

The Gospel Methodology of Group Revelation

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For those of you who were here last year, we spent time on President Spencer W. Kimball's 1975 address "The Second Century of Brigham Young University." In my remarks, I shared how being a part of this university, a modern-day manifestation of the School of the Prophets, provides us with an opportunity to receive an endowment of knowledge and power to help each one of us move this university forward. Today I would like to build on that same theme from last year. This theme ties in nicely with our updated strategic plan and with the discussion we have had today on our branding efforts and messaging statement. I hope we never tire of thinking about how to accomplish what God intends for us to accomplish at His university. We can do this by going to President Kimball's second century address and other source documents of this university.¹

An Updated Strategic Plan

Let's start with the updated university strategic plan that President Kevin J Worthen discussed at the university conference general session on August 22. As you spend time with and read

through the specifics of the updated strategic plan, I invite you to keep in mind three overriding priorities so that you don't get lost in the details and so that you keep your eye on the right target. These three priorities are mission alignment, particularly in hiring; a focus on students; and strategies to share our unique light with the world. The plan goes into more detail about how we want to focus efforts in these three areas, but again, don't let those details distract your efforts to improve mission alignment in our current and future employees, to maintain a laser focus on student development, and to share our unique light with the world.

I want to discuss a few ways that our organization will need to better align with our university's strategic plan. I will not cover all objectives or action items of the plan, but instead I will highlight some updates or additions to the plan.

For example, we continue to work toward making our campus a community of belonging. I covered that aspect of the plan in detail last year, so I will not address it this year, other than to direct your attention to a devotional given at Ensign

Keith Vorkink, BYU advancement vice president, delivered this address at the university conference Advancement Summit on August 24, 2022.

College by President Dallin H. Oaks and CES Commissioner Elder Clark G. Gilbert titled “Stand Fast with Love in Proclaiming Truth.” They provided inspired answers and guidance on building a Christ-centered community here at BYU.²

Aligning to the University’s Mission

Let’s start with the first objective found in the strategic plan: “Ensure alignment with the university mission.”³ Under this strategic objective, priority areas 1.A and 1.C are new items that I believe have particular relevance for our organization.

Priority area 1.A states, “Make mission-fit hiring decisions.”⁴ Action 1.A.1 calls for each campus unit to create a written hiring document to specify how that unit will evaluate each candidate’s mission fit. Such a document would also provide measurable objectives to increase the breadth and depth of our mission-fit pools of applicants.⁵ Simply put, adopting this action step will facilitate a more deliberate process to hire new employees and new team members who understand and align with the university’s mission.

At our university, the primary objective is the development of our students, as President Worthen powerfully reminded us during the general session of university conference. Therefore, we need to ensure that our employees buy into that mission and provide the right environment for students in their work duties and responsibilities. I realize that not all of our employees have significant interactions with students, but we must ensure that all of our interactions with students are contributing to their “balanced development”⁶ and are “bathed in the light . . . of the restored gospel.”⁷

Action steps under priority area 1.C describe our need to provide training and support to increase the ability of our employees to authentically incorporate gospel truths into all student interactions. The university will provide resources to support auxiliary unit employees in this effort, and at the advancement leadership level, we will discuss if there is benefit of providing support at the advancement organization level as well. Still, I want each unit and each team to discuss, plan, and request specific resources as needed. Then I want each unit and each team to implement a plan that will, first, enhance their student interactions

to focus more on the “balanced development”⁸ of the student and, second, ensure that their interactions and relationships with students and student employees are “bathed in the light . . . of the restored gospel.”⁹

Expanding the Inspiring Learning Objective

Let’s pause for a second. Hopefully you are seeing in the updated strategic plan the focus on the three overarching priorities I listed at the start; we have already covered emphasis on university mission alignment (through mission-fit hiring) and on student focus. As we move to the second strategic objective, to “enhance the educational experience of students,”¹⁰ we see that it adds even more color and depth to our student interactions, highlighting the need for more quality experiential learning opportunities by pursuing even further the Inspiring Learning Initiative.

One key aspect of our updated objective is the now formal acknowledgement that these key student experiences can happen in student employment and internships in auxiliary settings—such as within our advancement organization. This is a big deal for a university to acknowledge that the role of educating students—the core objective—is shared by auxiliary units and not just wholly owned by academic units. This is a significant recognition and one that we in advancement should both celebrate and then lean into further.

I hope you feel both acknowledged and empowered—but also even more responsible. You have a dual mandate, first, to produce and contribute to your team and organization in whatever role you have been hired into, and, second, to assist in the balanced development of our students. These student interactions must be unique relative to what students would experience at other universities. So as we work to solve the real-world problems that we all face, we will need to model and train our students on the powerful combination of learning “by study and also by faith”¹¹ and, quoting President Kimball, on the value of using “gospel methodology.”¹² I will come back to this language later in my remarks.

My hope is that this discussion helps you to see the purpose behind our need to attract, hire, and develop mission-fit employees (our first

overarching priority), because the importance of this dual mandate necessitates us having the right employees. I trust that we will work on, discuss, and build plans to do that better.

I will discuss progress on these objectives regularly with my direct reports. If you have an experience that changes or enhances how you interact with students, I invite you to reach out and let me know. I would love to hear your experiences in aligning to these strategic objectives.

Enlarging Our Influence

Our third strategic objective addresses the final overarching priority to “enlarge the influence of a BYU education.”¹³ This objective, substantially revised from last year, has direct relevance to the advancement organization. In many ways, members of our area will be leading efforts on this objective across campus. If you were in the general session on Monday, you heard President Worthen speak about this objective at length—that BYU does not exist to build up ourselves but to benefit the world, and that we cannot “hide our unique educational candle ‘under a bushel.’”¹⁴ We know that *the* light that emanates from our unique candles is the light of Jesus Christ, and we have a responsibility of sharing His light to the world. That light is frequently shared through our students, but it also spreads as we share our story through various channels. Specific people in our organization will lead this effort; I’ll note that the majority of the members of the Strategic Communications Committee, a key part of this objective, come from the advancement organization. That said, the university will only succeed if everyone gets on board and helps to row this boat. I invite each of us to search for and find ways that we can help to share the unique light of BYU and to proselyte that effort to others across campus.

One of the great assets we have developed in that effort is the university’s messaging statement, or brand narrative, that we have titled “For the Benefit of the World.” This statement succinctly describes our message as explained in our source documents. Thank you, Jeff McClellan, and those involved in the creation of this statement; it has been a labor of love, patience, diligence, and inspiration.

I want to share with you one way in which this messaging statement has helped me to realize our unique light. One of my favorite parts of the messaging statement is this section that describes how we combine spiritual and intellectual pursuits: “belief enhances inquiry, study amplifies faith, and revelation leads to deeper understanding.”¹⁵ For much of my time at BYU, I thought of those “paired aspirations”¹⁶ as largely independent pursuits—at times I am developing myself spiritually and at others I am developing myself intellectually, and the deployment or utilization of those are independent as well. My interpretation of President Kimball’s discussion of being bilingual helped to reinforce this notion: “Your double heritage and dual concerns with the secular and the spiritual require you to be ‘bilingual.’”¹⁷ But this simple phrase from the messaging statement suggests that faith and study are mutually reinforcing and that we ought to consider them in more of an integrated fashion.

I had a recent experience that has helped to deepen and sharpen that understanding. This experience overlaps with the story of Erika Hunter that President Worthen shared in university conference. I will offer a slightly different context to that great story. In the first few weeks of August, units from across campus come and make presentations to the President’s Council as part of resource planning. In these presentations, unit leaders both report on good events of the past year as well as discuss resource needs and plans for the upcoming year.

This year in the resource planning presentation by the McKay School of Education, interim dean Kendra Hall-Kenyon shared Erika’s story of how BYU’s unique light blessed Erika to overcome an obstacle. As you recall from President Worthen’s address, Erika had accepted her first position teaching second-grade students. She shared, “On the first day, . . . I loved it! The second day, I was unsure. And by the third day, I was ready to quit. It was *so* hard!”¹⁸

Over the next few days, while wrestling with these feelings, she prayed for help. And Erika did receive an answer to her prayer. While driving to work a few weeks into the term, she was blessed to remember counsel from one of her

instructors—that she was a child of God and so were all of her students, including the ones who pushed her buttons. Erika’s instructor taught that as public school teachers, they can’t walk into a classroom and teach the gospel directly to their students, but they can always bring the Savior with them into that space.

And that answer was enough. Erika didn’t quit. With that momentary reminder of primary identity, she doubled down on class preparation with new focus, returned to the classroom with more determination and, to keep the story brief, ended up having a great experience with her class that year.

While Dean Hall-Kenyon was sharing that story, I, too, had an impression, what I believe was a gift from God that deepened my understanding of this university’s uniqueness. I have spent many hours trying to better understand President Kimball’s call to become more bilingual and how that charge can help us produce the “special glow”¹⁹ in what we do. The impression that came was that the fulfillment of that prophecy is more than just becoming accomplished in speaking both intellectually and spiritually. To use President Kimball’s language analogy, I will equate developing intellectual proficiency to speaking English and developing spiritual fluency to speaking Spanish. Those efforts are both necessary but not sufficient for the fulfillment of President Kimball’s charge. To fulfill his vision, we must learn to fully *integrate* these two languages, perhaps represented by speaking “Spanglish.” I apologize if this seems irreverent, but this was the inspiration! We must speak a language that deeply integrates our intellectual pursuits (English) with our spiritual pursuits (Spanish). Only through fully integrating our spiritual selves with our professional or worldly selves can we produce the light—the Savior’s light—that is the solution or path to all good things.

This is exactly what Erika did when she felt she couldn’t go on. She prayed for help and received the inspiration she needed, and she combined that with her training from the McKay School to have this great teaching experience. This was also exactly what she was taught by her bilingual instructors who didn’t compartmentalize

their spiritual teaching and teacher training. Her instructors didn’t consider their responsibility to spiritually strengthen their students as only a pause during class time for a spiritual thought or an opening prayer. That would be speaking English and Spanish at mutually exclusive times. These faculty members worked to integrate these two languages into something better, something more whole. Our unique light, our power, comes from the integration, the mutual reinforcing, of both belief and inquiry, faith and study, revelation and understanding. Our messaging statement succinctly articulates and teaches that principle beautifully. I am so excited to use this tool more fully in our efforts to share our unique light with the world, and I invite you to find ways to utilize this statement in how you share the BYU story both formally and informally.

Implementing Gospel Methodology

Recall the quote from the second century address used in the Action 2.A.2, which states, “Design inspiring learning activities to increase students’ ability to seek truth and solve problems through study and faith using *gospel methodology*.”²⁰ The addition of this phrase resulted in large part from something Elder David A. Bednar shared with BYU leaders in the spring of 2021. His message was primarily based on the second century address. He finished his message by asking university leaders a set of questions, one of which was this:

*At BYU in the second half of the second century, will we employ more effectively gospel methodology, concepts, and insights to address the root causes of significant problems—and thereby do what the world will not or cannot do in its own frame of reference?*²¹

That question prompted an increase in my efforts to better understand the gospel methodology, concepts, and insights that we are charged to more deeply employ.

I want to share with you an insight that has come during my endeavors to better understand gospel methodology. This ties back to my message last year about how being an employee at BYU—part of the kingdom of God—provides an

opportunity to receive an endowment of knowledge and power. Through our own personal worthiness we can access this promised knowledge and power to help solve the challenging questions and seize important but daunting opportunities. Our ability to receive inspiration in our work pursuits here at BYU through personal revelation is a gospel methodology, as President Worthen reinforced as part of his message on Monday.

What I want to discuss today is a related gospel methodology that I will define as *group revelation*. I believe that among all large universities, this methodology can only be utilized at Brigham Young University; we are uniquely positioned to employ this gospel methodology. It requires a community, a unit, or a team unified in purpose and uniformly seeking heaven's help in finding answers to their questions or problems.

Group revelation, at its core, is described in Matthew 18:19–20 which states:

If two of you shall agree on earth as touching any thing that they shall ask, it shall be done for them of my Father which is in heaven. For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them.

Key elements of the gospel methodology from this scripture include:

- You need more than one person (“two or three”).
- It requires unity of group members (“if two of you shall agree”).
- The group must petition the Lord for help (“that they shall ask”).

These principles and elements are further taught in Doctrine and Covenants 88:122, a scripture that I shared at last year's Advancement Summit. In this section, the Lord is establishing the “basic constitution”²² of the School of the Prophets—and as President Oaks once said, of the Church Educational System—as well as laying groundwork for modern-day temple worship. This verse reads:

Appoint among yourselves a teacher, and let not all be spokesmen at once; but let one speak at a time and let all

listen unto his sayings, that when all have spoken that all may be edified of all, and that every man may have an equal privilege.

The Lord is describing a setting where multiple people will be gathering to learn. This scripture also provides further aspects of the Lord's definition of unity, especially in the second half of that verse: “Let one speak at a time and let all listen unto his sayings, that when all have spoken that all may be edified of all, and that every man may have an equal privilege.” Other verses in section 88 provide further definitions or examples of His required unity.

In a talk given to newly called mission presidents in 2014, Elder Bednar provided insight into this very scripture that helps define further elements of unity and also a key principle of petitioning for heaven's help. He stated:

This is one of the Lord's powerful patterns [or might I say “methodologies”] for learning and teaching. May I suggest another way of looking at this verse: “Appoint among yourselves a teacher.” Who is the teacher? The Holy Ghost. Could it be that if you want the Holy Ghost to be the teacher, then “let not all [speak] at once, but let one speak at a time and let all listen unto his sayings, that when all have spoken, that all may be edified of all”? The only one that can produce that edification is the Holy Ghost.

*Interacting to edify invites revelation.*²³

I love the phrase “interacting to edify.” This concept is an essential element of the group-revelation gospel methodology, and it stands in stark contrast to group interactions that I have been involved in at other universities who adopt secular methodologies to solve problems.

Here is one representative example. Soon after joining a school back East, I attended a research seminar where a faculty member from another university had come to present his research to our faculty. In the course of this presentation, I noticed a problem in his approach and statistical methods, and I shared these thoughts with the presenter during the seminar. It proved to be a problematic error for the visiting faculty member's research, and by the end of the seminar, everyone knew the

research conclusions of the scholar could not be made given that error.

Later that day, my colleagues congratulated me for “killing the paper”—their words, not mine. They shared with me running tallies of how many research papers they each had shot down in the public setting of a seminar. It felt wrong to me. Over time, I came to see that their group behavior or methodology seemed to be driven by a “king of the mountain” mentality, that if they were to be on top, they had to take others down. I found this culture to be quite common among my colleagues, and some argued that this was a superior methodology to get to the best research. From some perspectives, I could see their point. I have seen similar cultures or methodologies in business and other professional settings. Those interactions were not to edify, and unless those groups become willing to fundamentally change how they interact, they will never qualify to receive group revelation.

Now does the unity required by this gospel methodology mean that we all must always agree? Does it mean we have to settle for mediocre outcomes? Certainly not. The Prophet Joseph Smith once said, “The reason why men [and women] always failed to establish important measures was, because in their organization they never could agree to disagree long enough to select the pure gold from the dross by the process of investigation.”²⁴

The unity the Lord requires for group revelation does not necessitate that we never disagree. His conditions are more fundamental than governing the specifics of our interactions. His requirements speak more to the conditions of our hearts and minds. In our 2017 university conference, Elder Bednar offered another helpful insight into the unity required for group revelation; his counsel applies to all members of a group or team but particularly to team leaders and directors. He spoke of the needed role of meekness:

Meekness is not weak, timid, or passive. Meekness is the quality of being God-fearing, righteous, teachable, patient in suffering, and willing to follow gospel teachings. A meek person is not easily provoked or irritated, pretentious, arrogant, or overbearing. . . . A

*distinguishing characteristic of meekness is a particular willingness to learn both from the Holy Ghost and from other people who may seem less experienced or capable, may not hold prominent positions, or otherwise may not appear to have much to contribute.*²⁵

Does this help you to further see the sort of unity required to qualify for group revelation?

We can’t go into team or group meetings with personal agendas—we have to move beyond this. This holds true for all of our members but perhaps especially for our leaders and managers. We are required to do our homework and to come ready to contribute, but our goal for the interaction should be to interact to edify. We can discuss and debate the particular issue in a way that qualifies our group for the guidance and direction of the Holy Ghost. Our purpose is not to ensure that our agenda wins or that another team member’s agenda does not. The Lord may intend to only speak through the most junior member of the group or team, and He may withhold His direction unless the whole team creates an environment where that junior member can both receive revelation and feel comfortable sharing it, and where the group can accept the junior member’s comments as revelation.

Interacting to Edify

I find value in visualizing what meekness, unity, and edification might look like in a group setting. I think of a group sitting at a round table, and I consider what their interaction looks like. Sometimes group members might metaphorically spread out their elbows and take a wide stance—in part to defend their spot at the table, to keep others from having a seat, or perhaps to keep others from having an equal seat at the table. If you are inclined to do that, I invite you to stop. Pull in your elbows and make room for all. Other group members might prefer to sit back away from the table, do their own thing, and not engage. They might feel distant from the group or feel that they haven’t been listened to before, so why should they engage now? If you are inclined to be this person, I also invite you to stop. Take your seat at the table, be involved in the discussion, and help establish a setting where the group

culture is to “let one speak at a time and let all listen unto his sayings, that when all have spoken that all may be edified of all.”²⁶

More than a simple set of tactics to implement, the Lord is instructing us to know and love those around the table regardless of any professional or personal identity. He asks us to love them while also loving God and looking to Him for His direction. The settings in which we can implement this are varied; please don’t think of my example of all sitting around a table as the only manifestation of group interaction but instead as a metaphor of groups or teams interacting.

Let me add one more visual to that round table setting that ties into our strategic plan. What if one or more of those metaphorical seats around the table were saved for our students to sit at? I don’t think I can envision a greater bilingual training center for our students than a group setting where engaged, well-trained but also faithful and meek colleagues are gathered together to counsel, learn, disagree, and wrestle to solve a really hard problem or answer a difficult question—petitioning for the Lord’s help in that process.

We don’t invite students to the table because of their résumé, but their seat at the table signals our focus on their development and equally signals to the Lord our dependence on Him. I believe that if we do so, there will be times when the needed group revelation will come through our students and only because that student had a seat at our table. I also believe that this setting is truly a manifestation of “speaking Spanglish”—wholly integrated professional or academic engagement blending with a humble acknowledgement of God’s omniscience and a desire to be led by Him and His Son.

Of course, I don’t suggest we bring students into all of our councils or all of our team meetings, but I am confident that it can apply to many settings, and likely to more than we might currently think.

If we can truly gather together in the spirit of unity and look to our Savior for guidance, we can tap into power and knowledge that *can only be gained* by employing this gospel methodology. In a recent question-and-answer session with President Dallin H. Oaks and President Henry B.

Eyring on the power of counseling in councils, President Eyring commented on the Savior’s willingness to direct our groups. He said:

Councils are about revelation. . . .

I really think He [the Savior] does have an opinion on everything. Remember, the Savior told Samuel to “write it down.” This shows a little detail, that what Samuel recorded, He had a view. I tend to think He’s probably that way about everything.²⁷

The Savior stands ready to offer revelation as we employ this gospel methodology of university-directed group revelation that *we would not qualify for if we were petitioning as a collection of independent individuals.*

Meeting Challenges, Spreading Light

As an advancement organization, we face many seemingly overwhelming problems and challenges. To meet these challenges, we need the greater knowledge and power that can come when we qualify to receive revelation as a group. I know that University Communications and Alumni and External Relations face the massively difficult challenge of leading the university’s efforts to more effectively and broadly communicate our unique message. Athletics has the almost impossible task of trying to share BYU’s unique light in the world of NCAA athletics while also transitioning into a power conference, all while the landscape of intercollegiate athletics is simultaneously changing under their feet. BYUtv and BYU Broadcasting are working tirelessly to find ways to reach more people and move them toward the Savior. Philanthropies faces the daunting challenge of staying aligned to Church direction and priorities while efficiently deploying its resources. We will only be able to summit these mountains using every gospel methodology at our disposal.

Our ability to produce the prophesied “unique light”²⁸ will in large part be determined by our willingness to embrace unique methodologies, concepts, and insights that can reflect the Savior’s light. We need the courage and faith of everyone on campus to accomplish this—all of our employees and all of our students.

The Prophet Joseph Smith once spoke of the power that will come to communities that can master this methodology of group revelation:

*Could we all come together with one heart and one mind in perfect faith the veil might as well be rent today as next week or any other time and if we will but cleanse ourselves and covenant before God, to serve Him.*²⁹

I have only briefly introduced this gospel methodology. I hope you will spend time yourself trying to better understand how our groups, teams, and units can and must more fully access the Lord's power and knowledge. Please make this coming year a year in which you seek and qualify for personal revelation as well as contribute to group revelation. Take your proper seat at the table and invite others to do so as well.

As we incorporate gospel methodology into our professional work in a "Spanglish" holistic manner and increasingly work shoulder to shoulder with our students, this university's unique light—the light of Jesus Christ—can help us to solve our current problems and challenges. And as the light continues to grow, it will emanate from our campus to the world, and the Savior's peace and joy will come to those who follow Him. That we may have the courage and conviction to do so is my prayer, in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

Notes

1. See the Mission of Brigham Young University (4 November 1981); the Aims of a BYU Education (1 March 1995); Spencer W. Kimball, "The Second Century of Brigham Young University," BYU devotional address, 10 October 1975; Spencer W. Kimball, "Education for Eternity," pre-school address to BYU faculty and staff, 12 September 1967; Jeffrey R. Holland, "A School in Zion," BYU university conference address, 22 August 1988; Dallin H. Oaks, "A House of Faith," BYU university conference address, 31 August 1977.

2. See Clark G. Gilbert and Dallin H. Oaks, "Stand Fast with Love in Proclaiming Truth," Ensign College devotional address, 17 May 2022.

3. Updated BYU Strategic Plan (6 June 2022), section 1.

4. BYU Strategic Plan, 1.A.

5. BYU Strategic Plan, Action 1.A.1.

6. Mission of BYU.

7. Kimball, "Education for Eternity."

8. Mission of BYU.

9. Kimball, "Education for Eternity."

10. BYU Strategic Plan, section 2.

11. Doctrine and Covenants 88:118.

12. Kimball, "Second Century."

13. BYU Strategic Plan, section 3.

14. Kevin J. Worthen, "This Is a Student," BYU university conference address, 22 August 2022; quoting Matthew 5:15.

15. "For the Benefit of the World," BYU Core Brand Message, 10 August 2022.

16. James R. Rasband, "Paired Aspirations," BYU devotional address, 28 August 2017.

17. Kimball, "Second Century."

18. Personal correspondence between Sarah K. Clark and Erika Hunter; see also Worthen, "This Is a Student."

19. Kimball, "Second Century."

20. BYU Strategic Plan, Action 2.A.2, emphasis added.

21. David A. Bednar, "Look unto Me in Every Thought; Doubt Not, Fear Not," BYU leadership meeting address, 16 April 2021, emphasis added.

22. Oaks, "House of Faith."

23. David A. Bednar, "Learning in the Lord's Way," seminar for new mission presidents, 25 June 2014, *Ensign*, October 2018.

24. Joseph Smith, Nauvoo, Illinois, in "Minutes and Discourse, 4 April 1844," 81, josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/minutes-and-discourse-4-april-1844/8.

25. David A. Bednar, "Walk in the Meekness of My Spirit," BYU university conference address, 28 August 2017, emphasis added.

26. Doctrine and Covenants 88:122.

27. Sydney Walker, "Eight Questions with President Oaks and President Eyring About Revelation in Councils," *Leaders and Ministry, Church News*, thechurchnews.com/2022/2/3/23218864.

28. Kimball, "Second Century."

29. Joseph Smith, Orange Township, Ohio, "Minutes, 25–26 October 1831," 11, josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/minutes-25-26-october-1831/2.