

# *To Confirm and Inform: A Blessing of Higher Education*

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I became a seminary teacher in the Church Educational System at a time when a new paradigm for teaching the scriptures was being introduced. Our leaders felt that this new approach, which emphasized teaching each book from the standard works sequentially from beginning to end, would help students better know and love the scriptures. It was exciting to be part of that grand experiment. President Henry B. Eyring, who was then serving as commissioner of Church education, shared his feelings about what these efforts could accomplish. He said:

*I have a hunch that four or five years from now you will see more Latter-day Saint youth in our classes pondering the scriptures, talking about them with each other, teaching each other from them, believing that they really do have the answers to the questions of their hearts.<sup>1</sup>*

I believe that President Eyring's "hunch" has been realized in you. I believe you are a generation that knows and loves the scriptures. Today I would like to take advantage of this opportunity to test that hypothesis—so I am going to give you a test. Here is the test. I am going to begin reciting a passage of scripture. When I stop, I would like you to finish it if you

can, speaking out loud so those around you can hear. Let's begin.

"For behold, this is my work and . . ." (Moses 1:39).

"I will go and . . ." (1 Nephi 3:7).

"I, the Lord, will forgive whom . . ." (D&C 64:10).

"Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least . . ." (Matthew 25:40).

"Adam fell that men . . ." (2 Nephi 2:25).

"When ye are in the service of your fellow beings ye . . ." (Mosiah 2:17).

"And it came to pass . . ."

I am teasing, of course, with the last example, but isn't it wonderful to be part of a people who know and love the scriptures? I love the way the scriptures make me feel. I love the perspective and hope they give my life. I love to hear the words. I love the way phrases and passages come to mind when I need strength or direction. I love to hold the scriptures, turn the pages, see the markings and notes, and

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read the words that feel like comfortable old friends. To me, the scriptures are one of the great manifestations that God loves us.

I am sure many of you can recall the words that the Book of Mormon prophet Jacob spoke to the people of Nephi about a problem in his day. You remember that he said:

*O the vainness, and the frailties, and the foolishness of men! When they are learned they think they are wise, and they hearken not unto the counsel of God, for they set it aside, supposing they know of themselves, wherefore, their wisdom is foolishness and it profiteth them not. [2 Nephi 9:28]*

Modern sociological studies indicate that the pattern in which learning undermines faith was not a problem unique to Jacob’s people or dispensation. Studies analyzing religiosity and education levels in the United States typically indicate that the most educated Americans are the least likely to participate in religious activities such as prayer, Bible study, and missionary work. However, within individual Christian denominations, the relationship between education and one measure of religiosity—church attendance—appears to be positive, though often only mildly so. Latter-day Saints typically stand out as different in these kinds of studies, for not only is the correlation between education and church attendance very strong for members of our faith, but other measures of religiosity are positively correlated with education as well. For example, if you are a Latter-day Saint, the more education you have, the more likely you are to pray, to study the gospel, to pay tithing, and to feel that your faith is important in your life.<sup>2</sup>

As members of the Church, we are not surprised by these findings, for we understand that a faith confirmed by the Spirit is further confirmed and informed by education. In fact, it is our clear and published expectation that your BYU education should “be (1) spiritually strengthening, (2) intellectually enlarging, and

(3) character building, leading to (4) lifelong learning and service.”<sup>3</sup>

My own experience in obtaining higher education has followed typical Latter-day Saint trends. My testimony and understanding of the gospel have been strengthened by what I have learned through my university studies. I have every confidence that yours can be as well. In order for your education to best inform and confirm your testimony of the restored gospel, I believe three important conditions must be met. First, you must have faith; second, you must be obedient; and third, you must be observant. I would like to explain what I mean by each of these, beginning with the condition that you must have faith.

### **We Must Have Faith**

We use the word *faith* to describe a number of different principles and concepts. I would like to share a personal experience to illustrate what I mean by faith in this context. When I was a little boy, I enjoyed pretending to be a superhero. I patterned myself after the most popular hero of the day, Superman. When my mother tied a bath-towel cape around my neck, I was transformed not into Superman but rather into a hero of my own making: I became “Man of the Whole Wide World.”

I spent much time each day pretending to fly around as Man of the Whole Wide World—so much time, in fact, that I eventually had a Korihor experience. Do you remember Korihor? He spent so much time pretending to believe things that were not true that eventually he “verily believed that they were true” (Alma 30:53). Likewise, I began to convince myself that I might really be Man of the Whole Wide World and that perhaps I really could fly.

One day I decided to find out. I reasoned that if I were really going to fly, I would need to leap from a high altitude. Fortunately I chose the arm of the living room sofa as the high-altitude launching point from which to test my hypothesis. I leaped many times from

the sofa, only to land on my feet just a few inches away. Then it occurred to me that when Superman flew, his body was horizontal—parallel to the ground—but when I jumped from the sofa, my body was vertical—perpendicular to the ground. (I did not know the terms then, but I understood the principle.) It seemed to me that in order to really fly, all I needed to do was leap from the sofa and quickly orient my body so that it was flat—parallel to the ground. I only tested this hypothesis once, for the experiment was too painful to repeat. In fact, after conducting the experiment, I came to the sad realization that I was not really Man of the Whole Wide World. But in the process something I had always known in my heart to be true was confirmed: ordinary people cannot fly. I learned that one's education will strengthen one's beliefs, but only if those beliefs are true. In fact, a belief in things that are not true will fall flat on its face.

Many more profound educational experiences have followed that simple early one. Those experiences have continued to confirm and inform the things I know to be true in my heart while helping me avoid being caught up in the imaginations of men. They have helped me understand that real faith is as Alma defined it to the humble among the Zoramites. He said, "Faith is not to have a perfect knowledge of things; therefore if ye have faith ye hope for things which are not seen, *which are true*" (Alma 32:21; emphasis added). Thus, while one may believe that a false principle is true, that belief cannot be real faith, for faith is, by this definition, a belief in things that are true.

It is little wonder, then, that higher education leads to greater faith and devotion among Latter-day Saints, for the restored gospel is true. God lives. Jesus Christ is our Redeemer. Joseph Smith was God's prophet of the Restoration. A belief in these things is faith, for these things are true, and if you have this faith, your education can indeed confirm and inform it.

This kind of faith—this ability to recognize and believe truth—is identified as a spiritual gift by the Apostle Paul and by Moroni (see 1 Corinthians 12:9; Moroni 10:11). Many of you have enjoyed this spiritual gift from a very young age. You have believing hearts and find it easy to recognize and accept the truths of the gospel. For others, having this kind of faith is difficult. Perhaps you have not been taught gospel truths or perhaps you find it difficult to recognize truth when you hear it. Some of us simply struggle to believe. If that sounds like you, do not be discouraged or give up. Remember that the Apostle Paul encouraged us to earnestly seek spiritual gifts (see 1 Corinthians 12:31, footnote 31a). I know that God wants each of us to have the gift of faith and that if you sincerely strive and ask Him for it, God will give you this gift—this wonderful ability to recognize and believe truth—and your education will strengthen that faith.

### **We Must Be Obedient**

In addition to having faith, we must be obedient if we want our education to be spiritually strengthening. I would like to share another personal experience to illustrate why this is so. One of the wonderful experiences a young husband can anticipate is that of watching his bride learn how to cook. While some young women enter marriage already skilled in the art of cooking, many do not. For some the learning curve can be very steep.

My wife, Sister Ball, is a wonderful cook. Over the years she has polished and refined her culinary skills to the point that now I am confident she could walk into a strange kitchen and prepare a delicious and nutritious meal out of whatever she found in the pantry and refrigerator. Still, some of the early meals she prepared for us as a young couple were real gastronomical adventures. But to this day I consider one of her early successes a true miracle in the kitchen. Somehow she managed to transform broccoli into something edible. The

rave reviews I gave the dish encouraged her to make the recipe a regular part of our menu.

At that time we were living in a small town in southeastern Arizona, where I had my first assignment as a seminary teacher. The town had two major roads, appropriately named Poverty Flats and Hog Holler. We lived at the end of Hog Holler Road in a small home sandwiched between a chili field and the desert. The nearest full-service grocery store was more than 30 miles away. Consequently, kitchen commodities often ran short between trips to the store. To compensate, Sister Ball got in the habit of experimenting with substitutes for ingredients that were temporarily unavailable.

The results of her experiments were very unpredictable. On one occasion she began preparing the remarkable broccoli dish, only to discover that she did not have the cream of mushroom soup the recipe required. She decided to make her own “white sauce” from a little flour and water to substitute for the soup. (What she called “white sauce” I would call “paste.”) She reasoned that the soup was white and lumpy, and so was her flour and water concoction. The result of the substitution was a disaster. Without the proper ingredients, the true nature of broccoli was left exposed—it was no longer palatable. Sister Ball learned from that experience that color and texture are no substitutes for taste.

Following that failure, Sister Ball removed the broccoli dish from her repertoire. She no longer trusted the recipe. However, if you were to ask her about it today, she would confess that the fault was not with the dish but with her, for she had failed to hearken unto the commandments of the recipe. She thought that she could change it or twist it to her own will without consequence.

In truth, her initial confidence in the recipe was not misplaced, but that confidence could only be confirmed if she diligently abided by the recipe’s instructions. So it is with your testimony and understanding of the restored

gospel: It will be best confirmed and informed by your education if you diligently follow the recipe by keeping the commandments of God.

Indeed, the words of Jacob confirm this truth. After lamenting the foolishness of men who thought they were too smart for God, Jacob declared, “But to be learned is good if they hearken unto the counsels of God” (2 Nephi 9:29). The Savior explained it another way to some disbelieving individuals of His day. He declared, “If any man will do [God’s] will, he shall know of the doctrine, whether it be of God, or whether I speak of myself” (John 7:17).

So it can be for you. If you will diligently strive to keep the commandments of God as you gain your education, not only will you receive the confirmation of the Spirit but you will also find your testimony and understanding of the restored gospel further confirmed and informed by what you learn in your studies.

### **We Must Be Observant**

Finally, you can better obtain an education that is spiritually strengthening if you will be observant. Develop the habit of regularly observing or considering how the things you are learning from your studies can be informed by the gospel and, conversely, how your understanding of the gospel can be informed by the things you are learning. This habit of observation can add a wonderful and exciting dimension to your learning and can lead to the discovery of knowledge and ideas that might otherwise be missed.

To illustrate this concept, I would like to share one of my favorite examples of how my education has helped me better understand the gospel. Though I am a professor of ancient scripture, I have a bachelor’s degree and a PhD in the field of botany. That training has been a wonderful asset to me in my scripture study, especially of Isaiah. By my count, Isaiah uses more than 300 botanical metaphors in

his prophecies. One of my favorites, found in Isaiah 28:24–28, beautifully teaches principles fundamental to our faith. It reads:

*Doth the plowman plow all day to sow? doth he open and break the clods of his ground?*

*When he hath made plain the face thereof, doth he not cast abroad the fitches, and scatter the cummin, and cast in the principal wheat and the appointed barley and the rie in their place?*

*For his God doth instruct him to discretion, and doth teach him.*

*For the fitches are not threshed with a threshing instrument, neither is a cart wheel turned about upon the cummin; but the fitches are beaten out with a staff, and the cummin with a rod.*

*Bread corn is bruised; because he will not ever be threshing it, nor break it with the wheel of his cart, nor bruise it with his horsemen.*

Looking at this passage through a botanist's eyes reveals some wonderful principles of the gospel. The passage begins with a question: "Doth the plowman plow all day to sow?" In other words, does a plowman plow the same field over and over again? The answer of course is no. Rather, when he has broken the clods of the ground and "hath made plain [or level] the face thereof," he begins to sow—in this case various kinds of seeds in different ways.

First he plants "fitches" and "cummin." *Fitches* likely refers to *Nigella sativa*, a plant commonly known today as nutmeg flower. This plant has finely incised leaves and grows on a delicate stem to about 12 inches tall. It has a terminal white or pale blue flower that matures into a walnut-sized and -shaped seed-pod; at maturity the pod is very brittle and is loaded with tiny seeds that are valued as a pungent spice. The *cummin* mentioned in this verse is likely the same plant as our modern cumin (*Cuminum cyminum*). This member of the carrot family grows up to two feet tall and produces clusters of white to pink flowers

that, at maturity, yield the spicy seeds that are still valued in kitchens today. Both fitches and cumin have relatively tiny seeds that do not require special spacing in their planting, so the wise farmer plants these seeds by merely casting abroad or throwing (Hebrew *zaraq*) and scattering (*hephitz*) them over the ground. Today we call this broadcast seeding. Seeds sown by broadcasting grow close together in dense patches or clusters, which happens to be an ideal condition for fitches and cumin, for if the plants are sown too widely apart they do not compete as well with other vegetation. When planted close together in tight communities, fitches and cumin thrive, creating their own microenvironment that preserves moisture and chokes out competing weeds.

The farmer next plants three kinds of cereal grains. First, he "[casts] in the principal wheat." Bread wheat (*Triticum sp.*) was the most important food crop grown anciently and still is today. It is truly the staff of life. Accordingly, this critical crop is planted with special care. The Hebrew term *sowrah*, translated here as "principal," is better translated as "in rows." Thus, rather than merely throwing out the wheat seeds, the wise farmer "casts"—from the Hebrew *sam*, meaning to put or place—the seeds in rows. By carefully placing the seeds in rows, the farmer ensures that his precious wheat crop will have adequate spacing for the irrigation, cultivation, and ripening it so needs to thrive.

Following the wheat, the farmer plants the "appointed barley," or, better translated, "the barley in the appointed place." Barley (*Hordium sp.*) is an inferior grain to wheat for human consumption—barley bread is the poor man's bread. The redeeming value of barley is that it will grow in places where wheat will not; it is much more tolerant of poor soils, especially saline soils. If a portion of a field has poor drainage—which causes the salinity of the soil to increase—that portion becomes the appointed place for barley. The farmer knows

that while precious wheat may not grow there, barley will do just fine.

Finally, the farmer plants the “rie in [its] place.” The Hebrew term *gebulto*, translated here as “in [its] place,” is better translated as “on the edges” or “borders.” Thus the farmer seems to be planting the rie around the edges of his field, perhaps to form a living hedge or fence to protect the other crops. The rie planted here is likely a type of spelt wheat that is not free threshing—meaning that the seeds cannot be easily separated from the seed heads. This kind of wheat is a poor grain for human use and is more commonly used for animal fodder, straw, and, in this case, as a protective hedge.

Can you picture then the farmer’s field? In one portion he has a nicely broadcast patch of fitches and in another a broadcast patch of cummin. In the choicest part of his field he has carefully placed rows of wheat. In the poorest sections of the field he has planted barley and then surrounded the entire field with a protective hedge of rie.

Obviously Isaiah is trying to do something more here than teach us about Old Testament agriculture. I believe Isaiah wants us to liken the farmer to our Heavenly Father and the seeds to ourselves. Have you ever wondered why you were born where and when you were born? Why were you not born 500 years ago in some primitive aboriginal culture in some isolated corner of the world? Is the timing and placing of our birth capricious? For Latter-day Saints, the answer is no. Fundamental to our faith is the understanding that before we came to this earth we lived in a premortal existence with a loving Heavenly Father. We further understand that in that premortal state we had agency and that we grew and developed as we used that agency. Some, as Abraham learned, became noble and great ones (see Abraham 3:22–23). We believe that when it came time for us to experience mortality, a loving Heavenly Father, who knows each of us well, sent us to earth at the time and in the place and in cir-

cumstances that would best help us reach our divine potential and help Him maximize His harvest of redeemed souls.

Therefore, some of you are fitches and cummin. You were born and raised in tight-knit and supportive communities, and you are a vital and contributing part of those communities. Others of you are wheat. You have been placed in exceptionally fertile and promising places because God, who knows your special potential, is counting on you to produce so much. Some of you are barley and rie. You have been placed in some difficult circumstances and have perhaps had to face handicaps and hardships, but God knows you. He knows your needs, your hearts, and your abilities, and He knows you can reach your divine potential, even in the face of great trials. Perhaps it is those very trials that will help you reach your potential, or perhaps He allows you to face those trials so you can help others reach their potential. Some of you may be zucchini: It would not matter where you were planted, you would grow and flourish and produce extraordinary amounts of fruit to be foisted upon unsuspecting neighbors.

The teaching in this passage does not end with the planting of the seeds but continues through to the harvest. Isaiah observes that “fitches are not threshed with a threshing instrument, neither is a cart wheel turned about upon the cummin.” The “threshing instrument” mentioned here is today known as a threshing sled. This is a toboggan-shaped tool that typically stands about six feet tall and two to three feet wide. On the underside of the sled, rocks or slivers of flint or obsidian are embedded. Anciently, and in some places still today, when a farmer is harvesting his grain, he will cut it close to the ground, tie it into sheaves, and then place the sheaves on an area of hard-beaten earth called a threshing floor. When the threshing floor is covered with sheaves, he will place the threshing sled on top of the sheaves, weigh it down with something, and then have

it pulled around over the sheaves. As the threshing sled is pulled over the sheaves, the kernels of grain are knocked out of the seed heads, and the rest of the plant is chopped into chaff. Then on a windy day the farmer will use his winnowing fork to toss the mixture of chaff and grain into the air. As he does so, the lighter chaff is blown away, leaving the clean kernels of grain behind. In the absence of a threshing sled, the farmer may use a heavy cart to thresh the grain.

But Isaiah observes that threshing sleds and carts are not used on fitches and cumin. Can you see why? These plants are too delicate and the seeds too tiny to withstand the rigors of a threshing sled or the weight of a cart. Using such implements would grind the seeds into oblivion. Rather, Isaiah observes that “fitches are beaten out with a staff, and the cummin with a rod.”

I picture the farmer placing a piece of cloth on the ground and then, while holding the plants over it, lightly tapping the seed heads with a stick. As he does so, the fragile seed heads break open and spill their contents onto the cloth. That is all it takes to get the harvest out of fitches and cumin—just a little light tapping with a stick. But imagine what would happen if you tried to thresh wheat in this manner: You could spend an entire day lightly tapping the seed heads and have very little to show for your labors. The wise farmer knows that wheat and other cereals need to be vigorously and rigorously threshed to produce a harvest. As Isaiah explains, “Bread corn is bruised; because he will not ever be threshing it.”

Consider what the threshing represents in this metaphor. Perhaps it refers to the challenges and trials we experience in life that, if properly processed, bring out the harvest, the very best in each of us. Or perhaps the threshing represents opportunities, talents, and callings we are given. Have you ever been threshed by a calling or an opportunity to serve? Thus some of you are like fitches and cumin: it only

takes a little nudge or challenge and the goodness just spills out of you. Others of you more likely resemble wheat. You have to be vigorously pushed and challenged before your potential surfaces. The point is that God knows you and loves you and that if you will trust Him and involve Him in your life, then He will see that you have the challenges and opportunities—the threshing—that will help you realize your fullest potential. These are wonderful truths, perhaps taught better in this passage of Isaiah than anywhere else in the scriptures.

I am so grateful for the ways in which my botanical studies have helped me understand this beautiful metaphor of Isaiah and many other passages of scripture. I believe that when an engineer, a musician, a social scientist, or anyone educated in a given discipline reads the scriptures, they too can gain insights and make discoveries unique to that discipline if they are looking for them and if they are observant. It is exciting to be a part of a community of learners who are doing so and then sharing their insights and discoveries with others. I hope you will develop the habit of being so observant—of regularly considering what your learning can tell you about the gospel and what the gospel can tell you about your learning.

Brothers and sisters, you have a wonderful opportunity while here at BYU to gain a spiritually strengthening education and to join the ranks of those whose commitment to and understanding of the gospel have been greatly enhanced by their studies. May I invite you to work toward that goal by being faithful, by being obedient, and by being observant. In the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

#### Notes

1. Henry B. Eyring, “We Need a Miracle,” unpublished address to CES area directors, 6 April 1981, 5.

2. See *Religion in America, 1982* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton Religion Research

Center, 1982), as cited in Stan L. Albrecht and Tim B. Heaton, "Secularization, Higher Education, and Religiosity," in *Review of Religious Research* 26, no. 1 (September 1984): 43–58; see also *Latter-day Saint Social Life: Social Research on the LDS Church and Its Members*,

ed. James T. Duke (Provo: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 1998), 293–314.

3. In *The Mission of Brigham Young University and The Aims of a BYU Education* (Provo: BYU, 1996), 3.