

Understanding The Principles of Personal Revelation
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1. Introduction: An experience common to Latter-day saints is the life-long task of learning how to receive and understand personal revelation. Elder S. Dilworth Young, member of the Seventy said: "I can testify to you that . . . none of you [will] have any adventure greater, more thrilling, and more joyful than to find out how to interpret the Spirit which comes into you . . . Young folks have to learn how, and so do we older folks. We have to find out the technique by which the Spirit whispers to our hearts. We have to learn to hear it and to understand it and to know when we have it, and that sometimes takes a long time."¹ The revelations contained in Doctrine and Covenants sections 6 through 11 contain a number of principles and conditions relative to personal revelation. This paper will outline and analyze some of these principles and the conditions in an effort to help students and teachers gain a better understanding of how the Lord taught his children to receive and recognize personal revelation.

2. Principle #1: Ask and you shall receive according to the conditions prescribed by the Lord

- a. The Lord gave Oliver Cowdery a principle of truth that applies to all of His children: "Verily, verily, I say unto thee, blessed art thou for what thou hast done; for thou hast inquired of me, and behold, as often as thou hast inquired thou hast received instruction of my Spirit (D&C 6:14)." This highlights the importance of the first principle we will discuss: "ask and ye shall receive."
- b. Elder Boyd K. Packer of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles emphasizes the importance of our asking in order to receive personal revelation. He said: "You have your agency, and inspiration does not--perhaps cannot--flow unless you ask for it, or someone asks for you. No message in scripture is repeated more often than the invitation, even the command, to pray--to ask. Prayer is so essential a part of revelation that without it the veil may remain closed to you. Learn to pray. Pray often. Pray in your mind, in your heart. Pray on your knees. You must begin where you are. Pray, even if you are like the prophet Alma when he was young and wayward, or if you are like Amulek, of the closed mind, who 'knew concerning these things, yet . . . would not know.' Prayer is your personal key to heaven. The lock is on your side of the veil."³
- c. In order to receive, however, the Lord outlines several conditions upon which this principle is based.
- d. *Condition #1: Ask for the "right things."* In order to receive personal revelation, we must ask according to the Lord's will. In the Bible Dictionary under "Prayer," it states: "Prayer is the act by which the will of the Father and the will of the child are brought into correspondence with each other. The object of prayer is not to change the will of God, but to secure for ourselves and for others blessings that God is already willing to grant, but that are made conditional on our asking for them." The ancient Nephite Disciples exemplified this principle: ". . . and they did not multiply many words, for it was given unto them what they should pray, and they were filled with desire (3 Nephi 19:24)." They knew what to pray for [the Lord's will] because it "was given unto to them" by the Holy Ghost. In other words, you have to be in tune with the Spirit of Revelation to receive personal revelation--so you will know what the Lord's will is and then pray for *it*. D&C 46:30 confirms this truth: "He that asketh in the Spirit asketh according to the will of God; wherefore it is done even as he asketh." In D&C 6:5-9, the Lord promises Oliver Cowdery that if he asks he will receive, and then he carefully instructs Oliver on what to ask for: "Therefore, if you will ask of me you shall receive; if you will knock it shall be opened unto you. Now, as you have asked, behold, I say unto you, keep my commandments, and seek to bring forth and establish the cause of Zion; seek not for riches but for wisdom, and behold, the mysteries of God shall be unfolded unto you, and then shall you be made rich. Behold, he that hath eternal life is rich. Verily, verily, I say unto you, even as you desire of me so it shall be unto you; and if you desire, you shall be the means of doing much good in this generation. Say nothing but repentance unto this generation; keep my commandments, and assist to bring forth my work, according to my commandments, and you shall be blessed." The Lord gave a similar message about asking for the right things to Hyrum Smith: "And then shall ye know, or by

this shall you know, all things whatsoever you desire of me, *which are pertaining unto things of righteousness* (D&C 11:14, italics added)."

- e. *Condition #2: Have the "right desires."* Closely related to "asking for the right things" is having the "right desires." D&C 7 is an excellent example of two brethren who both receive because of their "right desires." Peter and John receive what they ask of the Lord, even though they ask for very different things. Peter asks to return speedily to the Savior in heaven upon completion of his mission in this life; John asks to "have power over death, that I may live and bring souls" to the Savior beyond the time normally allotted in this life. Because both had what the Savior considered "a good desire (D&C 7:5)," He told them that both would receive according to their desires and have joy in that (D&C 7:8). The Lord's promise to Oliver Cowdery in this regard applies to us today: "If you have good desires (D&C 6:27)," the Lord will bless you to be able to be a part of bringing to forth his will and kingdom on the earth.
 - f. *Condition #3: Believe that you will receive.* Once you have obtained knowledge regarding the Lord's will for you, and your heart is filled with the "right desires," the next step is to proceed with faith, believing that you will receive that thing, if you ask for it, according to the promises of the Lord. Again, to Oliver Cowdery, the Lord said: "Verily, verily, I say unto you, that assuredly as the Lord liveth, who is your God and your Redeemer, even so surely shall you receive a knowledge of whatsoever things you shall ask in faith . . . believing that you shall receive" (D&C 8:1). The ancient prophets of the Book of Mormon provide an excellent example of this principle. The Lord explained that those prophets were receiving according to their righteous desires because they had asked Him, believing they would receive: "The remainder of this work does contain all those parts of my gospel which my holy prophets, yea, and also my disciples, desired in their prayers should come forth unto this people. And I said unto them, that it should be granted unto them according to their faith in their prayers (D&C 10:46-47)." Elder Packer explained how "asking in faith" works: "The flow of revelation depends on your faith. You exercise faith by causing, or by making, your mind accept or believe as truth that which you cannot, by reason alone, prove for certainty . . . As you test gospel principles by believing without knowing, the Spirit will begin to teach you. Gradually your faith will be replaced with knowledge."⁴
3. Principle #2: While seeking and receiving, trifle not with sacred things
- a. As we obtain the will of the Lord, have righteous desires, and ask in faith, we must not "trifle with [the] sacred things" we receive. To Oliver, the Lord said: "Behold thou hast a gift, and blessed art thou because of thy gift . . . Remember it is sacred and cometh from above-make not thy gift known unto any save it be those who are of thy faith. Trifle not with sacred things (D&C 6:10, 12)." The Lord has given each of us gifts as well, including the gift of the Holy Ghost, and access to the several gifts of the Spirit. These things are sacred and are not to be treated lightly. There are several conditions mentioned in relation to this principle in D&C sections 6-11.
 - b. *Condition #1: Don't ask for what you shouldn't.* In relation to asking for the "right things," and with the "right desires," the Lord simply told Oliver Cowdery: "Trifle not with these things; do not ask for that which you ought not (D&C 8:10)."
 - c. *Condition #2: You must study it out in your mind.* Having already begun his labors as Joseph Smith's scribe, a somewhat discontented Oliver Cowdery also "desired to be endowed with the gift of translation (heading to D&C section 8)." The Lord responded with these words of encouragement: "ask . . . that you may translate . . . those ancient records which have been hid up, that are sacred; and according to your faith shall it be done unto you (D&C 8:11)." When he attempted to translate, however, he failed. One of the reasons he did not succeed was given to him in this explanation from the Lord: "Behold, you have not understood; you have supposed that I would give it unto you, when you took no thought save it was to ask me. But, behold, I say unto you, that you must study it out in your mind; then you must ask me if it be right, and if it is right . . . you shall feel that it is right (D&C 9:7-8)." Elder Dallin H. Oaks of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles said this regarding these

verses: "Being taught by the Spirit is not a passive thing. Often the Lord's communication does not come until we have studied matters out in our own minds. Then we receive a confirmation."⁵ Elder Bruce R. McConkie, also of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles added: "We are to solve our own problems and then to counsel with the Lord in prayer and receive a spiritual confirmation that our decisions are correct."⁶

- d. *Condition #3: Keep sacred things sacred.* Once we are able to receive revelation from the Lord, we need to work as hard to keep those things sacred as we did to receive the revelation. After Joseph lost the manuscript containing the first 116 pages of the Book of Mormon, the Lord chastened and warned him: "Therefore, you have delivered them up, yea, that which was sacred, unto wickedness . . . But behold, here is wisdom, and because I show unto you wisdom, and give you commandments concerning these things, what you shall do, show it not unto the world until you have accomplished the work of translation. Marvel not that I said unto you: Here is wisdom, show it not unto the world--for I said, show it not unto the world, that you may be preserved. Behold, I do not say that you shall not show it unto the righteous; But as you cannot always judge the righteous, or as you cannot always tell the wicked from the righteous, therefore I say unto you, hold your peace until I shall see fit to make all things known unto the world concerning the matter (D&C 10:9, 34-37)." Because of this experience, Joseph Smith learned a painful but powerful lesson about "keeping sacred things sacred."
- e. In connection with sacred communication from the Holy Ghost that we might receive, Elder Boyd K. Packer taught: "I have come to believe also that it is not wise to continually talk of unusual spiritual experiences. They are to be guarded with care and shared only when the Spirit itself prompts you to use them to the blessing of others . . . We are, I believe, to keep these things and ponder them in our hearts."⁷
- f. *Condition #4: Once is enough.* Both Oliver Cowdery and Joseph Smith learned for themselves that in the economy of God, one does not need to receive the same revelation more than once. Even though he had already received a witness of the truthfulness of the Prophet Joseph Smith's testimony regarding the plates, Oliver sought an additional witness from the Lord. The Lord patiently responded to Oliver's query by reminding him of the revelation he had already received: "Verily, verily, I say unto you, if you desire a further witness, cast your mind upon the night that you cried unto me in your heart, that you might know concerning the truth of these things. Did I not speak peace to your mind concerning the matter? What greater witness can you have than from God? And now, behold, you have received a witness; for if I have told you things which no man knoweth [Joseph Smith was unaware of Oliver's experience when he inquired of the Lord in his behalf], have you not received a witness (D&C 6:22-24)?" He learned that if the Lord has already revealed something to you, then "trifle not with sacred things" by asking for the same revelation again.
- g. Joseph Smith had already learned this painful lesson in connection with the lost manuscript of the Book of Lehi. He recorded: "Some time after Mr. Harris had begun to write for me, he began to importune me to give him liberty to carry the writings home and show them; and desired of me that I would inquire of the Lord, through the Urim and Thummim, if he might not do so. I did inquire, and the answer was that he must not. However, he was not satisfied with this answer, and desired that I should inquire again. I did so, and the answer was as before. Still he could not be contented, but insisted that I should inquire once more. After much solicitation I again inquired of the Lord, and permission was granted him to have the writings on certain conditions . . . In accordance with this last answer, I required of him that he should bind himself in a covenant to me in a most solemn manner that he would not do otherwise than had been directed. He did so. He bound himself as I required of him, took the writings, and went his way. Notwithstanding, however, the great restrictions which he had been laid under, and the solemnity of the covenant which he had made with me, he did show them to others, and by stratagem they got them away from him, and they never have been recovered unto this day."⁸

- h. *Condition #5: Continue as you commenced.* As was mentioned above, when Oliver Cowdery attempted to translate the ancient record, he failed. Rather than continue to try to learn how to translate by the gift and power of God, he returned to his position as scribe. Shortly thereafter, Joseph Smith received the following in Oliver's behalf: "Behold, I say unto you, my son, that because you did not translate according to that which you desired of me, and did commence again to write for my servant, Joseph Smith, Jun., even so would I that ye should continue until you have finished this record, which I have entrusted unto him . . . And, behold, it is because that you did not continue as you commenced, when you began to translate, that I have taken away this privilege from you (D&C 9:1, 5)." Relating this experience to our lives and the receipt of personal revelation, Elder Jeffrey R. Holland taught: "In the process of revelation and making important decisions, fear plays a destructive, sometimes paralyzing role. To Oliver Cowdery, who missed the opportunity of a lifetime because he didn't seize it in the lifetime of the opportunity, the Lord said, 'You did not continue as you commenced.' . . . After you have gotten the message, after you have paid the price to feel His love and hear the word of the Lord, go forward. Don't fear, don't vacillate, don't quibble, don't whine . . . dismiss your fears and wade in with both feet."⁹
- i. *Condition #6: You need to obtain all that has been revealed before more can be added.* Hyrum Smith, ever anxious to help his younger brother and the Lord build up the cause of Zion, received this in response to his desire to proclaim the word: "Seek not to declare my word, but first seek to obtain my word, and then shall your tongue be loosed; then, if you desire, you shall have my Spirit and my word, yea, the power of God unto the convincing of men. But now hold your peace; study my word which hath gone forth among the children of men, and also study my word which shall come forth among the children of men, or that which is now translating, yea, until you have obtained all which I shall grant unto the children of men in this generation, and then shall all things be added thereto (D&C 11:21-22)."
- j. In connection with this promise given Hyrum-"all things shall be added thereto" *after* "you have obtained all which I shall grant unto . . . this generation," Elder Dallin H. Oaks of the Quorum of the Twelve taught: "Just as continuing revelation enlarges and illuminates the scriptures, so also a study of the scriptures enables men and women to receive revelations. Elder Bruce R. McConkie said, "I sometimes think that one of the best-kept secrets of the kingdom is that the scriptures open the door to the receipt of revelation" (Doctrines of the Restoration, ed. Mark L. McConkie, Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1989, p. 243). This happens because scripture reading puts us in tune with the Spirit of the Lord . . . We do not overstate the point when we say that the scriptures can be a Urim and Thummim to assist each of us to receive personal revelation¹⁰ . . . The best way to have the spirit of revelation is to listen to and study words spoken under the influence of the Holy Ghost. In other words, we obtain the Spirit by reading the scriptures or reading or listening to the talks of inspired leaders.¹¹
4. Principle "3: We must know how to recognize the Spirit when it comes
- a. *Condition #1: I will tell you in your mind and in your heart.* The Lord told Oliver Cowdery that He will speak "in your mind and in your heart, by the Holy Ghost, which shall come upon you and which shall dwell in your heart (D&C 8:2)." Of this, Elder L. Lionel Kendrick of the Seventy, said, "The means by which the Spirit speaks to both the mind and the heart is through the still, small voice spoken of in the scriptures. This voice is often called the "voice of the Spirit" (1 Nephi 4:18). Sometimes that voice is heard within, but more often it is felt. It may prompt us with both a thought and a feeling concerning a matter."¹² Elder Boyd K. Packer of the Quorum of the Twelve more fully elaborated on this: "The Holy Ghost speaks with a voice that you feel more than you hear. It is described as a 'still small voice.' And while we speak of 'listening' to the whisperings of the Spirit, most often one describes a spiritual prompting by saying, 'I had a feeling' . . . Revelation comes as words we feel more than hear. Nephi told his wayward brothers, who were visited by an angel, 'Ye were past feeling, that ye could not feel his words.'"¹³

- b. Elder Richard G. Scott, also of the Quorum of the Twelve, explained in detail how this process works: "An impression to the mind is very specific. Detailed words can be heard or felt and written as though the instruction were being dictated. A communication to the heart is a more general impression. The Lord often begins by giving impressions. Where there is recognition of their importance and they are obeyed, one gains more capacity to receive more detailed instruction to the mind. An impression to the heart, if followed is fortified by a more specific instruction to the mind . . . It is through the repeated process of feeling impressions, recording them, and obeying them that one learns to depend on the direction of the Spirit more than the communication through the five senses . . . We often leave the most precious personal direction of the Spirit unheard because we do not record and respond to the first promptings that come to us when the Lord chooses to direct us or when impressions come in response to urgent prayer."¹⁴
- c. *Condition #2: You will either feel that it is right or that it is not.* Many questions have arisen regarding recognizing personal revelation because of the Lord's words to Oliver Cowdery in D&C 9:8-9: ". . . you must ask me if it be right, and if it is right I will cause that your bosom shall burn within you; therefore, you shall feel that it is right. But if it be not right you shall have no such feelings, but you shall have a stupor of thought that shall cause you to forget the things which is wrong." Of this passage, Elder Dallin H. Oaks of the Quorum of the Twelve said: "This may be one of the most important and misunderstood teachings in all the Doctrine and Covenants. The teachings of the Spirit often come as feelings. That fact is of the utmost importance, yet some misunderstand what it means. I have met persons who told me they have never had a witness from the Holy Ghost because they have never felt their bosom "burn within" them. What does a "burning in the bosom" mean? Does it need to be a feeling of caloric heat, like the burning produced by combustion? If that is the meaning, I have never had a burning in the bosom. Surely, the word "burning" in this scripture signifies a feeling of comfort and serenity. That is the witness many receive. That is the way revelation works. Truly, the still, small voice is just that, "still" and "small."¹⁵
- d. In addition, Elder Boyd K. Packer, also of the Twelve said: "This burning in the bosom is not purely a physical sensation. It is more like a warm light shining within your being . . . If ever you receive a prompting to do something that makes you feel uneasy, something you know in your mind to be wrong and contrary to the principles of righteousness, do not respond to it!"¹⁶
- e. *Condition #3: The Spirit will speak peace to your mind.* In an attempt to help him recognize the Spirit of Revelation, the Lord said to Oliver Cowdery: "Did I not speak peace to your mind concerning the matter? What greater witness can you have than from God (D&C 6:23)?" This teaches two very valuable principles regarding the recognition of personal revelation: (1) The voice of God is a voice of peace, and (2) this is one of the greatest witnesses we can receive from Him. Elder L. Lionel Kendrick of the Seventy said: "The most frequent confirmation of the Spirit comes to us as peaceful feelings . . . President Brigham Young quoted these words of the Prophet Joseph Smith: "They can tell the Spirit of the Lord from all other spirits-it will whisper peace and joy to their souls." Feelings of peace are promptings and proof that the Spirit is bearing witness to us in response to our petitions."¹⁷
- f. *Condition #4: Revelation will enlighten your mind.* Through his brother Joseph, Hyrum learned: "Verily, verily, I say unto you, I will impart unto you of my Spirit, which shall enlighten your mind (D&C 11:13)." Elder L. Lionel Kendrick of the Seventy taught in relation to this verse: "Prophets, seers, and revelators have described this process of receiving personal revelation through the enlightenment of the mind: "When you feel pure intelligence flowing into you," said the Prophet Joseph Smith, "it may give you sudden strokes of ideas, so that by noticing it, you may find it fulfilled the same day or soon; (i.e.) those things that were presented unto your minds by the Spirit of God, will come to pass; and thus by learning the Spirit of God and understanding it, you may grow into the principle of revelation, until you become perfect in Christ Jesus." Elder Marion G. Romney said, "This is a very common means of revelation. It comes into one's mind speaking words and sentences." President Harold B. Lee further taught, "When there come to you things that your mind

does not know, when you have a sudden thought that comes to your mind, if you will learn to give heed to these things that come from the Lord, you will learn to walk by the spirit of revelation."¹⁸

- g. *Condition #5: Revelation will lead you to do what is right.* The final condition for learning to recognize the Spirit that will be discussed in this paper was spoken by the Lord to Hyrum Smith this way: "And now, verily, verily, I say unto thee, put your trust in that Spirit which leadeth to do good--yea, to do justly, to walk humbly, to judge righteously; and this is my Spirit."

5. Summary:

- a. As we continue to learn for ourselves and help our students better understand the principles of personal revelation, together we will be able to "receive revelation upon revelation, knowledge upon knowledge, that [we may] know the mysteries and peaceable things--that which bringeth joy, that which bringeth life eternal (D&C 42:61)."

Notes

1. S. Dilworth Young, *Improvement Era*, vol. 62, no. 6, June 1959, 449.
2. J. Reuben Clark, "The Charted Course of the Church in Education," 4-5.
3. Boyd K. Packer, "Personal Revelation: The Gift, the Test, and the Promise," *Ensign*, November 1994, 59.
4. *Ibid*, 60.
5. Dallin H. Oaks, "Teaching and Learning by the Spirit," *Ensign*, March 1997, 13.
6. Bruce R. McConkie, "Why the Lord ordained prayer," *Ensign*, Jan. 1976, 11.
7. Boyd K. Packer, "The Candle of the Lord," *Ensign*, Jan. 1983, 53.
8. Joseph Smith, *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, ed. B.H. Roberts, 2d ed., rev. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1957), 1:21.
9. Jeffrey R. Holland, "Cast Not Away Therefore Your Confidence," *Ensign*, March 2000, 10.
10. Dallin H. Oaks, "Scripture Reading and Revelation," *Ensign*, January 1995, 7-8.
11. Oaks, "Teaching and Learning by the Spirit," 9.
12. L. Lionel Kendrick, "Personal Revelation," *Ensign*, September 1999, 11.
13. Packer, "Personal Revelation: The Gift, the Test, and the Promise," 60.
14. Elder Richard G. Scott, "Helping Others to Be Spiritually Led," CES Symposium, 11 August 1998, 3-4, 11.
15. Oaks, "Teaching and Learning by the Spirit," 13.
16. Packer, "Personal Revelation: The Gift, the Test, and the Promise," 60-61
17. Kendrick, "Personal Revelation," 13.
18. *Ibid*, 12.