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Abstract: How can we as teachers of the restored gospel effectively teach the sublime and deep doctrine of the Atonement? How have the prophets done so? And what can we learn from them? Although prophets through the ages have reflected varying talents and unique teaching skills, certain underlying principles occur again and again in their teaching ministries. Set forth below are some teaching techniques and resources used by the prophets to explain the atoning doctrine and its infinite implications.



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Heinrich Hofmann (1824—1911) painting, Christ in Gethsemane

Teaching the Atonement

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How can we as teachers of the restored gospel effectively teach the sublime and deep doctrine of the Atonement?

How have the prophets done so? And what can we learn from them?¹

Although prophets through the ages have reflected varying talents and unique teaching skills, certain underlying principles occur again and again in their teaching ministries. Set forth below are some teaching techniques and resources used by the prophets to explain the atoning doctrine and its infinite implications.

A Spiritual Shot across the Bow

King Benjamin called his subjects together—but not for a day of entertainment. If any had come with spiritual thimbles to receive his words, he was quick to inform them of the need for much larger receptacles: “I have not commanded you to come up hither to trifle with the words which I shall speak, but that you should hearken unto me, and open your ears that ye may hear, and your hearts that ye may understand, and your minds that the mysteries of God may be unfolded to your view” (Mosiah 2:9; emphasis added). His introduction was a warning shot that ears needed to be spiritually attuned and hearts softened to receive the message of supernal import that was about to follow. He then gave one of the most masterful sermons ever delivered on the Atonement. Years later, Elder Bruce R.

McConkie began his never-to-be-forgotten sermon on the atoning sacrifice with these profound words: “I feel, and the Spirit seems to accord, that the most important doctrine I can declare, and the most powerful testimony I can bear, is of the atoning sacrifice of the Lord Jesus Christ.”² Just like King Benjamin, he first set the stage before launching into his inspired message. As a result, ears perked up, minds became more focused, and hearts yielded to receive the spiritual reservoir that was about to be released. The impact of these messages was life-changing for many. Those who heard the words of King Benjamin cried with one accord, “We believe all the words thou hast spoken unto us; and . . . we have no more disposition to do evil, but to do good continually” (Mosiah 5:2).

These prophets began their sermons by firing a spiritual shot across the bow. It was a warning, a wake-up call, that the message to follow deserved far more than the listener’s casual attention. It required an intense alertness of all his spiritual faculties. Why? Because these prophets knew that the beautiful but difficult doctrine of the Atonement can be comprehended only by the spiritually prepared. Their messages are poignant reminders of the spiritual tone we ought to set before we commence teaching what Robert L. Millet calls “the doctrine of doctrines.”³

Laying the Groundwork

A person could never master calculus without first mastering algebra. A certain order of events is required in the learning process. Isaiah taught, “Whom shall he teach knowledge? and whom shall he make to understand doctrine?” Then, he gave the simple but profound formula for mastering the doctrines of the Church: “precept upon precept; line upon line” (Isaiah 28:9–10). President Ezra Taft Benson taught, “No one adequately and properly knows why he needs Christ until he understands and accepts the doctrine of the Fall and its effect upon all mankind.”⁴

Students quickly learn the impossibility of adequately comprehending the Atonement without first understanding the Fall. Lehi gave a magnificent discourse on the Atonement (see 2 Nephi 2). In the course of it, he first explained the conditions that existed in the Garden of Eden. Then, he followed his introduction with a succinct summary of why the Savior came: “The Messiah cometh in the fulness of time, that he may redeem the children of men from the fall” (2 Nephi 2:26). Thus, we learn that the Atonement was neces-

sary to correct certain conditions brought about by the Fall (that is, physical and spiritual death). Alma, in counseling his wayward son Corianton, discerned, “I perceive there is somewhat more which doth worry your mind, which ye cannot understand—which is concerning the justice of God in the punishment of the sinner.” Then, he said, “Now behold, my son, I will explain this thing unto thee” (Alma 42:1–2). In the next eleven verses, Alma laid the groundwork for his answer by detailing the conditions in the Garden of Eden and the consequences of the Fall. Only then did he proceed to explain the relationships among justice, mercy, and the Atonement.

Because of the need to understand the Fall before we can fully comprehend the purposes of the Atonement, I have found the following chart useful in helping students grasp how the Atonement

Before the Fall	After the Fall	After the Atonement
1. Immortality (+) Genesis 2:17	1. Mortality (-) Genesis 2:17	1. Resurrection (+) (unconditional for all) 1 Corinthians 15:20–22
2. Lived in God’s presence (+) Genesis 3:8, Moses 4:14	2. Spiritual death (-) a. First spiritual death (born outside God’s presence) D&C 29:41; 2 Nephi 9:6 b. Second spiritual death (separated from God because of individual sin) Alma 34:15–16; Alma 42:13–16	2. Overcame spiritual death (+) a. Unconditional because everyone returns to God’s presence for judgement purposes 2 Nephi 2:10; 2 Nephi 9:38; Alma 12:15; Alma 42:23; Helaman 14:15–18; Mormon 9:12–14 b. Conditional because second spiritual death is overcome only if we repent Helaman 14:15–18 Moroni 9:12–14
3. Innocent (-) 2 Nephi 2:23	3. Knowledge of good and evil (+) Genesis 3:5; Alma 42:3	3. Unlimited knowledge of good and evil (+) John 14:26
4. Childless (-) 2 Nephi 2:23	4. Children (+) 2 Nephi 2:25; Moses 5:11	4. Children forever (+) D&C 132:19

The Book of Mormon Comes to the Rescue

The doctrines of the Fall and the Atonement are the centerpiece of Christianity, yet many misconceptions exist concerning their

underlying principles because the Bible, as inspired as it is, has had “many plain and precious things taken away” (1 Nephi 13:28) from its original manuscripts. As a result, “an exceedingly great many do stumble, yea, insomuch that Satan hath great power over them” (1 Nephi 13:29). Elder Bruce R. McConkie once offered this challenge: “Choose the one hundred most basic doctrines of the gospel, and under each doctrine make two parallel columns, one headed Bible and the other Book of Mormon. Then place in these columns what each book of scripture says about each doctrine. The end result will show, without question, that in ninety-five of the one hundred cases, the Book of Mormon teaching is clearer, plainer, more expansive, and better than the biblical word. If there is any question in anyone’s mind about this, let him take the test—a personal test.”⁵

Nowhere is this invitation more applicable than with respect to the Atonement. Without the Book of Mormon, many misconceptions have arisen in the Christian world on this keystone doctrine. For example:

First misconception: Many teach that Adam and Eve would have had children in the Garden of Eden if they had been allowed to remain. After their transgression in the garden, the Lord said that “in sorrow thou shalt bring forth children” (Genesis 3:16). Accordingly, some have interpreted this to mean that if no transgression had occurred, Adam and Eve would have had children without sorrow in the Garden of Eden. But the Book of Mormon reveals the truth: “And they would have had no children” (2 Nephi 2:23; see also Moses 5: 11).

Second misconception: Some teach that Adam and Eve were living in a state of bliss—of unparalleled joy—in the garden. Again, the Book of Mormon teaches the truth: “They would have remained in a state of innocence, having no joy, for they knew no misery” (2 Nephi 2:23). As a result of the first two misconceptions, much of the Christian world believes the Fall was a tragic step backward. They have innocently, but incorrectly, concluded that if Adam had not fallen, all of us would have been born in the Garden of Eden and thereafter lived in a state of eternal bliss. Such reasoning, however, would have negated the need for the Atonement, an event that was foreordained in the premortal life (see Ether 3:14). John so witnessed when he spoke of the Savior as “the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world” (Revelation 13:8).

Third misconception: There are those who teach that because of the Fall, all infants are tainted with original sin. Mormon gave a

scathing rebuke to those who so believed: “I know that it is solemn mockery before God, that ye should baptize little children.” He quoted the Savior in explaining the reason why: “The curse of Adam is taken from them in me, that it hath no power over them” (Moroni 8: 8, 9).

Fourth misconception: Some people believe that grace alone can save us, regardless of any works on our part. Nephi puts the doctrines of faith and works in their proper perspective: “For we know that it is by grace that we are saved, after all we can do” (2 Nephi 25:23; emphasis added). We do not earn our salvation, but Nephi taught we must contribute the best we have to offer. C. S. Lewis hit the nail on the head while discussing the age-old debate between faith and works: “It does seem to me like asking which blade in a pair of scissors is most necessary.”⁶

Fifth misconception: Another fallacy is that the physical Resurrection of the Savior is merely symbolic and that we will be resurrected without the “limitations” of a physical body. Alma, however, left no doubt about the corporeal nature of the Resurrection: “The soul shall be restored to the body, and the body to the soul . . . yea, even a hair of the head shall not be lost” (Alma 40:23).

Sixth misconception: Many people teach that the Atonement does not have the power to transform us into gods; in fact, according to them, such a thought is blasphemous. The Savior Himself, however, extended the divine challenge: “What manner of men ought ye to be? Verily I say unto you, even as I am” (3 Nephi 27: 27). The concluding chapter in the Book of Mormon then reinforces this lofty doctrine: “Yea, come unto Christ, and be perfected in him . . . by the grace of God, through the shedding of the blood of Christ” (Moroni 10:32–33).

Although Nephi knew that many plain and precious truths would be deleted from the Bible, he likewise knew that the Book of Mormon, among other sacred writings, would come to the rescue: “These last records, which thou hast seen among the Gentiles, shall establish the truth of the first, which are of the twelve apostles of the Lamb, and shall make known the plain and precious things which have been taken away from them” (1 Nephi 13:40).

President Ezra Taft Benson spoke of the absolute need for the Book of Mormon to comprehend the divinity and Atonement of the Savior: “Much of the Christian world today rejects the divinity of the Savior. They question His miraculous birth, His perfect life, and the reality of His glorious resurrection. The Book of Mormon teaches

in plain and unmistakable terms about the truth of all of those. It also provides the most complete explanation of the doctrine of the Atonement. Truly, this divinely inspired book is a keystone in bearing witness to the world that Jesus is the Christ.”⁷

The Book of Mormon is a gold mine for discovering the magnificent truths of the Atonement. The following are but a sample of the many chapters filled with golden nuggets for those who are willing to do some panning:

2 Nephi 2 (Lehi)	Alma 40 and 42 (Alma)
2 Nephi 9 (Jacob)	Helaman 14 (Samuel)
Mosiah 2–5 (King Benjamin)	3 Nephi 11 (the Savior)
Alma 34 (Amulek)	Moroni 10 (Moroni)

As we feast upon the words of the Book of Mormon, we will connect the spiritual dots that unveil the glorious picture of the Savior’s atoning sacrifice.

The Power of a Good Question

How is the Savior’s Atonement infinite? Did the Savior suffer for sins both in the Garden of Gethsemane and on the cross? Could He, a perfect man, understand what it is like to have weaknesses—to be rejected? Was there a backup plan if He chose not to proceed? Could a person suffer for his or her own sins and be redeemed?

The power of a good question is of inestimable worth. In many ways, it is like a mental alarm clock that awakens us out of our mental doldrums. It is a catalyst that jump-starts our mental engines. It causes the cerebral wheels to move and thrusts upon us a certain uneasiness, an anxiety that triggers a fixation on the subject at hand until relief comes only in the form of an answer that is both satisfying to the mind and acceptable to the heart. Until that answer comes, it is like staring at a crooked picture without being able to fix it or working on a puzzle with one piece missing—there is an irresistible urge to straighten the painting and a compelling urge to find and place the final piece of the puzzle in its rightful place. Until that happens, one’s mind is in overdrive—considering all the options, weighing, sifting, and sorting until the answer comes. A tremendous difference exists between being told the answer and discovering it. It is somewhat like being given a picture versus painting one, receiving a book compared to writing one, or listening to Rachmaninoff’s Piano

Concerto No. 3 versus playing it. Discovering the answer brings immense satisfaction, gives ownership, and makes a permanent deposit in our memory bank—not just some “in-and-out” entry.

There are many types of questions. There are factual questions to acquire background information. Such inquiries, however, are usually a means, not an end. For example: Where was the Savior born? How long was He in the Garden of Gethsemane? These questions are helpful in setting the stage, but in and of themselves, they do little to stir human emotions or fire human resolve. Nonetheless, a factual setting is often a necessary prerequisite to discovering the greater truths.

There are questions that elicit a self-evaluation. God’s question to Adam, “Where art thou?” (Genesis 3:9) was more than a request for Adam’s physical location. It was also an inquiry into Adam’s spiritual standing. The climax of Alma’s sermon to the people of Zarahemla consisted of eleven consecutive, introspective questions, such as, “Have ye spiritually been born of God? Have ye received his image in your countenances? Have ye experienced this mighty change in your hearts?” (Alma 5:14). A thoughtful teacher might ask similar questions that require self-evaluation of one’s faith and worthiness: Do you believe you can be totally cleansed of your sins because of the Savior’s infinite sacrifice? Do you have faith that His Atonement provides a remedy for each of your weaknesses, sins, infirmities, and shortcomings? Do you have a broken heart and a contrite spirit?

There are other questions that heighten our level of commitment. Three times the Savior asked Peter, “Lovest thou me?” (John 21:15–17). No doubt, Peter responded each time with greater passion—an even deeper commitment to the Holy One. Teachers might ask similar questions: Do we love the Savior enough to forgive others as He forgives us? Do we appreciate His sacrifice to the extent we are willing to consecrate our all in furthering His cause?”

Questions can also be effective answers. Corianton wondered why the coming of Christ “should be known so long beforehand.” The answer his father Alma gave was in the form of a series of questions: “Behold, I say unto you, is not a soul at this time as precious unto God as a soul will be at the time of his coming? Is it not as necessary that the plan of redemption should be made known unto this people as well as unto their children?” (Alma 39:17–18). Suppose a student were to ask, “Is the Atonement retroactive? Could the people of Old Testament times receive its benefits before

the purchase price was paid?” Resisting the temptation to give the instant answer, a wise teacher might respond with another question, “Do we have anything in our current society that allows us to enjoy the benefits before we pay the price?” The resulting discussion might reflect the credit card as an example. This outcome might further lead to the fact that the Savior’s credit was pure “gold” in the premortal existence because He always kept His word. Accordingly, under the laws of justice, the benefits of His Atonement could be enjoyed before the purchase price was paid because there was no doubt He would pay “the bill” when it was presented to Him in the garden and on the cross (see Alma 39 headnote and Mosiah 3: 13).

A good question can often be the springboard for an entire sermon or class discussion. So it was for Amulek who discerned “that the great question which is in your minds is whether the word be in the Son of God, or whether there shall be no Christ” (Alma 34:5). In response, Amulek delivered his wonderful sermon on the infinite nature of the Atonement.

And Then More

How does a mere mortal understand and grasp the Savior’s love and sacrifice of infinite proportions? Of course a mortal cannot fully do so. But the prophets have done their best to help bridge the gap by comparing the Atonement to two of the most passionate, loving relationships known by man and then suggesting that it is all this plus more, much more.

One example addresses the story of Abraham and Isaac. In speaking of Abraham’s sacrifice of Isaac, Jacob notes that the event was “a similitude of God and his Only Begotten Son” (Jacob 4:5; emphasis added). It would be difficult, if not impossible, for a father to contemplate a greater trial than to sacrifice his beloved son, the very one through whom the blessings of eternity were to flow. What father cannot empathize with Abraham as he bound his son and then stretched forth the knife to spill the lifeblood of this promised child? The pain must have been bitterly acute—the emotions heart wrenching—as he raised his hand to make the fatal plunge. But at such a moment, the angel of mercy released him: “Lay not thine hand upon the lad, neither do thou any thing unto him: for now I know that thou fearest God, seeing thou has not withheld thy son, thine only son from me” (Genesis 22:12). Abraham then found a ram

caught in the thicket to be the “sacrificial lamb” in place of his son; but for our Father in Heaven, there was no ram to be caught in the thicket, no angel of mercy to stay the hand of death. Our Father’s sacrifice would be all that Abraham encountered, and then more.

Isaiah knew there was no love like the love of a mother for her nursing child. And so he asked, “Can a woman forget her sucking child?” As unlikely as that possibility might be, he used it as his spiritual yardstick to show that God’s infinite love encompasses a mother’s love—and then more: “Yea, they may forget, yet, will I not forget thee. Behold, I have graven thee upon the palms of my hands” (Isaiah 49:15–16). Lest there be any question, the nail marks of the cross would be a tangible reminder that His love transcended even the love of a mother for her infant child.

These examples cause us to plumb the depths of our emotional reservoirs. They are windows to the infinite. Although we cannot fully comprehend, they nonetheless help us momentarily glimpse the unbounded love of the Father and the Son.

The Pure Doctrine of the Atonement

Perhaps the most masterful discourse on the Atonement in the revealed scriptures is that delivered by King Benjamin (see Mosiah 2–5). In his own words, he said, “I have spoken plainly unto you that ye might understand” (2:40). With clarity and conciseness, he proceeded line by line and verse by verse with compelling logic and an uncompromising testimony that cannot be refuted by the mind or spirit. This sermon is a spiritual missile launched with laser precision to the center of the soul. It is as though the spiritually attuned are receiving the wondrous atoning truths in undiluted fashion, akin to a spiritual transfusion of pure doctrine. There is no need for outside collaborating sources or historical evidences. None of that is necessary because these spiritually mature Saints are ready and eager to receive the atoning doctrine in its fullest dose. And so they do.

Set forth below is the doctrine of the Atonement in the most concise and accurate way I can express it. Perhaps when we are spiritually prepared and our students are spiritually ready, we can, like King Benjamin, give the full dose and “tell it like it is” so that “he that preacheth and he that receiveth, understand one another, and both are edified and rejoice together” (D&C 50:22).

The doctrine of the Atonement is the most supernal, mind-expanding, passionate doctrine this world or universe will ever

know. It is this doctrine that gives life and breath and substance to every gospel principle and ordinance. It is the spiritual reservoir that feeds the streams of faith, provides the cleansing powers to the waters of baptism, and supplies the healing balm to the wounded soul. It is the focal point of the sacrament, temple, and other gospel ordinances. It is the rock foundation upon which all hope in this life and eternity is predicated.

By definition, the Atonement is the foreordained mission of the Savior. It is that love displayed, that power manifested, and that suffering endured by Jesus Christ in three principal locations—namely, the Garden of Gethsemane, the cross of Calvary, and the tomb of Arimathea. It is the universal act of supreme submission in which the Savior completely yielded His will to that of the Father.

The Atonement was necessitated by the Fall of Adam. Lehi wrote, “The Messiah cometh in the fulness of time, that he may redeem the children of men from the fall” (2 Nephi 2:26). Adam’s transgression was called the Fall because Adam and Eve fell from the presence of God and, in addition, fell from immortality to mortality. Thus, one of the prime purposes of the Atonement was to redeem men and women from the negative consequences of the Fall. The Savior did this in part by dying on the cross and subsequently bringing about the Resurrection for everyone. Paul so testified: “As in Adam all die, even so in Christ shall all be made alive” (1 Corinthians 15:22). In addition, the Savior suffered for everyone’s sins, as evidenced by His bleeding from every pore, which act brought about the condition of repentance. Through His stripes, we can be healed. So complete is this healing process that Isaiah taught, “Though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be white as snow” (Isaiah 1:18).

But there is yet another purpose of the Atonement—it is not just to redeem us (that is, to reconcile the Fall) but to perfect us. The Atonement was designed to do more than return us to the starting line, more than just wipe the slate clean, more than make us innocent. It was designed to provide us with heavenly endowments that would help us achieve godlike perfection. How is that accomplished? Because of the Atonement, we are cleansed in the waters of baptism. Because of that cleansing, we are eligible to receive the gift of the Holy Ghost; and with that gift, we are entitled to the gifts of the Spirit (that is, knowledge, patience, love, and so forth), each of which is an attribute of godliness. Thus, as we acquire the gifts of the Spirit, made possible by the cleansing powers of the Atonement, we acquire the attributes of God.

Because of its expansive and comprehensive nature, the Atonement was referred to by certain Book of Mormon prophets as an “infinite atonement” (2 Nephi 9:7; 2 Nephi 25:16; Alma 34:10, 12).

It was infinite in divineness in that it was performed by the Holy One, the Only Begotten Son of God, who possessed every divine and godly attribute in unbounded measure (see D&C 109:77).

It was infinite in power in that the Savior was the only one who possessed the three powers necessary to save and exalt us—namely, the power to resurrect us from the dead, the power to redeem us from our sins, and the power to endow us with godly attributes (see John 11:25; Alma 12:15; Moroni 10:32–33).

It was infinite in time, both prospectively and retroactively (see Alma 34). As declared by King Benjamin, “Whosoever should believe that Christ should come, the same might receive remission of their sins . . . even as though he had already come among them” (Mosiah 3:13).

It was infinite in coverage since it provided the resurrection for all living things and, in addition, the opportunity for redemption and perfection for every person of every world of which the Savior was the creator (see D&C 76:23–24, 40–43).

It was infinite in depth—not only in whom it covered but also in what it covered. The Savior “descended below all things” (D&C 88:6), meaning He descended beneath all our sins so that even the “vilest of sinners” (Mosiah 28:4) and the “most lost of all mankind” (Alma 24:11) could be redeemed by His mercy. Further, His sacrifice descended beneath the total human plight, even that which has no relation to sin. Therefore, He comprehends the loneliness of the widow; He understands the agonizing parental pain when children go astray; and He can empathize with the excruciating pain of cancer and every other debilitating illness of man. As difficult as it might be to conceive, He, a perfect man, understands the rejections and weaknesses of mortals. There is no temporal condition, however ugly or gruesome it may seem, that has escaped His grasp. No one will be able to say at the judgment bar, “You did not understand my unique plight”—because He does. He “comprehendeth all things” (Alma 26:35) because He “descended below all things” (D&C 88:6). He not only has an infinite reservoir of redeeming powers but also an infinite reservoir of remedial powers. He not only redeems us from our worst sins but also has the power to remedy our smallest hurt or most insignificant weakness. He is the Master Healer,

the Master Counselor, the Master Comforter. There is no hurt He cannot soothe, no rejection He cannot assuage, no loneliness He cannot console, and no weakness He cannot strengthen. Whatever affliction the world casts at us, He has a remedy of superior healing power. His Atonement is infinite because it circumscribes and encompasses every finite condition known to mortals.

His Atonement is infinite in suffering. The Savior spoke of that awful, bitter cup, “which suffering caused myself, even God, the greatest of all, to tremble because of pain” (D&C 19:18). It commenced in Gethsemane, where in agony He bled from every pore, and concluded on Calvary, where He cried out, “My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?” (Matthew 27:46). He bore it all alone—the total human plight. His divine powers were not a shield to His suffering—to the contrary, when the pinnacle of pain would have triggered the release mechanism of death or unconsciousness in a mere mortal, the Savior summoned His divine powers, not to immunize Himself but to stay such relief mechanism until He had suffered the pain endured by every person of every world. Only then would He voluntarily lay down His life.

Finally, His Atonement was infinite in love—both the Son’s and the Father’s. The human mind cannot fully grasp such love. This is part of the sacredness and beauty of the event. It must be felt, not just reasoned. Someday we will understand that divine disclosure: “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son” (John 3:16). Then, every knee will bow and every tongue confess that Jesus is the Christ.

The Savior is our only hope for salvation and exaltation. There is no “backup” man, alternative way, or contingency plan. As King Benjamin taught, “There shall be no other name given nor any other way nor means whereby salvation can come unto the children of men, only in and through the name of Christ, the Lord Omnipotent” (Mosiah 3:17).

In the process of His supreme sacrifice, the Savior satisfied every demand for justice and exercised every particle of mercy. He paid the awful price, the infinite price, to redeem us and perfect us. He is our Savior, our Redeemer, and our Exemplar.

The Atonement in a Spiritual Greenhouse

The doctrine of the Atonement is like a good seed planted in the ground. If, however, the seed is not nourished and taught in

an atmosphere of spirituality, gratitude, and testimony, it will never bloom in the eye of the beholder. Sometimes the way we say something is as important as what we have to say. When the Savior completed the Sermon on the Mount, “the people were astonished at his doctrine,” and then the scriptures tell us why: “For he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes” (Matthew 7: 28–29). Nephi gave the same prescription for effective teaching: “When a man speaketh by the power of the Holy Ghost the power of the Holy Ghost carrieth it unto the hearts of the children of men” (2 Nephi 33:1).

Some teachers may be caretakers or clock watchers until the class hour is completed; some may be entertainers; others are dispensers of factual information; some are motivators; and some are those never-to-be-forgotten teachers who are spiritual catalysts—those who speak with a power that not only momentarily motivates us to do good works but also permanently causes a change in our hearts. The doctrine of the Atonement thrives in such a spiritual climate—it is both sun and water in a single medium. There is no substitute for the Spirit—no other compensatory teaching technique. For only by the Spirit can the atoning doctrine come to full life.

Expressions of loving gratitude add to the nourishing of the seed. They break down defenses, cause meaningful reflection, and engender an atmosphere of humility and receptiveness to the truth. Who could listen to the touching words of gratitude expressed by Elder McConkie in his farewell sermon and not feel a kinship with the Savior and an eternal gratitude for His incomparable sacrifice: “I am one of his witnesses, and in a coming day I shall feel the nail marks in his hands and in his feet and shall wet his feet with my tears.”⁸

Again and again the doctrine of the Atonement is accompanied by the power of testimony. Amulek boldly declared: “I say unto you, that I do know that Christ shall come among the children of men, to take upon him the transgressions of his people and that he shall atone for the sins of the world; for the Lord God hath spoken it” (Alma 34:8). Nowhere, however, is testimony more powerful than that expressed by the Savior Himself: “I have drunk out of that bitter cup which the Father hath given me, and have glorified the Father in taking upon me the sins of the world, in the which I have suffered the will of the Father in all things from the beginning” (3 Nephi 11: 11). Testimonies such as these cause fire in our bones, cause our spirits to quake, and engrave the word of God upon our hearts.

In such an atmosphere as the foregoing, the prophets have issued life-changing challenges. It was Jacob who issued the towering challenge: “For why not speak of the atonement of Christ, and attain to a perfect knowledge of him?” (Jacob 4:12). As King Benjamin delivered his concluding sermon, he challenged his listeners: “If you believe all these things see that ye do them” (Mosiah 4:10). The response of his “spiritual students” was miraculous. They rejoiced “with such exceedingly great joy” and promised “we are willing to enter into a covenant with our God to do his will, and to be obedient to his commandments . . . all the remainder of our days” (Mosiah 5:4–5). What more could a teacher hope for?

Spirit, gratitude, testimony, and challenge—these are the nourishing agents of the spiritual greenhouse that allow the doctrine of the Atonement to thrive and blossom with radiant beauty. Teaching this doctrine requires the highest and best within us—our most creative powers, our most submissive spirit, and our finest intellectual faculties. For, in truth, it is the most profound, moving doctrine we will ever be privileged to teach.

Notes

1. This essay is a distillation of and reflection on Elder Tad R. Callister’s book, *The Infinite Atonement* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2000).

2. Bruce R. McConkie, “The Purifying Power of Gethsemane,” *Ensign*, May 1985, 9.

3. Robert L. Millet, “Foreword,” in Tad R. Callister, *The Infinite Atonement* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2000), ix.

4. Ezra Taft Benson, *A Witness and a Warning* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1988), 33.

5. Bruce R. McConkie, *A New Witness for the Articles of Faith* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1985), 467.

6. C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: Collier Books, 1996), 129.

7. Ezra Taft Benson, *A Witness and a Warning* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1988), 18.

8. McConkie, “The Purifying Power of Gethsemane,” 10.