

A DISCUSSION ABOUT FAMILY FOUNDATIONS:  
A FORUM DISCUSSION

*Editor's note: Members of the Family Foundations course development team—Philip Allred, Janiel Nelson, Richard Openshaw, Doug Ladle, and Steve Dennis spoke with John Thomas on 10 July 2008.*

John: Let's start with how a class on the family became a core component of the new Foundations program. It's a new thing to dedicate two of fourteen required religion credits for every student to study the family. What do you think that indicates?

Doug: We have a class on the family as part of Foundations because the family is the basic unit of the gospel plan. A class on the family ought to be the basic part of a core curriculum for all students in our religion. To not have it would be a gross oversight. Family is a basic unit of what we ought to learn at a university and to be successful saints.

Richard: I think that's true, and the flip side to that is that the family is under disastrous attack. Not just locally but nationally and internationally. United Nations conferences have redefined the family. Church representatives participated in the first United Nations conference on family, but they refused to participate in the next two because of the way things were going. And in recent weeks with the First Presidency asking Church members in California to support an amendment to the state constitution regarding marriage, it re-emphasizes that our young people are growing up in a time where it's hard for them to articulate why the family is needed because there is so much bombarding them against the family.

Doug: That's a good point. Our students have a gut feeling that certain things are wrong, but they haven't learned how to articulate why the family is so important. Understanding and communicating why we ought to be in certain family styles is a very important skill that the student needs to learn.

Philip: This is why the Proclamation on the Family is so significant and is quoted in the letter to the Californian saints. It provides a doctrinal context for our statement on "the family"—that there really is eternal truth and all of these things are outgrowths of that fundamental eternal truth of our divine nature as sons and daughters of God and of the plan for the family.

John: How did you initially go about creating outcomes for this course?

Janiel: Here's an excerpt from my notes of some remarks President Clark gave at the General Education Oversight Committee Meeting I attended on January 23, 2006. We looked at that to help give us some guidance and direction:

Perhaps the most important thing to prepare the students for is to be great moms and dads and great husbands and wives so that the families will become strong in Zion. Some of [the class] might be understanding the family in gospel context. What do we know about the family as it has actually been practiced in history up to our current practice? Creating a twenty-first century family. A course that would bring together different views of the family. View it through the lens of the gospel. Understand how the world looks at it. Take it down even further, mesh it with provident living. Perhaps a lab course with hands on experience: Cooking, economics, organizing a budget, family home evening, managing a family. A great course taught by a lot of faculty on the family. If the outside world looked at it they would [consider it] a serious course.

I believe this was before they actually had a new Foundations program in mind. So already then they were thinking about it. Our direction came from these remarks, or at least our starting point came from President Clark's suggestion to prepare students to be parents and to brainstorm ideas. We have tried to use this to help guide us along the path.

Philip: I think President Clark has always focused on how: how will a student accomplish the learning outcomes? So, as you talk about being great husbands and wives and great fathers and mothers, well, then there have to be some how-to's, some hands-on practice or laboratory experiences. So every fourth day they are actually presenting how to do some practical skills as families, as husbands and wives and mothers and fathers. That has been a very important point. But I think it's just an outgrowth of President Clark saying, "Look, it's got to move from the academic setting to the real-life setting." We've got to help them transfer their learning.

John : So let's talk more about the aims or intended outcomes of this course. One seems to be to develop the ability to articulate why we view the family the way we do, how family is nested in the eternal plan. What are some other learning outcomes—not

only knowledge outcomes but attitudinal outcomes, or even skills to cultivate? What do you hope a student walks away from this class understanding and being and doing?

Doug: On the first basic level they ought to know “The Family: A Proclamation to the World.” We have as one of the outcomes for them to memorize the paragraphs of the Proclamation and place it in their hearts. On top of that, to know some scriptures and doctrinal quotes by the Brethren that underwrite each of those paragraphs. So that’s a beginning place.

Steve: I think the most important outcomes are to recognize that there are eternal laws that are foundational for successful, happy family life, which is what we open with in our beginning unit. Hopefully all of the units really touch on that. I think the other units just are saying here are the eternal laws related to a specific topic, for example, gender. We’ve talked about learning outcomes, and you can think of outcomes as cognitive outcomes, as behavioral outcomes, or as affective outcomes. Most of the stuff that we will learn about in family foundations are things that they’ve heard before. We talk a lot about the family in the Church, so I don’t know that everything that we present them is going to be new knowledge, but hopefully it will be presented in a way that will result in a change of heart. So I see some of our goals as really affective goals.

John: I see two core outcomes related to knowledge and to some degree attitudes. One, there is such a thing as eternal truths, and it’s not simply man-made reason when we take a stand. And secondly, here is a distillation of some eternal truths in the Proclamation. You want students to understand that. Is there anything else that would disappoint you to see students leave the class without?

Richard: Well, I think they also need to be able to articulate truths about the family in a way the world can understand. It’s one thing to know them, but if somebody outside of the Church asks, why is that your Church’s position? Simply saying, we have a living prophet and we believe in prophets doesn’t help somebody on the outside.

Philip: As we looked at what we want them to learn, we felt like the prophets have told us what they want us to learn, and that is the Proclamation. It is informational, absolutely, but it is also very practical because in paragraph six, for instance, it goes through nine key principles that lead to the greatest

potential for family happiness. So we created a section that is broken up throughout the semester where students are making practical skills presentations on the fourth day in our cycle of classes. We feel strongly that the students need to have hands-on experiences of teaching and being taught by students about their own experiences, what they've observed in successful families, and what they've observed in failed families and marriages, with the Proclamation as the guide. So they have the opportunity for actual practice and application. First understand, second articulate, and third, problem solve with the principles learned.

John: So some of the skills that they work on relate back to the 2006 statement by President Clark such as cooking, economics, budgets, family home evening, managing a family, and practical life skills?

Philip: Notice that he was thinking about perhaps a lab course with hands-on experience. With our schedule we have a four-day rotation. We start with unified presentations to a large group that includes multiple sections: the truths, the informational truths, the doctrines. Then we spend days two and three in individual sections trying to understand those truths—trying to explore how to apply them and to recognize possible misunderstandings. We also address what scholarly research and social statistics can teach us. And then day four is when the students come and present these practical skills, and they have the other students do things with them and articulate how this works on a daily basis in the home.

John: Let's talk about the "architecture" of this class, in terms of the process of learning. My understanding is that you have six core principles you want to explore from the Proclamation, and you've organized each of them in sort of a four-day unit. Day one is this large gathering of multiple sections of students where one of you delivers "the word," preaches the core doctrines outlined in the Proclamation, perhaps situating them in terms of the plan of salvation...

Doug: We bring in a lot of video clips of the Brethren giving the talks, saying the words.

Richard: So we're reflecting basically the statements of the Brethren and the scriptures on this topic.

Doug: And using multimedia so they are getting it right from their voices and their faces.

John: So in some ways day one is like a mini general conference, days two and three are sort of like quorum or auxiliary learning activities, and day four is what happens at the house. Tell us more about how you translate the doctrine and principles taught on day one into the activities on days two through four.

Doug: For example, I'll take the unit on the law of chastity and the sanctity of life. On day one, we have three talks: Elder Holland, Elder Bednar, and President Clark all gave beautiful summary talks on these topics and we've excerpted and packaged all these talks into one presentation on that day. So on day two, I chose in my section—all married students—to talk about the law of chastity in marriage versus out of marriage. And so we explored that, including a discussion of birth control. Now other sections might have more single students and they will talk about the law chastity before marriage, perhaps, and so we are seeking to be pertinent to the needs of students in our sections.

Steve: I think of day two as an elaborated de-briefing of the case study and an opportunity to make new applications that venture beyond. To say, “so this is what happened in that case, now let's apply those principles to other situations.” So I see it as an application of doctrinal principles to new scenarios, new situations.

John: I've heard Phil use the word “caselet” before. What is that?

Janiel: Well, I will give an example of a “caselet” I used today in class (a pilot version). As we are finishing up the semester we're discussing the nine principles of successful families. And I use a “caselet” from the history of Joseph Smith and his family to explore how they were living each one of those nine principles—faith, prayer, repentance, forgiveness of sins, and so on. They reviewed a PowerPoint presentation about historical sites and events in the prophet's life, and we read from the history of Joseph Smith and picked up examples of each of those nine principles in action.

John: So the students are extracting from a narrative examples of each of those principles and actions. You don't just say,

“Here they are, now I’ll talk about them.” But they’re digging around in some material.

- Janiel: And then we finished up today simply talking about those nine principles in our own families. So I actually helped them be their own case study, if you will, to look at how they have seen or have used one or more of those nine principles in their family, and to think about how to do that now or in future family life, including changes they could make in their family lives.
- Richard: So it’s an opportunity to take the doctrine and distil it down into practical everyday use. To see examples of it, and then present examples of it themselves and teach how it works. Many times you can get the doctrine but there’s not that transfer, and so those two days become the transfer mechanism.
- Philip: Another example of this would be paragraph five of our core document, the Proclamation, which talks about responsibilities and duties of husbands, wives, and parents. And in that situation we wrote up a little case about “Jenny and Tyson.” Jenny is frustrated with Tyson’s inability to exercise his priesthood except in a passive way. He’s not really leading out as the teacher in the home. She might be a little uptight about it. She might be expecting too much because her Dad was a real champion at this, while her husband is new at this. Anyway, we present this case where they now have the Proclamation saying what husbands and wives are supposed to be doing. They see Jenny and Tyson wrestling with it, and this becomes a whole class period where we are trying to resolve Jenny and Tyson’s problem. Then we use a scripture “caselet” to help inform the discussion. We take them to 1 Nephi 16 and we talk about how Nephi has a broken bow and even Dad is murmuring and struggling—a struggling patriarch—and the Book of Mormon now becomes a wonderful resource for them. How does the dad handle it? How does the son handle it? How does the family operate in this strenuous circumstance? And it’s all tied to the divinely decreed responsibilities and duties of parents in the Proclamation and scripturally-based principle made wonderfully relevant.
- John: Richard used the word “transfer.” You say to students, “You’ve heard the principles; now let’s take you to an unfamiliar setting or problem and see if you can make the links.”

- Steve: I see that on day two, as well as getting them to some of the scriptures and seeing some scriptural examples, we can look at scenarios that we may have created. Then I see day three as an opportunity to bring in scholarly research from secular studies that support doctrinal principles. That's where I see bringing in the best research that validates what we've talked about and further supports it.
- John: I am assuming that the first day when you've got General Authority messages and one teacher generally talking to hundreds of students, there's a lot of uniformity in that day. As you were designing days two, three, and four, how much uniformity is there? You mentioned adapting to the makeup of the class, but is there a core set of materials you are all referring to, and is it the same set of preparation activities for your students?
- Janiel: We've all got the same materials, but we all have the leeway to use a different activity, or if we've thought of something else we'd like to try, we can. We have five members on the committee and six core principles; we each tackled one (two for Richard) on our own and then shared with each other what we're doing. Then we tested it out in a "pre-pilot," and now we are testing it again in pilot classes. Then we've got what we hope is a menu of opportunities for a professor to take each of these core principles and say, here's three or four options for the subsequent days. You have some freedom to develop it as you like, but at the end of the day your students need to be able to do this. This is a menu of options to get the students to that point.
- Philip: Something I may present works well for me, and something Doug presents works well for him. Then we have a third teacher coming on board who says, I can't quite do this, and I can't quite do that, but I can synthesize the two together, so this may be a third way or hybrid.
- John: In getting ready for day one versus days two or three or four, is there a difference in how the student prepares? And how do you know when you get to the end of the unit what's been learned?
- Doug: There are some talks students need to look at and some scriptures they ought to look at before the first day. So hopefully they come mentally zeroed in on that facet, and that begins the process.

- John: How about the subsequent days?
- Philip: As we're developing, we're working on a common assessment that would not only prove that they can articulate the Proclamation and understand some of its applications, but would also include some subjective questions that would get at their ability to transfer to a variety of circumstances. So we're developing an objective unit, pretty standard objective part of this evaluation (on content), and then these subjective little cases to prove that they can tackle the nuances of individual lives. So we're developing those; we have an eye to that, and we're experimenting with some things, but we haven't got a fully developed instrument yet.
- Doug: For example, Janiel supplied two very good case studies that show functional families with some challenges. Students are accountable to come to class having reviewed those two case studies and to having prepared a written document. The written analysis should show which of those nine principles of success are missing that could cause dysfunction or what Satan is substituting for those principles. Then it tells how the student, either as a bishop who has influence or as a spouse in this family, would try to affect the family. So they came with written presentations like that, and then we have a class discussion where they build upon each other's ideas. Then the next time we meet they'll be accountable for memorizing the Proclamation and a written assessment of the scriptures and quotes that go along with each paragraph. So those are the two things I'm doing.
- John: And when you get to day four it sounds like you have students presenting skills or modeling skills? And that's almost like a real-time assessment, to see if they know it well enough to pass it on—is that right?
- Philip: Yes. But in fairness, not always does our fourth day match the content of the immediately preceding days. We try to coordinate that, but sometimes students have chosen a different issue, so I have some day-four presentations on meal preparation with economy in mind.
- Doug: Which obviously may not tie in directly to a section on chastity.
- Janiel: But it ties into work and it ties into faith or other basic principles. Speaking of learning things as we pilot the class,

this semester I tried to really use the Provident Living website and their areas of focus and blend them a little better with our six core principles.

John: What is the size of the teaching groups?

Janiel: I divided the class into smaller groups of six, with three teaching three others. So our classroom gets fairly noisy, but I think Phil and Doug are having teams take turns teaching the entire section.

Philip: And some of those teams have actually been taking it upon themselves to break out the class into groups. Then they had individual members teach each of the small groups, so there's room for adaptation of all kinds of architectural innovations. It's wide open for that. The key, I think, in keeping with President Clark's vision, is that the prophets are really hoping students can understand the doctrine, how to live it in daily life, and how to help others who are struggling with it to find the answers themselves and actually practice them.

John: How easy was it to agree on both what should be taught and how the students should learn?

Philip: We've actually found it was pretty easy. President Clark promised a season of revelation, and we experienced it as we talked in our first few meetings. As we talked it through, the four-day model seemed to just distill and make a lot of sense. And then there was some tweaking about what we would be doing on days three and four, and that took a few weeks of kind of getting on board and realizing just what we had. This was apparently going on at the same time as the learning model was being developed, and it was fun that when the learning model and our four-day model came out they were really complementary to each other—not identical but quite complementary. At least from my perspective, it seemed we really distilled some inspiration, and it wasn't hard. We didn't have any blood on the floor, so to speak.

Richard: It was fun and inspiring at the same time. I would come with my ideas of what I thought, and then we'd sit down and everybody else was on the same page. I hadn't really conversed with anybody during the week and it just sort of came together.

John: Anything you would add?

- Doug: Just that the revelation season is not over yet, and I think it will continue on as other teachers are brought on board and they have their chance to wrestle with days two and three. After these two pilot experiences, we meet as a committee and review what's happening, and we still have insights coming that will improve the course.
- John: So is it safe to say that day one has been set pretty clearly (in terms of doctrinal foundations) and day four (in terms of skills to develop), and so most of the wrestling or tweaking is about those two days of exploring and applying and using principles for problem solving. Is that right?
- Philip: Day four is still student choice, and some of the skills they choose and their priorities might not be what the previous semester chose.
- John: So what are you learning in the pilot courses about days two and three in addition to what Doug said about how to refine this process? For instance, what are you learning about helping students get ready for the problem-solving or how to assess whether they're actually making the transfer you're looking for?
- Doug: I'm learning how to tighten my assessment. We've had some flexibility because they knew as students we were field testing this pilot. We had to be a little bit quick on our feet with changing some of the assignments, so we might only have known what the assignments were for the next four days. This meant student accountability was kind of a floating hope in my heart. But now I've learned how to come down to more accurate ways of assessing their learning.
- John: What's an example of something you are most comfortable with right now in terms of assessing what they're learning?
- Doug: I call it an inspired page of learning. After they do their homework and the readings, they are to write down the statement that impacted them most as well as what they really want to capture and take with them out of that set of readings. Those pages are very much a distillation of what I think they've found most relevant in those studies.
- Janiel: One thing we haven't talked about is the family handbook that we are asking students to put together using materials they find of most value. That includes the day-one study guide of articles from the prophets they've read and any assignments —

a collection or a guidebook for future reference. Everybody's will be different based on their own personal insights and impressions that they receive. To evaluate something like that is hard in relation to content, but they have something to take away from the class which is meaningful. So I'd say that something I've learned from the pilot is adding more value to that binder, and it needs to be somewhat subjective but valuable enough to have meaning in the long run for each individual student.

John: So they create kind of a tailored personal text. Do you have a textbook that they all get at the beginning?

Philip: We do have a textbook, the CES manual for Religion 234/235, as well as the manual for the Provident Living course. These are both Church correlated curriculum manuals. And we've been working with the printing press and other avenues to rearrange the order to correspond closer to the Proclamation and our core units.

John: Are you using all of both books?

Philip: No. We're not.

Doug: We have selected readings in electronic format for downloading and printing, then capturing, underlining, and bringing to class discussions. It would be nice to have an electronic version that would allow them to print out just what they need from both manuals and other articles.

John: What are the most important things you've learned from piloting the course? I keep waiting for Doug to spill the beans on all his great struggles, but what have you learned from the pilots?

Doug: Don't face Goliath in Saul's armor. In the first semester pilot I was using their suggested approaches to days two and three, and it just didn't feel like I was killing Goliath very well. I killed the students.

Richard: Let me defend him for just a minute. That first semester pilot in Winter 2008 was not this course. Doug had his eternal marriage classes and Janiel had her home and family living classes, and we tried to superimpose this on top of them.

Doug: So that's one thing that was hard in the pilot experience. And then not knowing for sure how to test or to have them ponder and prove what we're doing, so I was a little bit wishy-

washy in what the students had to do at the end. They were sometimes checking I-Learn two days before they were to do something to find out what it was, because I was building the course as I went along.

Janiel: I have a question. How do you get students to bring their scriptures to class? The scriptures are the main text in my mind. We've always gone to them, but we haven't plowed deeply into them every single class. But even today it was a critical day to have your scriptures. Many of them did not, and I can't imagine going to a religion class without them.

Philip: It helps to make it worth enough points that they say, "I've got to have them in my back pack," because they use them in class on a regular basis. Otherwise they'll say, "If he doesn't bother using them, then I don't know why I'm bringing them to begin with."

Doug: In my pilot I didn't do anything different than I do in my normal religion classes, but it's true, they did not consistently bring their scriptures, and that was a frustration. I think we need to spend some time figuring out how to encourage that. I think consistent use over time brings the expectation. Where it's a new class and it's about the family, they're maybe not making those connections in their minds that there is strong scriptural help. One thing I learned also in the pilot, in line with the learning model, is that students do want to discuss better if they come prepared with thoughts about a case study in their minds. So it's changed my teaching approach because I'm more interested in what they're saying after intelligent preparation.

John: Is there anything else that you want to track this fall semester based on your experience so far?

Doug: One thing to track is what difference it will make to have single freshmen and senior married students in the same class. My pilot classes have all been homogeneous with married students, usually juniors and seniors, but in my Fall 2008 family foundations class, half of the students are freshmen.

Philip: That won't be such a problem over time because we are going to install a twenty-four credit prerequisite for the course which will keep freshmen out, and get them in the scripture foundations first. It is a 200-level course, and we'd like to keep it as close as we can to them actually experiencing marriage

and families without being unreasonable in the scheduling process.

John: Is there anything else you want to share, any caveats, any cautions, any lessons we haven't talked about?

Philip: I think this four day schedule is a fairly unique thing, and at its core is that first day which is a large group in a unified doctrinal setting, where we have prophets speaking. Early on as we talked, Steve mentioned the cognitive virtue of variety and being able to mix up the semester over time, in a cycle you can count on that's revolving and changing. Perhaps most significant is that it's providing us a doctrinal focus and consistency campus-wide. We'll have a unity in purity and power on these same doctrines. Everybody will know these things together. We'll all be able to have a common discourse, a common language, a common articulation on these things, and finally that leads us in many ways to the ability to have a common assessment across the sections. There will be upwards of 40 sections of this running in any semester, so we have common assessment ability on those core things. But then we can also allow for some freedom in days two and three for teachers to own the course themselves and inject themselves and have the course develop around the doctrines but in innovative ways. We feel kind of excited about that architecture.

Janiel: And then we agreed about the fourth day provident living topics and giving students the opportunity to teach each other. That seemed to be a bonus that the course offers—giving them some opportunities to teach their peers and get better at teaching—and one of the things they'll do in their families is teach. One of the big things they'll do is teach, so we want to help them perfect that as best we can. ∞