

# *Keeping the Gospel Simple*

GLEN L. RUDD

## **Matthew Cowley**

Many years ago I went on a mission to New Zealand, and the day I arrived I had the opportunity of meeting President Matthew Cowley for the first time. He was to be my mission president. During the next two years we became close friends, and during the latter part of my mission I had the honor of living in the mission home with the Cowleys and traveling with President Cowley throughout New Zealand.

He was an excellent teacher and a most interesting person. Some years later, while he was a member of the Council of the Twelve Apostles, I had the opportunity of bringing him here to BYU on two or three occasions when he was the speaker at devotionals. Everyone loved to hear him and his stories. Even though he has been gone for over thirty-four years, there are people in many parts of the Church still interested in the faith-promoting stories he used to tell. As I have prepared to come here today, I have been reminded over and over of the inspirational talks he gave to the students who were here. Those students might have been your parents—and for some, even your grandparents.

Over and above everything else, President Cowley tried to keep simple the things he taught. In fact, he said many times that he was unable to speak very often of things beyond the first principles of the gospel. I remember well that he spoke about prayer, faith, and repentance. For several years he had a talk ready on baptism, but he was never able to get that far along and give it. He had some ideas on baptism that he wanted to give in general conference, but life ran out before he gave his special talk on baptism. He lived simply. He really didn't concern himself with his own personal needs. He only wanted to bless people and inspire them to live the gospel in a simple way.

Because of his great faith, many wonderful things continued to happen after our missions were over. We found ourselves blessing people all over who called for him. I was a very young bishop in those days who had a rather difficult time earning a living because President

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Cowley would insist I leave work and go with him. After we would bless people, he would fast and pray for them and return again and again to those who needed him. We saw great miracles happen in those days. My testimony to you students is that miracles do happen! They are happening on the earth today, and they will continue to happen, particularly to those who believe and have great faith. Miracles occur frequently in the lives of humble, fine Saints who have the faith to make them possible. My feeling about miracles is that the greatest of all miracles is the one that happens in the life of a person who really learns how to pray, who exercises faith to repent, and who lives the gospel in a simple and obedient way.

President Matthew Cowley said many times, "The gospel of Jesus Christ is simply beautiful and beautifully simple." He spent his whole life trying to explain that there isn't anything very complicated about the Church. In fact, most of the Church leaders whom I have known have taught the same thing. Many of us complicate simple things to the point of causing confusion. The Savior has always been direct and plain in giving commandments to us. I am convinced that understanding increases when we talk or teach in a direct and simple way. For instance, we are told to do missionary work by the Spirit. We could complicate this by writing books on how to follow the Spirit in missionary work, but that is really unnecessary because the Lord has a manner of communicating with us in a very simple way. Generally, all that a person has to do is pray in faith and wait for the answer. Sometimes he needs to do a little more than just wait, but the more simple he can keep his prayers, the more simple and more direct the answer will be.

Now, let me say a little more about Matthew Cowley. He was a very uncomplicated man. Some who couldn't understand his simplicity became confused about the things he was able to do and found it difficult to

understand him. I had the opportunity of being his close associate for fifteen years. After he died, some people asked me to explain Matthew Cowley to them. One man in a high position said, "I just can't understand how he did all the things he did." The real answer was that he went directly to the Lord, told the Lord what he wanted, and received the answer. There wasn't anything hard about that. He just did it.

President Cowley was different from mission presidents today. Mission presidents in this day and age are well-organized in order to hold district and zone meetings and all the necessary appointments and interviews. They have almost every day planned weeks in advance. Brother Cowley never planned anything. He just lived by the Spirit of the Lord.

As his traveling companion in the mission field, I received instructions from him to keep my briefcase packed with a couple of clean shirts, clean socks, and clean underwear. Then he said, "When I say, 'We're going,' you grab your bag, beat me to the car, and don't ask any questions." When that would happen, I would grab my bag and go to the car. Being a young, eager missionary, I would wonder, "Where are we going now?" But I didn't ask.

Once, after we had driven a few miles, he asked, "Would you like to know where we're going?" I said, "Yes." Then he said, "So would I! I'm not sure just where we're going, but we'll keep going. And when the Lord tells us to turn, we'll turn, and we'll end up where he wants us to be."

The Maori people used to pray for President Cowley to come to them. One day he drove up to the front of a post office in a rather distant city in New Zealand. There were two sisters standing by the post office waiting. When he got out of the car, one said to the other, "See, I told you he would be here soon." President Cowley said, "Hey, what's going on here?" One of the sisters said, "We needed you and we've been praying. We knew you would

be coming, and you always go directly to the post office, so we decided to wait here until you arrived." It was just that simple. People would tell the Lord what they wanted, and somehow or other President Cowley was led by the Spirit to go where they were. Now, he wasn't totally disorganized, but I have never known anyone who planned less and accomplished more, simply by doing the things he felt impressed to do.

During the last several months, while I have been speaking at stake conferences, I have had difficulty myself getting past the simple principles of personal and family prayer, faith, and repentance. I believe in these things. I think they are as plain and simple as anything in the whole world can possibly be. I am going to tell you four simple stories about *prayer, faith, repentance, and baptism*.

### **Prayer**

Prayer is the way we talk to the Lord. We bow before him and in humble prayer pour out the feelings of our hearts, thank him, and ask him for special blessings. If we have simple faith, those answers will come.

Just to illustrate this, one day when President Cowley and I were traveling, we arrived at the home of Brother Stewart Meha, a great and wonderful Maori man. He was in every way a pure patriarch. He had never been ordained a patriarch—he just was one, and he presided over his large family as a true father and leader. President Cowley and Brother Meha spent all afternoon sitting on the porch just talking about the Church and other interesting things. I listened to them part of the time and then visited with the kids and others who lived in this little area near Brother Meha's home. Incidentally, there were two or three other homes in this little Maori village, but I discovered that most of the people living there belonged to his family. They were his children and his grandchildren.

When it came time for the evening meal, Brother Meha stood on his front porch and, in the Maori language, shouted out to all of his large family, "Haere Mai Ki Te Kai." Then he said, "Haere Mai Ki Te Karakia." This simply meant "Come on home for supper" and "Come on home for prayer." Soon family members came from every direction. We all assembled in his home in the big front room. This room had very little furniture in it, and everybody gathered in a large circle. Brother Meha was at the head of the circle and on his left was President Cowley. I was next to the president. On Brother Meha's right was a little child about eight years of age. All around the rest of the circle were the other children with some adults in between.

Finally Brother Meha said to the little boy on his right, "You start." I bowed my head in anticipation of the little boy's prayer. Instead of praying, he quoted a scripture, after first reciting the chapter and verse. Then the young person next to him gave a scripture with the reference. After about four scriptures had been given, I realized that we were going around the circle with each person quoting a different passage of scripture. One youngster started to quote one that had already been used, and he was quickly corrected. I immediately began to think of a scripture that I could quote when my turn came.

I had been in the mission field just a little over a year and had mastered two wonderful passages of scripture. I mentally polished up my first scripture and had no sooner silently rehearsed it than one of the young people gave that exact scripture. This, of course, slowed me down for a minute, but I thought I was okay because I still had one in reserve. I worked a little on it, only to hear someone directly across from me quote it. I then became panicky as I realized I could not think of another scripture I could give. My turn was coming closer and closer, and I felt tension building up within me. My mind went totally blank.

In my moment of greatest concern, President Cowley nudged me with his elbow and, out of the side of his mouth, said, “Quick—tell me a scripture. I can’t think of a single one to say.” I then realized that the two of us were in the same desperate situation. At that moment it was my turn. I bravely said the first article of faith. President Cowley followed by quoting the second article of faith, and then Brother Meha prayed. I think that night he prayed for the mission president and the missionaries a little more than usual. When the prayer was finished, a little boy about eight years of age came over to us and said, “I guess you two guys don’t know that the Articles of Faith are not allowed in our scripture study.”

Now, brothers and sisters, that was an excellent example to me of family prayer and how children can be taught the scriptures. If we would just gather together and have prayer, it would probably be the finest teaching experience that a mother and father could give to their children. Prayers do not need to be long or complicated. They only need to be simple and sincere. If we want to talk to the Lord, we do it through prayer. If we listen with faith, we will hear his answers. We can also search the scriptures, for in the scriptures we are given in an uncomplicated way the answers to the things we need to know. Prayer is simple and should remain that way.

### **Faith**

Now let me say something to you about faith. Faith is the first principle of the gospel. Faith is a gift from our Heavenly Father. No one seems to have enough faith. It is hard to tell how much we have, but we all need a little bit more. The faith of most of us seems to come and go. Faith is simply knowing that the Lord is there and that he will keep his promises to those who humbly approach him.

Let me tell you an unusual experience that happened to me personally while I was presiding over the old Florida mission about twenty

years ago. It all started when I received a letter written in Spanish. Upon reading the translated letter, I learned it was from a young member of the Church—a sister twenty or twenty-one years of age, Flavia Salazar Gomez—who was living in the city of Santiago in the Dominican Republic. I understood that Santiago at that time had close to 200,000 inhabitants. It is located about ninety miles north of Santo Domingo, which is the main city in that country.

Flavia stated in her letter that she had joined the Church when she was about twelve. Her sisters and mother had also joined the Church, and she had been very active in Mexico. Later on, she had fallen in love with a Dominican boy, married him, and gone with him to the Dominican Republic to live. Flavia thought she was the only Latter-day Saint in the whole country of five million people. She mentioned in her letter that she had a year-old baby boy who had not been named or blessed by the priesthood. She wrote that she was seriously ill with cancer and had been told by doctors that she did not have very long to live. She asked if it would be possible for someone holding the priesthood to come to Santiago and give her a blessing.

I wrote her back and told her we would get there as soon as possible. It wasn’t long before I was to go to a district conference in Puerto Rico. There was one Latter-day Saint family living in Santo Domingo—Brother and Sister Dale Valentine and their children. Brother Valentine was an elder, and they were a good, active, fine Latter-day Saint family. I wrote Brother Valentine and asked if he would take me to Santiago so we could find and bless Flavia.

I took Elder Gert Forestor with me and flew into the Dominican Republic. Brother Valentine and one of his children met us at the airport in Santo Domingo, and early the next morning all four of us got into his station wagon and drove up to the city of Santiago. It was a rather long

ride because the highway was crooked and traffic was quite heavy.

When we arrived at the outskirts of Santiago, Brother Valentine asked me where she lived. At that moment we realized that none of us knew exactly where she lived. We didn't have a street address for her. All I knew was her name and that she was hoping we would come. We stopped the car for a few minutes on a high point overlooking the city. I told Brother Valentine to drive his car down into the city and turn left. He obediently drove on. I then told him to make a right turn and proceed toward the center of this large, congested city. As we drove down this busy street, we began looking for a parking place. But there was none to be found. After traveling several more blocks, Brother Valentine said, "What can we possibly do to find her?" I said, "Go to the next corner, make a right turn, and after you turn you will find an empty parking place."

He drove to the corner and made the right turn. There in front of us in the second or third slot was an open place where he parked the car. We got out of the car and stood on the sidewalk. He said, "Now what do we do?" I said, "Let's just start asking people." Brother Valentine just looked at me as if I had lost all my marbles. I wasn't sure myself, but I had a feeling we were okay.

There was a man on the sidewalk leaning up against the front of a residence. Brother Valentine went over to him, spoke in Spanish, and asked if he knew Flavia Salazar Gomez. The man looked at him in surprise and said, "Yes, she's my wife. She's just inside that door." We had parked in front of their home.

Her husband went in, and she came out onto the sidewalk with her little baby boy. We were pleased to see what a lovely person she was. We were invited into their humble little home. I asked Brother Valentine to interview her and see how close to the Church she had remained. We were delighted to know that she was still living the Word of Wisdom and that

she prayed every day. Of course, she had no church to attend and was unable to make any contributions to the Church, but she felt she was a good, faithful member. She asked if President David O. McKay was still alive and well and asked a few other questions about the Church. It had been at least two years since she had left Mexico, and during that time she had been out of contact with the Church. We named and blessed the little boy, and then I requested Brother Valentine give her a blessing in Spanish. I felt impressed to tell him to bless her that she would recover from her cancerous condition and become well. After the blessing and a brief visit, we drove back to the city of Santo Domingo.

A month or two later, I heard from Brother Valentine that Flavia and her husband had moved into Santo Domingo. Six months later, as I was on my way to Puerto Rico again, I stopped over in Santo Domingo, and Brother Valentine drove me out to where Flavia and her husband were living. We found her in good health, looking well and happy. She told us she had been completely cured. The doctors told her she no longer had cancer, and it seemed she was going to be all right from then on. They were delighted to see us again. It was a great thrill to meet this lovely Latter-day Saint sister and realize the blessings of the Lord that had come to her.

Actually, what happened was that this lovely, young Mexican mother needed a priesthood blessing. She knew there was no way to get one except to ask the Lord to help her. She very simply wrote a letter to the mission president, who she didn't know. The mission president read her letter and immediately did the thing that the Lord told him to do. He arranged to go and answer her need. It was just that simple. There may be those who question such things as this, but they happen all the time. Almost any priesthood leader, if he thinks for a moment, can tell you how faith has led him to do things that he hadn't planned to do.

## Repentance

Repentance is just about as simple as prayer and faith. All that a person really has to do to repent is to quit doing what is wrong and then make amends as much as he can to rectify the problems he has created. Then he must tell the Lord about it, and sometimes he needs to tell the bishop or the branch president, but it can all be handled in a simple, practical way. Repentance is understood by some people to be a long, drawn-out process. That is absolutely not necessary. We just quit doing what is wrong, make up for it in the best possible way, and let the Lord do his part. He has promised that when a man repents, he is forgiven. If he does not commit the wrong again, the Lord will not even remember it. Let me read from section 58 of the Doctrine and Covenants, verses 42 and 43:

*Behold, he who has repented of his sins, the same is forgiven, and I, the Lord, remember them no more.*

*By this ye may know if a man repenteth of his sins—behold, he will confess them and forsake them.*

Nothing is more direct or simple than that scripture.

Now, let me tell you an interesting story about repentance. There was a man by the name of Syd who lived in a little Maori village on the east coast of New Zealand. At that time a large branch of the Church was there with about 400 members. One Saturday afternoon after a long, eight-hour drive, President Cowley arrived at this village and went directly to see his old friend Syd. As a young man, Syd had been an outstanding athlete. Some missionaries had taken him to America, where he attended high school and some college. He became a well-known basketball player and, as an all-star athlete, he received a lot of publicity. His picture was in the papers many times, and everybody knew about this

fine athlete from New Zealand. He was ordained a seventy while he lived here, but when he went back to New Zealand he found he was the only seventy in the whole country. He didn't have a quorum to belong to, and he became somewhat inactive. The first thing he knew, he was tampering with the Word of Wisdom and was in the habit of taking it easy. But deep within his heart he still knew the gospel to be true.

Now, as mission president and as friend, President Cowley called on Syd. Let me explain that among the Maori members and the missionaries, President Cowley was known as "Tumuaki," a word of utmost respect meaning "president" or "beloved leader" in the Maori language. "Tumuaki" found Syd sitting in a rocking chair on his front porch smoking a big cigar. He didn't stop chewing on his cigar as President Cowley sat beside him to visit. After they had talked and laughed for a while, President Cowley became serious and said, "Syd, I want you to come to church tomorrow."

They both looked toward the old chapel that was nearby, and Syd said, "I think it would fall in! I haven't been there for a long time. I don't think I'd better risk it."

President Cowley said, "Syd, I want you to be there. I'm going to do something important tomorrow."

Syd inquired, "What are you going to do?"

President Cowley answered, "I'm going to release the branch president and put in a new one."

Syd said, "Why don't you just tell me who the new branch president will be, and then I won't have to get myself cleaned up for church in the morning."

President Cowley said, "Well, I'll tell you who it is. It's going to be you."

Syd had that old cigar in his mouth. He pulled it out and looked at it and said, "Tumuaki, you mean me and my cigar?"

President Cowley said, "No, Syd—just you. We don't need your cigar."

Then Syd threw the cigar out on the ground in front of the porch. He thought for a moment, turned to President Cowley, and very humbly said, "Tumuaki, I don't break the Word of Wisdom anymore. I'm a full-tithe payer. I'll be the branch president, and I'll be worthy. Tomorrow morning I'll be there, and I promise you that I'll be the best branch president in the whole country. You won't have to worry about me and whether or not I'm living the gospel."

For the next several years, Syd served as one of the strongest and finest leaders in New Zealand. His son became the first bishop in the ward when the stake was created, and his grandson was just recently released as bishop. His whole family is strong and active in the Church today and is one of the great families in New Zealand. Why? Because old Syd knew how to repent. He repented on the spot. When he was called to repentance, he quit his worldly ways. He became and remained a faithful Saint until the day he died.

Now, that's all there is to repentance. You see how simple that really was? President Cowley never did ask Syd to repent. He gave him an opportunity to be of service to the Church. He gave him a priesthood calling. Syd knew he could no longer sin, so he immediately quit. It was over—just like that! The Lord accepted his repentance, and Syd became a great leader.

### **Baptism**

Now, baptism and confirmation are just as simple as prayer and faith and repentance. Baptism is simply doing what the Savior has told us to do. Go before the priesthood, be baptized by immersion, and receive the Holy Ghost through the laying on of hands. These ordinances do not need to be complicated.

I don't have time to tell you much about baptism except to tell you that it has to be done exactly right. There was an interesting old Maori man in New Zealand who loved to baptize people. In fact, as he grew older he did a most unusual thing. He would go down to the ocean, gather up all the kids who were playing on the beach, and take them out in the water one by one and baptize them. This is *not* the way we do baptisms in the Church! None of the kids was ever confirmed and nothing ever came of his baptisms, but all the missionaries knew him and loved him. They called him "Cannonball." He was a funny old Maori man who had a great heart and loved the Lord. The elders finally got him to quit baptizing.

My whole purpose in telling you these stories today is to bear testimony to you that simplicity is possible. Almost every principle and every doctrine of the Church can be made simple if we make the effort. It is absolutely possible to live righteously and properly in a simple way.

The Lord knows how to hear our prayers—so pray!

The Lord knows how to give us faith—so ask him for faith!

The Lord knows how to help us repent—so repent as needed!

In the most simple way I know, I bear to you my humble witness that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and the head of this church. Today a great man stands before us as our president. He is a living prophet of the Lord. May we all sustain him, support him, and be the kind of followers of Christ that we ought to be. This I humbly pray, and I leave my blessings upon each and every one of you, in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.