.

I confess that I just could not accept those ideas, although I never publicly disagreed with my leaders. Having been raised in an excellent family who had taught me to have faith in God above all things, even during the years in which we did not know about the restored gospel of Jesus Christ, I had such a great love for God that I just could not accept the idea that I might have been less valiant or less worthy in the pre-existence. That just sounded against my nature.

I understand that even today there are individuals who believe (and unfortunately some of them still teach) that people from certain races will never reach exaltation and eternal life. However, I don't feel any intention of contending with them to prove my view. Because of my testimony that Jesus Christ lives and that He is at the head of His Church, I feel that all I have to do is to wait on the Lord and be merciful with those who underrate me for any reason.

¹⁴ D&C 9:9

¹⁵ Isaiah 55:8-9

But as a High Priest I understand that part of my duty requires me to be concerned with the eternal welfare of my fellow-beings¹⁶. That is why I feel the obligation to warn that a line of reasoning that denies any righteous person an opportunity to be exalted may be, in a way, denying the power of Christ's atonement. If we say that Christ cannot exalt an individual who receives His ordinances and keeps His commandments, we are in a way saying that Christ's atonement was not infinite and eternal, as the scriptures teach¹⁷.

Again, I do not see any reason to confront or to contend against those who think that I have little chance to be saved. It is not the Lord who is saying that I am not going to the celestial kingdom; he allows me to make that decision by myself. And for those who insist in denying me the right to eternal blessings, I would quote the words of Jacob: "... there is none other way save it be by the gate ... and the keeper of the gate is the Holy One of Israel; and he employeth no servant there ..."¹⁸

I have enough faith to wait on the Lord; to wait for that day when all speculation will vanish, and truth will be plainly manifest; that day when "... the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea."¹⁹ Just like Father Lehi, "... I know in whom I have trusted."²⁰ And I have trusted in him who "... doeth not anything save it be for the benefit of the world; for he loveth the world, even that he layeth down his own life that he may draw all men unto him." Nephi added the following: "... Wherefore, he commandeth none that they shall not partake of his salvation. ... and he inviteth them all to come unto him and partake of his goodness; and he denieth none that come unto him, black and white, bond and free, male and female; and he remembereth the heathen; and all are alike unto God, both Jew and Gentile."²¹

The reason why we are going over this example is to emphasize how important it is to learn the true doctrine of Jesus Christ; how important it is to avoid teaching our own opinions as if they were official doctrines. We are dealing with the lives of individuals, all of whom are precious in the sight of the Lord; so precious that the Great Jehovah chose to come down from the courts of infinite glory to suffer infinite agony and pain so that all these individuals--all of them--could have a chance of coming back to the presence of the Lord on conditions of repentance²².

Our lack of true knowledge may damage lives instead of saving them, and if that happens, one day we will certainly find ourselves in deep trouble, because the Lord said: "Woe be unto the pastors that destroy and scatter the sheep of my pasture! ..."²³

The Lord is merciful, and he is aware that we will not have all knowledge in this mortal stage. After all, he was the one who determined that we would not have a full knowledge at this stage of the plan of salvation, so we could develop faith. But it is one thing to make a mistake (e.g. teaching a false doctrine, or making a wrong judgment) after we searched for knowledge with all diligence; it is another very different

¹⁶ Alma 13:6,12

¹⁷ Alma 34:10; D&C 132:27

¹⁸ 2 Nephi 9:41. I altered the sequence of the clauses.

¹⁹ Isaiah 11:9

²⁰ 2 Nephi 4:19

²¹ 2 Nephi 26:24,33

²² D&C 18:10-11; 19:15-16,18

²³ Jeremiah 23:1

thing when the mistake is the result of our negligence in searching for the truth. We must have enough strength of character to say "I don't know", and then look for the answer through study, prayer and patience.

Serving or Disserving Others

Church leaders must strive to learn the true doctrine and the covenants of the Lord, otherwise they may disserv (i.e., harm or injure) those under their responsibilities. I remember an insight I gained in the past while reading the experience Aaron had when he was guarding the people while Moses was communing with the Lord on the mount.

Moses gave the people some initial instructions about the law and then went to the mount and "disappeared" for 40 days²⁴. The people saw when Moses went up the mount into the cloud of God's glory. After waiting his return for over a month, they probably imagined that something had gone wrong and wanted some action taken; maybe they thought Moses had died--after all, who would survive almost a month and a half in the midst of all that fire and lightning without appropriate food and shelter²⁵?

It is possible that Aaron, fearing that the people might give up waiting and decide to go away, decided to do something that might make them wait a little longer, like a religious ceremony, for example²⁶. He remembered Moses' recent instructions and the sacrifices of oxen that had already been offered²⁷, and perhaps Aaron, by not understanding those instructions well, decided to build a calf (a young ox) maybe with the intention of creating a visible token of the covenants the people had made almost a month and a half before²⁸. If that was really Aaron's intent we don't know at this time. However, if that was his intention, it backfired, because the people engaged in open idolatry, causing the judgments of God to fall upon them.

As church leaders in these latter days we are also conducting the people to a promised land: in our case, we call this promised land the celestial kingdom. As the prophets and apostles commune with the Lord and receive instructions, we at times may also hear the people asking how long it will take us to get there. I have heard people asking why we don't go faster; or why the Lord doesn't give any new revelations. Occasionally we may even find individuals who, if they could, would rather release the prophets when they would get too old, probably expecting that a younger person might get things done faster--which idea hides the false assumption that the prophets direct the Church instead of the Lord.

Sometimes it seems that we want to see the Church of Christ remodeled or re-restored every two or three years. We must understand and teach that the Lord said that he would give "... line upon line, precept upon precept, here a little and there a little ..."²⁹

Once again, we can damage the lives of others if we assume that all our thoughts and ideas are the result of inspiration from the Lord³⁰. For example, in the Book of Mormon we find the account of a man called Zeniff, a good Christian. So good that he reached the point of loving his enemies, the Lamanites. In

²⁴ Exodus 24:14-15,18

²⁵ Exodus 20:18; 24:17; 32:1

²⁶ Exodus 32:5

²⁷ Exodus 20:24; Exodus 24:3-8

²⁸ Exodus 32:2-6

²⁹ D&C 98:12

³⁰ See chapter 8 for another insight on this topic.

his own words, "... when I saw that which was good among them I was desirous that they should not be destroyed.³¹"

Zeniff, having a burning desire to return to the that part of the land where Nephi had lived after he had left his brethren³², gathered a group of followers and went back to inhabit the land³³. His problem was that he wanted a particular blessing (a beautiful one--to live in the land of his ancestors) and perhaps he thought that the Lord would have to give it to him just because of his desire³⁴. Had he been more attentive to his scriptures, he would have seen that the Nephites had left that part of the land under the Lord's instructions³⁵, and apparently only the Lord could command them to go back. That mistake cost his people years in wars and eventually, bondage³⁶.

We must constantly check to see whether our opinions coincide with the scriptures and with the latest words of the living prophets. The handbooks, conference reports, official church magazines, and those appointed to instruct us are the appropriate sources of the latest words. We should never assume that we already know how to solve a certain problem based on past experiences alone, because the circumstances may very well be partially or totally different. We must also consider that the Church is dynamic, not static: although the fundamental doctrines do not change, the programs and certain procedures will at times be altered to face different circumstances.

In conclusion, let us consider what the Lord said about his revealed instructions: "... I give unto you directions how you may act before me, that it may turn to you for your salvation.³⁷"

³¹ Mosiah 9:1

³² 2 Nephi 5:4-5,7-8

³³ Mosiah 9:3,5-9

³⁴ A still common misunderstanding of a covenant instituted by the Lord: "I, the Lord, am bound when ye do what I say ..." (D&C 82:10).

³⁵ Omni 1:12-13

³⁶ Mosiah 9:10-13; 19:26,28; 21:13

³⁷ D&C 82:9

About the Author



Marcus Helvécio Tourinho de Assis Martins is a native of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, and joined The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in July, 1972. In August of 1978 he became the first black member to serve as a full-time missionary for the Church in the 20th century, serving in the Brazil São Paulo North Mission.

Since then, brother Martins served as bishop, counselor in branch presidencies, member of stake high councils, stake and ward executive secretary, high priests group leader, ward mission leader, temple officiator, stake and ward sunday school president, and teacher in primary, sunday school, and institute of religion. In the early 1980's he also translated the “Book of Mormon: Another Testament of Jesus Christ” into Portuguese.

Brother Martins has worked over the years as a systems analyst and independent consultant for the Brazilian government and a number of private corporations. He holds a Ph.D. in Sociology of Religion, Race and Ethnic Relations, a Master’s degree in Organizational Behavior, and a bachelor’s in Business Management. He taught religion and sociology classes at Brigham Young University, Ricks College, and currently serves as chair of the department of religious education at Brigham Young University-Hawaii.

He and Sister Mirian Barbosa Martins, herself a native of Petrópolis, Brazil, and a returned missionary with several years of leadership experience, have four children: Flávio, Natália, Felipe, and Cristina.