I thank this beautiful choir for setting this Spirit and tone that we need and pray for on an occasion like this. I am most grateful for the prayer that we’ve heard. Paul Johnson, you are a treasure and loved by everyone who knows you—student, faculty, administration, Presidency of the Church, and the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles. I didn’t consult with Elder Rolfe Kerr on what we would say tonight, but you will see how our minds move in parallel directions.

Elder W. Rolfe Kerr, I congratulate you on behalf of the officers and members of the Board of Education and all the others who will be blessed by your service as the new commissioner of education. Your extensive education and professional career, your devoted service in many different callings in the kingdom, and your teachable, submissive spirit have prepared you extremely well for this new calling. I would also like to publicly acknowledge the outstanding service that Elder Henry B. Eyring has given over 17 years as the prior commissioner. He was recently honored in an exceptional way by President Gordon B. Hinckley in our last board of education meeting. It was a confirmation of how deeply he is appreciated for that service. We will all miss him but warmly welcome you, Elder Kerr, to your new assignment. We are confident that your service will likewise prove most effective.

I am profoundly grateful for this assignment from the First Presidency, as an officer of the board of education, to be with you on this very special occasion. We are linked together throughout the entire world in a common objective. As emphasized by Elder Kerr, you have the awesome duty of touching profoundly for good the minds and hearts of a singularly choice generation of young men and women. Your assignment is to encourage that extraordinary generation to live worthy, righteous, productive lives in an ever more challenging world.

You have the heavy responsibility and the singular privilege of exercising a major role in their lives. It is to arm them with truths and testimony-fortifying examples to equip them to make correct choices in many of the most vital decisions of their lives. This you are trusted to do through the inspiration of the Lord, as prompted by the Holy Spirit.

I wonder if you realize how vast an army you represent. As you contemplate the significance of your own service, consider this. There are approximately 900 full-time seminary teachers and leaders. That group is powerfully augmented by an army of approximately 25,000 capable volunteer teachers and leaders. Also, in our institute program there are about 1,100 full-time teachers, leaders, and coordinators. Their combined efforts are fortified by an additional 9,900 devoted volunteers. To that impressive group there is added the professional expertise of over 100 full-time and 135 volunteer religion teachers from the faculties of our three BYU campuses. In addition, we are blessed to have approximately 550 missionaries serving throughout the world on CES assignments. Many have completed professional assignments and are now volunteering to fulfill the same or more challenging tasks in the distant, remote parts of the world as well as the major centers of Church population. Think of it. Your individual consecrated effort is joined by that of nearly 38,000 others the world over. Yet what each of you can do is so vitally important that if there were only one of you I could speak to tonight, I would feel fully compensated for any effort expended in the preparation of this message.

The seminary and institute programs are in 144 countries throughout the world. This Church broadcast will reach the extensive footprint of the satellite communications network over the continents of the world. Where that service is not available, the content will be subsequently sent in appropriate formats. The English part of this broadcast will be translated into 18 languages—French, Portuguese, Spanish, Cantonese, Danish, Dutch, Finnish, German, Hungarian, Italian,
Japanese, Korean, Mandarin, Norwegian, Russian, Samoan, Swedish, and Tongan. Think of it. None of this would be possible without the faithful, devoted service of men and women like yourselves and the competent, devoted participation of all who perform so well their individual assignments. It truly is a miracle.

I pray that what is now communicated through the miracle of sight and sound will help each of you individually. I know that as you are attentive to the Holy Spirit, He will prompt you with an adaptation of this message fitted to your individual needs. He can touch your minds and hearts with other insights tailored to the personal conditions of your students. Please be attentive to that divine source of help. The impressions that come to you in the Spirit surrounding this broadcast will be the message of greatest worth. The Lord knows your needs. He knows what each student requires. As you are attentive to the quiet promptings of the Spirit when you prepare and teach, you will be led to meet important needs, some of which you may not know exist. How grateful I am that your faith and obedience permit that divine inspiration to be received, understood, and applied.

I want to discuss a challenge I have observed while traveling throughout the world. One of the greatest concerns that President Hinckley has expressed to me personally, which I have repeatedly felt myself, is the number of students who attend class without internalizing “in fleshy tables of the heart” (2 Corinthians 3:3) the instruction given. Such do not appear to associate what you teach with their personal choices in life. They can answer test questions well but do not retain in their minds and hearts the principles and truths taught. In times of trial or testing, they often seem to follow the world rather than the truths taught them. They do not appear to realize that what you share is not something of casual interest but are powerful truths that, when understood and applied, will help them resolve the defining challenges they face hourly. Those truths will lead them to make correct choices in a world that is spiraling downward by abandoning true principles and essential standards that yield peace, happiness, and purpose in life. It is heartrending to see some make choices that are not consistent with the truths you share with them. It is almost as if what is taught is temporarily recorded on a tape, maintained until the exam is passed, and then deleted from permanent storage in the mind and heart.

I am afraid we have a few students who think all that is needed is to get the material from your notes into their notebooks without encumbering their minds or memories. That may sound like a vicious criticism. It is not intended to be. They are so wonderful. They have so many things they are concerned about. I don’t know if I could have survived at their age in the environment in which they live. Each one, however, is precious. We simply must do better. I implore each one of you to correct this tragic misunderstanding when it occurs. To us it seems so evident and logical that what they learn is what they should live. Yet many do not seem to grasp that truth. Will you pray for guidance in how to have truth sink deep into the minds and hearts of your students so as to be used throughout life? As you prayerfully seek ways to do that, I know that the Lord will guide you. The solution will vary for different individuals, but you will come to understand how to do it. Make your objective to help students understand, retain, and use divine truth. Keep that objective foremost in every aspect of your preparation and teaching.

We know that these truths are better communicated within the sanctity of the home by loving, caring, prepared parents. But we also know that many of the students are not so blessed. We are most grateful for your efforts to fill that void. As you seek ways to do it, the Lord will guide you. Fortunately, there are many students who do study, listen, learn, and apply the truth. They do what is right. Use them to help the others catch the vision.

The curriculum materials you use are outstanding. They are kept fresh and meaningful. I recently reviewed a new course in preparation for the institutes that is based on the new missionary material of Preach My Gospel. When completed it will be the foundation for missionary preparation classes at the three BYU campuses. It will also be used in the institute program. This is an example of how your curriculum is carefully correlated. Remember, your highest priority is not to get through all the material if that means that it cannot be properly absorbed. Do what you are able to do with understanding. Determine, according to the individual capabilities and needs of your students, what is of highest priority. If a key principle is understood, internalized, and made part
of the students’ guidebooks for life, then the most important objective has been accomplished. The best measure of the effectiveness of what occurs in the classroom is to observe that the truths are being understood and applied in a student’s life. That is confirmation that your time with the students has been beneficial, that he or she is being equipped to succeed in life. It reveals that there has been increased confidence in the value of the precious gems shared. It confirms that your love and support is felt and appreciated and that the student is beginning to feel the love and support of the Master.

May I now share a few suggestions of how to help lock truth into the minds and hearts of youth.

Teaching

First, teaching. We are grateful for your efforts to have students fulfill brief teaching assignments. While that participation builds their personal skills, its basic purpose is to help the students internalize the significant content of the seminary and institute curriculum. Some students may have difficulty preparing such a lesson. May I suggest one way to help them. It is a simple four-step outline. The elements can be used in any order. The content can be extensive or brief.

A typical outline would include:

A well-expressed statement of the truth to be taught.

An example from everyday life to illustrate more understandably that truth.

A scripture to give power and meaning to the truth.

A personal testimony of the worth of the truth and, where possible, a personal application of it.

Help all of your students, not just the more capable ones, be successful in such teaching. Such experience will anchor truths in their minds and hearts.

Today many students can capture a concept more easily visually than through the written word. The use of an appealing visual aid can clarify truth. But such aids should not be used to entertain or draw attention to oneself. An effective visual aid is like a hook in the mind to which truth can be carefully secured so that it can be understood, remembered, and used in time of need. Such aids should be conditioned to the age of the student. They need to be understood in the context of his or her environment. Jesus is a Master at the use of such visual aids: a grain of mustard, a child, a millstone, a Roman coin. He forever confirmed their power.

Participation

Next, participation. Never, and I mean never, give a lecture where there is no student participation. A “talking head” is the weakest form of class instruction. The following passage from the Doctrine and Covenants reveals a principle much worth using:

“He that receiveth the word by the Spirit of truth receiveth it as it is preached by the Spirit of truth[.]”

“Wherefore, he that preacheth and he that receiveth, understand one another, and both are edified and rejoice together” (D&C 50:21–22; italics added).

The verb understand refers to that which is heard. It is the same message to all. Edified concerns that which is communicated by the Holy Ghost. The message can be different and tailored by the Spirit to the needs of each individual. Assure that there is abundant participation because that use of agency by a student authorizes the Holy Ghost to instruct. It also helps the student retain your message. As students verbalize truths, they are confirmed in their souls and strengthen their personal testimonies.

One-on-One Interaction

Last, one-on-one interaction. It is imperative that we use our every capacity to stimulate students to think. They must not be recording devices that play back information for a class discussion or test with little thought of future use. When there is pondering and stimulation to incorporate a truth into life, it will be resident in the treasury of experience. Then it can be drawn upon to help students make correct decisions for a worthy, successful life. Ask carefully formulated questions that stimulate thought. Even if the responses are not perfect, they will increase the probability that important lessons will be learned.

Questions should be clear and motivate discussion. They should not manipulate the student or put words in his or her mouth. Discussions that invoke a yes or no answer are weak and do little to stimulate insight. They are, however, appropriate when inviting commitment. I’ll try and show what I mean. If I don’t do it very successfully, then learn the principle and forget the example. I’m going to ask the help of a
friend of mine, a young woman who is as completely pure and righteous as she is beautiful. She is blessed with a quick and able mind and is a most outstanding student. Her discipline and diligence have made her an exceptional pianist. She has a very clear understanding of what is right and wrong and never goes near the boundary. Her name is Rebecca Bekker; she is a very close friend. Rebecca, could you come here and help me now?

Elder Scott: I’m going to ask you, Rebecca, do you know specifically what we are going to do?

Rebecca: I have no idea.

Elder Scott: I don’t either, but I promised you that I wouldn’t embarrass you, and I’ll keep that promise.

Rebecca: Okay.

Elder Scott: There are not any right or wrong answers. I just want to review a scripture or two with you and ask you what it means and how you would use it. Let’s start with one of those verses that is popular all over the world, 1 Nephi 3:7. I’m going to ask you to begin a little earlier than that, in verse 4. Would you mind reading that?

Rebecca: “Wherefore, the Lord hath commanded me that thou and thy brothers should go unto the house of Laban, and seek the records, and bring them down hither into the wilderness. And now, behold thy brothers murmur, saying it is a hard thing which I have required of them; but behold I have not required it of them, but it is a commandment of the Lord. Therefore go, my son, and thou shalt be favored of the Lord, because thou hast not murmured” (1 Nephi 3:4–6).

Elder Scott: What principle is in that scripture that might help you?

Rebecca: Obedience.

Elder Scott: Very, very good. Why do you suppose the father, Lehi, felt so good about Nephi’s response and so ill about Laman’s response? They both had been taught the same things. What was the difference?

Rebecca: Their willingness to serve the Lord no matter what He asked them to do.

Elder Scott: Would you continue reading? That’s a great answer. This is the verse that everybody knows. Rebecca: “And it came to pass that I, Nephi, said unto my father: I will go and do the things which the Lord hath commanded, for I know that the Lord giveth no commandments unto the children of men, save he shall prepare a way for them that they may accomplish the thing which he commandeth them” (1 Nephi 3:7).

Elder Scott: That’s almost stated like a law. Why do you suppose Nephi was able to make that statement about how the Lord would help him fulfill a commandment?

Rebecca: Because in the past he was always obedient. No matter what the Lord would ask him to do, he would always be blessed for it and was shown that it was the right thing to do.

Elder Scott: Now let’s examine a little further what happened. They were going to get the brass plates. They tried; it didn’t work. Laban sent an army to kill them, and they hid. Would you read that next scripture?

Rebecca: “And we began to be exceedingly sorrowful, and my brethren were about to return unto my father in the wilderness” (1 Nephi 3:14).

Elder Scott: They tried once, failed, and they gave up. Now let’s see what happens.

Rebecca: “But behold I said unto them that: As the Lord liveth, and as we live, we will not go down unto our father in the wilderness until we have accomplished the thing which the Lord hath commanded us. Wherefore, let us be faithful in keeping the commandments of the Lord” (1 Nephi 3:15–16).

Elder Scott: I have a question about that to ask you. First, let me give an explanation. This is an oath. We don’t do that as much as they did in the old times. But Nephi took an oath on the most fundamental thing he could think about—the fact that the Lord liveth. Why do you suppose he did that?

Rebecca: Because of his testimony, he knew that Heavenly Father lives.

Elder Scott: And what key is in verse 16 as to why he felt he would be successful?

Rebecca: Because he is faithful, and it was a commandment.

Elder Scott: You’re giving great answers without any prior prompting. I sure appreciate that. Now, this
seemed like an awful lot of work to get the brass plates. Nephi explained why they were important in verses 19 and 20. Would you please read that.

Rebecca: “And behold, it is wisdom in God that we should obtain these records, that we may preserve unto our children the language of our fathers;

“And also that we may preserve unto them the words which have been spoken by the mouth of all the holy prophets, which have been delivered unto them by the Spirit and power of God” (1 Nephi 3:19–20).

Elder Scott: Why were the records important to take with them on this journey?

Rebecca: For us and for their future children, so that we can learn from them.

Elder Scott: How do you learn from the scriptures?

Rebecca: We learn from the blessings that others have received from obeying the commandments and from the consequences that others have received from disobeying the commandments.

Elder Scott: How do you learn from the scriptures?

Rebecca: From relating the experiences that I go through to what they went through because it’s really the same thing—just being tested, just in different circumstances.

Elder Scott: Has that helped you?

Rebecca: Yes.

Elder Scott: Let me ask one more question. Now they have tried to get the plates. They were going home. Nephi convinced them to try once more. He had this great idea of getting all their riches and giving that to Laban to get the plates, but that failed. What do we learn from that? Nephi said he was going to be blessed by the Lord to accomplish what he was going to get, and here’s two failures. What do we learn from that?

Rebecca: That it’s not going to be easy. And we just have to be faithful and rely on the Lord no matter what.

Elder Scott: How does that teaching help you in your life?

Rebecca: It keeps me going—no matter what happens, just knowing I will be blessed. The more I go through, the more I will be blessed.

Elder Scott: Thank you. I’ve got one or two more scriptures. Would you mind reading verse 6 in chapter 4? This is kind of a puzzle I’m going to ask you—well, let’s read it first.

Rebecca: “And I was led by the Spirit, not knowing beforehand the things which I should do.

“Nevertheless I went forth” (1 Nephi 4:6–7).

Elder Scott: That says that Nephi didn’t know exactly how he was going to get those plates. And then it says, “Nevertheless, I went forth.” What does that teach?

Rebecca: That he trusts the Lord more than himself.

Elder Scott: Excellent. You are doing very well tonight. When you have something that you aren’t exactly sure how it will turn out, what do you do?

Rebecca: I go to the Lord because I know that He can see all things, and my perspective is limited. If I trust Him, then in the end it will be the right thing.

Elder Scott: Thank you. One last scripture. This is in chapter 5. Would you mind reading those parts of verses 7 and 8 that are underlined?

Rebecca: “And when we had returned to the tent of my father, behold their joy was full, and my mother was comforted.

“And she spake, saying: Now I know of a surety that the Lord hath commanded my husband to flee into the wilderness; yea, and I also know of a surety that the Lord hath protected my sons, and delivered them out of the hands of Laban, and given them power whereby they could accomplish the thing which the Lord hath commanded them” (1 Nephi 5:7–8).

Elder Scott: How would you use the teaching of that verse in your own life?

Rebecca: Through trials and through doing what the Lord has asked us to do, our testimonies will be strengthened.

Elder Scott: Do you see a word in there that’s really strong—that word power? What does that mean?

Rebecca: They couldn’t have done it without the Lord, and they needed Him so they were able to do what He asked.

Elder Scott: Thank you, Rebecca. You have done beautifully. I have one more question. It doesn’t have
anything to do with the scriptures. You go to the
temple frequently with your friends. You are not
endowed. Why do you go to the temple?

Rebecca: The temple gives me peace, and I love the
feeling that I feel there. I know that if I live worthily
now, it will be so much easier for me later. When I
go to the temple and get endowed, I’ll be ready.

Elder Scott: Why do you go to the temple?

Rebecca: So that I can return and live with my
Heavenly Father.

Elder Scott: Thank you, Rebecca. You have really
blessed our lives with your responses. You did
exceptionally well, especially considering that you
had no idea what questions I would ask.

I hope that each of you who has listened to my
conversation with Rebecca can see that when we ask,
questions can be appropriate. They can lead a
student to greater appreciation of the doctrine you
teach. In that way it is more likely that they will
capture it in their minds and hearts and use it to
guide their lives. I believe that is a tremendously
important principle. Appropriate questions lead a
student to think about doctrine, appreciate it, and
understand how to apply it in his or her personal
life. Rebecca did that very well.

As we part, may I share a motivating insight. As
conditions become more difficult in life, those of
us who are older and have had our own growing
experiences are not as flexible, are not as adaptive,
are not able to capture as quickly new conditions
and accommodate them to our personal needs. As
we observe some of the finest examples of youth,
we note that they have developed an internal
barrier against evil influences in a difficult world.
An example: they can study, learn, and flower in
an environment that would have totally distracted
me in my youth. Moreover, by righteous living
they come away clean and pure. I believe the Lord
prepares in premortal life the spirits who will come
to earth so that those who are obedient to His
counsel and seek direction of the Holy Spirit can
manage whatever environment they live in. They
have been prepared for it.

Maybe you recall how your parents lamented that
the world was going to the dogs when you were
young. I remember those comments. I felt they were
overexaggerated yet now find myself making similar
statements about our current world. When you teach
principles so that they are understood and applied,
the youth can know that they can overcome whatever
negative pressures surround them. In time they will
grow older and become more fixed in their ways.
Then the cycle will be repeated with their children,
who will have built their lives on truth. This new,
exuberant generation will take their place and
accommodate to even more severe challenges. Better
youth require better teachers. Deteriorating conditions
necessitate the understanding and application of the
essential truths.

Don’t let Satan lead you to underestimate your worth.
As a mission president, it was easy to distinguish the
difference between a young man or woman who had
consistently attended seminary or institute from those
who had missed those enriching experiences. You may
be discouraged when parents who are able to help their
children don’t do it. You may be less than enthusiastic
when a student comes to class and doesn’t appear
to be concentrating. Accept the challenge to get him
or her actively engaged. Don’t let Satan lead you to
underestimate your worth and the impact for good you
have in the lives of your students. It can be immense.

Remember, we trust you with the most precious
resource of the kingdom—our treasured youth. We
trust you to live, prepare, teach, and testify with
power as inspired by the Holy Ghost. Humbly, I
invoke a blessing upon each of you that as you do
your best, the Lord can guide and strengthen your
efforts to help each student understand and live
the truths you teach.

I testify that Joseph Smith was empowered by God
to restore the fulness of the gospel truths you teach.
I solemnly testify that Jesus Christ strengthened the
efforts of Joseph Smith to restore those truths. In like
manner, He will fortify you as you teach and testify of
them. I know He will. We love you. We are grateful
for what you do. In the name of Jesus Christ, amen.