

Excerpts about confronting controversial gospel topics from an address given by Elder M. Russell Ballard of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles to LDS Church Educational System employees on February 26, 2016

Excerpts chosen and underlines and highlights added by Cameron Ford

“As church education moves forward in the twenty-first century, each of you needs to consider any changes you should make in the way you prepare to teach, how you teach, and what you teach if you are to build unwavering faith in the lives of our precious youth. Gone are the days when a student asked an honest question, and the teacher responded, “don’t worry about it!” Gone are the days when a student raised a sincere concern and a teacher bore his or her testimony as a response intended to avoid the issue. Gone are the days when students were protected from people who attacked the church.”

“The internet is expanding its reach across the world into almost every home and into the very hands and minds of your students. You can help your students by teaching them what it means to combine study and faith as they learn. Teach them by modeling this skill and approach in class. President Harold B. Lee observed “we would remind you that the acquiring of knowledge by faith is no easy road to learning. It will demand strenuous effort and continual striving by faith. ... In short, learning by faith is no easy task for a lazy man or woman. Someone has said, in effect, that such a process requires the bending of the whole soul. The calling up of the depths of the human mind, and linking them with God – The right connection must be formed. Then only, knowledge comes by faith.” Knowledge by faith will produce a pure testimony, and a pure testimony has the power to change lives”

“It was only a generation ago that our young people’s access to information about our history, doctrine, and practices was basically limited to materials printed by the church. Few students came in contact with alternative interpretations. Mostly, our young people lived a sheltered life. Our curriculum at that time, though well-meaning, did not prepare students for today, a day where students have instant access to virtually everything about the church from every possible point of view. Today what they see on their mobile devices is likely to be faith challenging as much as faith promoting. Many of our young people are more familiar with Google than they are with the gospel, more attuned to the internet than to Inspiration, and more involved with Facebook than faith.”

“Teach them about the challenges they will face when relying on the internet to answer questions of eternal significance. Remind them that James did not say “if you lack wisdom, let him Google!” Wise people do not rely on the internet to diagnose and treat emotion and mental and physical health challenges, especially life-threatening challenges. Instead, they seek out health experts, those trained and licensed by recognized medical and state boards. Even then, prudent people seek a second opinion. If that is a sensible course to take in finding answers, for emotional, mental, and physical issues, it is even more so when eternal life is at stake. When something has the potential to threaten our spiritual life, our most precious family relationships, and our membership in the kingdom, we should find thoughtful and faithful church leaders to help us. And if necessary we should ask those with appropriate academic training, experience, and expertise for help.

This is exactly, brothers and sisters, what I do when I need an answer to my own questions that I cannot answer myself. I seek help from my brethren in the quorum of the twelve, and from others with expertise in fields of church history and doctrine. You should be among the first outside your students' families to introduce authority sources on topics that will be well-known or controversial, so your students will measure whatever they hear or read against what you have already taught them. You know, we give medical inoculations to our precious missionaries before sending them into the mission field, so they'll be protected against disease that can harm or even kill them. In a similar fashion, please, before you send them into the world, inoculate your students by providing faithful, thoughtful, and accurate interpretation of gospel doctrine, the scriptures, and our history, and those topics that are sometimes misunderstood. To name a few such topics that are less-known or controversial, I'm talking about polygamy, of seer stones, different accounts of the first vision, the process of translation of The Book of Mormon or the Book of Abraham, gender issues, race and the priesthood, or a Heavenly Mother."

"Church leaders today are fully conscious of the unlimited access to information. We're making extraordinary efforts to provide accurate context and understanding of teachings of the restoration. A prime example of this effort is the eleven gospel topics essays on LDS.org that provide balanced and reliable interpretations of the facts for controversial and unfamiliar church related subjects. It is important that you know the content in these essays, like you know the back of your hand. If you have questions about them, then please ask someone who has studied them and understands them. In other words, "seek learning, even by study and also by faith" as you master the content of these essays. You should also become familiar with the Joseph Smith Papers website and the church history section on LDS.org and other resources by faithful LDS scholars."