

10-16-2002

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## Recommended Citation

Nelson, Russell M., "Fundamentals and Initiatives" (2002). *Vol. 1: Answering God's Interrogatories*. Paper 10.  
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# Fundamentals and Initiatives

*Russell M. Nelson*

I am deeply grateful for the privilege of meeting with each of you on this special occasion. I bring greetings from President Benson, President Hinckley, President Monson, and members of the Quorum of the Twelve. We sincerely appreciate this law school, its faculty and student body. And we especially admire those faithful partners who sustain the efforts of their student-spouses. As a doctor, I have had the opportunity of lecturing to many medical groups, but the privilege of speaking with a congregation of lawyers is a rare one for me.

But my study of law is not rare. It is a continuing commitment, which has provided the under-girding strength for all I have tried to do. Of course, my study of law has pertained largely to those divine or natural laws—put in place by our Creator—that govern the structure, function, and healing powers of the human body. These would be classified in contrast to precedents of common law or statutes enacted by legislatures. I know very little about *Marbury versus Madison*, or the case of *Brown against the Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas*.

But I will identify law as an important facet of my message tonight that I have entitled, “Fundamentals and Initiatives.” I see the proper balancing of these two considerations—fundamentals and initiatives—as one of the great challenges of life.

Let us first turn our attention to the fundamentals, which include my feelings of reverence for the law.

I have learned that the wise physician asks himself at least two basic questions when confronted with any patient who is ill. Question number one: Will this illness subside with the passage of time, or will it become steadily more severe? Let me illustrate with a couple of examples. If a patient has a broken rib, it will get better with the passage of time. On the

other hand, if a patient has a broken mitral valve in the heart, the patient will steadily deteriorate and die.

Question number two is considered if the answer to question number one is an ominous prognosis. If the illness is steadily progressive, can that deteriorating course be changed by medical or surgical intervention? In a fractured mitral valve, the downhill progression can be reversed with surgical repair or replacement of that broken valve.

The conscientious physician devotes much of his study to learn the natural laws that govern the area of his concern. We could say the same for the aerospace engineer or the jet pilot whose understanding of the physical laws of “foil” and “lift” is vitally important.

Let us mentally portray this first fundamental principle as a circle of *DIVINE LAW*. Divine law is incontrovertible. It includes not only the laws of physics and physiology, but divine commandments as well. It pertains to things of eternal and everlasting worth, such as family, father, mother, children, ordinance, covenant, and doctrine. Divine law is the most basic of the fundamentals, obedience to which may begin the building of a life of greatness. Reference is made in the scriptures to this first fundamental:

All kingdoms have a law given;  
 And there are many kingdoms; for there is . . . no kingdom in which there is no space, either a greater or a lesser kingdom.  
 And unto every kingdom is given a law; and unto every law there are certain bounds also and conditions (D&C 88:36–38).

The second fundamental principle is also basic to success. It is the circle of *RULES*. This ring includes the laws of man that can be made and also changed by human endeavor. In the Church, we are subject to rules written in the *General Handbook of Instructions*. Not only do we obey our own church rules, but we heed those of the society in which we live. We charge our members to be “subject to kings, presidents, rulers, and magistrates,” and to obey, honor, and sustain the law (Article of Faith 12).

Government by law—both in word and practice—is the strength and bulwark of any democracy. No individual is to be above or below the law. This circle of rules must be added to the fundamentals upon which we build our lives. Of course, this will be the circle of your special interest as you shape, honor, and defend such laws of society for the benefit of all.

The next fundamental principle is that of *POLICIES*. Policies are established, for example, by governing boards and presidential bodies who may also change those policies. In the Church, we believe in continuing revelation to presiding leaders who have been given authority and responsibility. The men you sustain as prophets, seers, and revelators respond to inspiration from Him who said, “whether by mine own voice or by the voice of my servants, it is the same” (D&C 1:38).

Next, consider the importance of *GUIDELINES*. Guidelines can be written to help those at work, at school, at home, or at church. I know a man who really understands guidelines. He assists the General Authorities by studying all proposals to purchase or improve real property for the Church. I asked him once how he was able to formulate so many important recommendations he must make to the Brethren. He simply replied, “I work within my guidelines.”

If we examine these rings from another perspective, perhaps we can see what he meant. He establishes guidelines well within the circle of policies set by the Brethren. They, in turn, function within rules of the Church and civil government. And those rules are well within bounds set by divine law.

Now let us discuss the final fundamental—that of *STYLE*. This circle includes personality, determination, and spirit. A scripture uniquely applies to personal style:

... he that is compelled in all things, the same is a slothful and not a wise servant;

... men should be anxiously engaged in a good cause, and do many things of their own free will, and bring to pass much righteousness;

For the power is in them, wherein they are agents unto themselves (D&C 58:26–28).

(See Figure 1.)

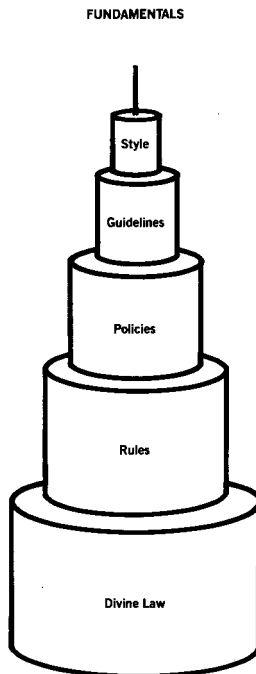


Figure 1

As we crown this stack with the ring of *STYLE*, note the importance of the central rod that is firmly attached to the basic ring of *DIVINE LAW*. This tie-rod may be likened to the scriptural term, “the rod of iron.”

Variations in personal style should range within established guidelines, implemented policies, official rules, and divine law.

When properly stacked, these rings resemble a pyramid in shape. If our behavior is centered in Christ, and the iron rod attaches us firmly at any level of our activity to the fundamentals of God’s commandments and things of eternal worth, then we won’t so likely be tipped over by winds of adversity.

The heaviest weight in the pyramid is on the bottom. That gives great stability. In a way, it is similar to the heavy ballast in the bottom of an ocean liner, placed there so the ship won’t be blown over in a storm.

Periodically we learn of individuals who are either not well anchored or obsessed with a particular idea that extends beyond the limits imposed by guidelines, policies, rules, or even divine law. Such a style may be portrayed as eccentric. This is an unstable situation that leads to wobbly imbalance.

Having considered the fundamentals, let us turn our attention now to the ideas alluded to in the second half of my title—individual initiative. This topic relates to one’s freedom to act as a citizen in society or as a responsible member of the Church. The image of the cone of individual initiative takes the inverted shape of the pyramidal cone of fundamentals, which we have just discussed. It is shaped more like a top.

(See Figure 2.)

Let me explain. As individuals, we have no latitude to break the commandments of God. They are absolutes for our conduct. “Thou shalt not commit adultery,” for example, is an irrevocable commandment and part of *DIVINE LAW*.

There is a little more room for initiative under the *RULES* by which we live. Handbooks can be edited, new statutes can be passed, even a constitution can be amended.

New *POLICIES* can be even more easily established—but only by those who formulated them in the first place.

*GUIDELINES* give even greater freedom for adaptation to particular circumstances.

The zone of greatest individual initiative is in the ring of *STYLE*. We previously referred to the word of the Lord that “he that is compelled in all things, the same is a slothful and not a wise servant” (D&C 58:26). So we are expected to exercise much individual initiative.

With this cone of individual initiative put in motion, imagine our rapidly rotating this cone to resemble a spinning top or a whirling gyroscope.

A top spins well on a sturdy pivot-point. It also spins well only if there is no lopsided projection to deform its shape.

In our model, the laws of physics dictate that the forces generated by the spin provide lift in both outward and upward directions.

To me, this teaches a lesson. If individual initiatives are free from abrasive burrs and well based on a firm foundation, there is great potential for personal spiritual growth.

The Lord said, “what manner of men ought ye to be? . . . even as I am” (3 Nephi 27:27). How can one’s personal progress approach that of the Lord’s hopes for us? It is by exercising individual initiative upwards and outwards, while remaining within the limits of the fundamental bounds and conditions we have discussed.

INDIVIDUAL INITIATIVE

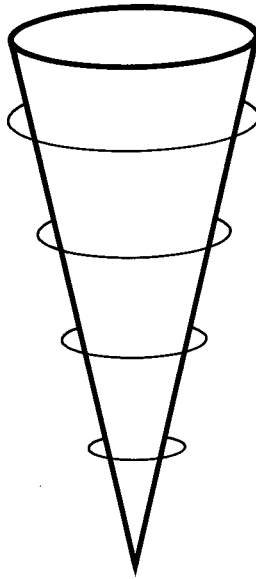


Figure 2

So much for the theory. This strategy can be applied to the lives of real people.

Let me illustrate with a specific example. In the March 3, 1990, issue of the *Church News*, there was a report of the official recognition of the Church by the government of Czechoslovakia. A photograph showed Elder Hans B. Ringger and me meeting with Dr. Josef Hromadka, Deputy Prime

Minister of that country. The fourth person in that picture was Jiri Snederfler, district president of the Church in Czechoslovakia. The accompanying account was truly historic! But another unpublished story preceded that story reported by the media.

As general authorities of the Church, we have been petitioning for official recognition in Czechoslovakia for several years. When Elder Ringger and I met with the minister of Religious Affairs of the country for the first time, we asked him what must be done to gain official recognition that would allow members of the Church in Czechoslovakia to meet in dignity and in full compliance with the law. He replied, "First, you will have to submit statutes indicating your religious beliefs. And they must be submitted not by you 'foreigners,' but by members of your Church here in Czechoslovakia. One of those members must be willing to meet with us and submit those statutes in person. Following that, we will consider your request."

Bear in mind that at this time, some citizens of Czechoslovakia were incarcerated in jail for expression of religious belief or dissident thought. You all know that the new president of the Czechoslovakian Republic, Vaclav Havel, shortly before he became president, was among those prisoners. Not only that, but for nearly four decades, our faithful Latter-day Saints had met quietly only in their homes.

After our meeting with the Minister of Religious Affairs, Elder Ringger and I conferred privately with our district president and his wife, Olga. We explained what was required. Then we asked him, "Are you willing to expose yourself as a member of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints? Are you willing to take the risk, knowing that it might mean jail or death if you were to identify yourself as the leader of the Church in this country?" We assured him that as his ecclesiastical authorities, we could not and would not make that request of him. We could only ask him to determine what his conscience would allow him to do.

Bravely he replied, "Of course I will do it! I will reveal myself. I will meet with the magistrate. I will take the statutes to him personally. I will submit myself to his mercy." Then he concluded, "I will take whatever risk is necessary and even pay with my life, if needed, for the cause of the Lord and his Church because I know the gospel is true!" His wife gave her approval as tears of love moistened her eyes.

God bless Brother and Sister Snederfler for their courage. They are the unsung heroes in the drama that made this significant announcement possible. Because of them, the Church will enter a new era of growth in Czechoslovakia. A mission will be reestablished there in July 1990 after an absence of forty years.

Brother and Sister Snederfler are noble examples of individual initiative balanced on fundamentals. They have been magnified and made great in the eyes of God and their fellowmen.

Valiant action occasionally entails risk. One's reputation, one's very life may be put on the line. Modern scripture suggests that this may be required of each of us. In speaking of our day when the Lord would come to make up his jewels, He spoke of the trials to which his Saints may be subjected:

Therefore, they must needs be chastened and tried, even as Abraham, who was commanded to offer up his only son.

For all those who will not endure chastening, but deny me, cannot be sanctified (D&C 101:4-5).

In a way, every leader in the Church has to endure trials. Every stake president, bishop, elders quorum president, and teacher has similar and challenging opportunities for individual initiative. When balanced in motion and upon sound fundamental principles, deeds of greatness can result.

Your legal training will require your becoming experts in the letter of the law. You will become craftsmen with words of the English language. But even more challenging will be your ability to master the spirit of the law.

The spirit is all important. President Benson often tells us that the most important thing about our work in the Church is the spirit.

A similar expression was uniquely voiced last month by Dr. Hromadka, Deputy Prime Minister of the Republic of Czechoslovakia. We conversed with him about the challenges faced by a new government in a land where so much is needed. We asked if we, as members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, could be of any help to his people. He knew that our Church is well recognized for its efforts in providing humanitarian relief throughout the world. We shall never forget his reply. He said, "We don't need material goods or technology. We need a new spirit. We need moral values. We need the Judeo-Christian ethic back in our curriculum. Please help us to make this a time of spiritual renewal for our nation!"

The new president of Czechoslovakia, Vaclav Havel, won the admiration of his audience when he addressed a joint session of the United States Congress. He did not hold an empty hat in hand. He asked only for spiritual assistance, not just for himself, but also for his neighbor.

This man, who had been unjustly imprisoned for so long and could have felt unkindly toward his captors, said, "I cannot hate; I will not hate." As he spoke to the combined assembly of the United States Congress, he made this impassioned plea for spiritual help:

The worst thing is that we are living in a decayed moral environment. We have become morally ill, because we have become accustomed to saying one thing and thinking another. We have learned not to believe in anything, not to have consideration for one another, and only to look after ourselves. Notions such as love, friendship, compassion, humility, and forgiveness have lost their depth and dimension, and for many of us they represent merely a psychological idiosyncrasy, or appear to be some kind of stray relic, something rather comical in the era of computers and space rockets.



What a marvelous message! President Havel's hopes for love, friendship, compassion, humility, and forgiveness harken right back to counsel given through the ages by living prophets of God. They have stressed the importance of practicing those principles broadly and, especially, within the walls of our own homes.

I am informed that about 50 percent of you students here tonight are married. And I suspect others may take that important step if your prospective mates are successful in catching you.

May I offer a little advice that may be helpful in your domestic relationships? Be mindful that there is no guarantee of a long life here in mortality.

The sporting world was shocked earlier this month. A 23-year-old basketball star, Hank Gathers, had just completed an "alley-oop" play with a spectacular slam dunk. He then headed up court with a big smile. Seconds later he collapsed and, in spite of prolonged efforts at resuscitation, he died.

While I don't presume to know any more about his particular clinical history than has been published in the papers, I do know this. So-called "skipped" heart beats are common. We all experience them from time to time. Some of those are recorded on the electrocardiogram (ECG) as premature ventricular contractions, or PVCs. If one of those PVCs occurs precisely at the onset of the T wave of the ECG, the heart is especially prone to a fatal shift of its rhythm. A normal rhythm can suddenly switch to ventricular fibrillation—a random motion of muscle fibers—which is incompatible with life because the heart can no longer propel blood. It is my assumption that this is what happened to Hank Gathers. The same can happen, regardless of physical conditioning, to any of us at any time.

Every day of life is a precious gift from God. I sincerely believe these words of King Benjamin:

If you should render all the thanks and praise which your whole soul has power to possess, to that God who has created you, and has kept and preserved you . . .

If ye should serve him who has created you from the beginning, and is preserving you from day to day, by lending you breath, that ye may live and move and do according to your own will, and even supporting you from one moment to another—I say, if ye should serve him with all your whole souls yet ye would be unprofitable servants.

And behold, all that he requires of you is to keep his commandments; and he has promised you that if ye would keep his commandments ye should prosper in the land (Mosiah 2:20–22).

That scripture teaches the importance of humility, gratitude, obedience, and faith in promised blessings.

It reminds us how fortunate we are to be touched by the majestic spirit of Rex E. Lee, president of Brigham Young University. His example of courage and candor, fidelity and love, constitutes a model worthy of our

emulation. He teaches us to keep our vision on the eternities ahead, yet to live and enjoy each day as if it were our last.

We can learn much from such courageous men and women of greatness. Though our eyes are fixed on distant goals, we do today's work today. We can pay our bills on the day we receive them. Today, we can really treat our neighbors as we would like to be treated. We can tell our partners of our love daily.

Occasionally I awaken in the night and tenderly run my fingers through the curly hair of the companion lying beside me. I'm so grateful for her. I suppose some of that gratitude stems from long periods of separation imposed upon us from time to time. How I missed her when I served in the Army on duty overseas! How I missed her when spending arduous nights rendering emergency surgical care at the hospital! And now those long and lonely nights must be endured again when I have assignments overseas for the Church.

Your spiritual self-evaluation is of great importance. Most of you will practice law on a fee-for-service basis. Collect that fee to enable you to serve others. Don't collect the fee as the reason for your service. And, occasionally, you will wish to render service without a fee. That is a great privilege—one of the refreshing distinctions between a profession and a trade.

Your professional work is to support your family. Your family does not exist to support your work.

Your profession will necessarily bring you into contact with the corrupted, which can be corrupting in itself. Your own spiritual strength must be your safeguard.

A society with no other scale than a legal one is not worthy of sons and daughters of God. Any morality based solely on the letter of the law falls short of the great potential of the human soul.

So I plead for a proper balance between fundamentals and initiatives. Actions based on eternal principles enlarge the soul. Through such actions we literally can become more like the Lord. We need not be boastful, but we can literally achieve the goal Jesus Christ expressed for us. "What manner of men ought ye to be?" he asked. Then he answered his own question: "Even as I am" (3 Nephi 27:27). As we so build we will be exhilarated, enlarged, ennobled, and magnified beyond our fondest dreams.

Please know of our deep love for you and of our great confidence in you. Our prayers are with you and your loved ones for your success now and always. I invoke the blessings of the Lord upon you as I testify that God lives, that Jesus is the Christ, that his restored church provides the pathway by which we can achieve balanced growth in this life and eternal glory in the life to come. In the name of Jesus Christ, Amen.

*This fireside address was given at the BYU Law School on March 18, 1990. Reprinted from the Clark Memorandum, Fall 1990, 12–17.*

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