

The University and the Kingdom of God

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Friends, this morning I offer a love story. It is not *the* love story, mind you, but it is in some ways like *the* love story. *The* love story would take three hours (if I did it right), and I am told we don't have time. If I were telling *the* love story, about the remarkable woman seated behind me, you might be struck by the story's influence on me. In fact, please inscribe this on my tombstone: "If he amounted to anything, it is because he loved her." I love Hollie more for the good she calls forth from me than for what she does for me. In a word, she inspires me. And therein lies my simile. This morning's love story centers on this university and the church that sponsors it. As with *the* love story, my love for The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and for Brigham Young University has everything to do with the good they call forth from me, with what they insist I become.

Knowledge Transmission and Creation

First, a word or two about universities more generally. I love them. I have always felt at home on university campuses. I have had more than one opportunity to leave academic life, but I can never seem to pry myself away. I have lectured or researched at many of the great universities in

the United States and Europe and hope to visit a few more. Something about the life of the mind has always resonated with me. I find it stretching and exhilarating. It feeds my avid curiosity. In fact, when other fourth graders were getting sports and achievement awards at our year-end ceremony, I got what seemed at the time to be the lamest award of the bunch: my citation noted my "thirst for knowledge." I must have looked devastated, because I was. That award earned me no new friends, but it at least predicted my future career.

When I was early in my graduate studies at a venerable Midwestern research institution, I passed a prominent inscription that stopped me in my tracks:

*Whatever may be the limitations which trammel inquiry elsewhere, we believe that the great state University of Wisconsin should ever encourage that continual and fearless sifting and winnowing by which alone the truth can be found.*¹

J. Spencer Fluhman, executive director of the BYU Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, delivered this devotional address on July 30, 2019.

I knew the plaque was not intended as a religious message, but it resonated with my religious self. “Truth” named a quest that I had long invested in, and I came to feel quite at home in that secular university community.

For several centuries before I arrived for graduate training, colleges and universities had functioned as a critical mechanism for transmitting knowledge. The “modern” university was born in the late nineteenth century, however. It was oriented not merely around the transmission of knowledge; through focused research, it was to *create* knowledge. Such a thing has always seemed bold and exciting to me, and I have never tired of the process of knowledge creation. I suppose I love universities because I am unfinished, because I am perpetually “in process” myself.

That university ideal of knowledge transmission and creation has had an uneasy history with religious institutions in the United States, however. Many religious traditions feature revelation as a critical means of gaining or creating knowledge, and revelation and academic research sometimes have been seen as oppositional in the history of American universities. In fact, the questions of whether religious ideas or institutions or, more specifically, which religious ideas or institutions should set educational agendas became an almost overwhelming problem in this country. A kind of compromise developed in which a so-called secular ideal took root at many elite institutions, in which no preference for any particular religious identity or position reigned, at least explicitly, and in which a “marketplace” of ideas could wend as it may. Significantly, some minority faiths experienced this secular ideal as heaven-sent. Early Latter-day Saints, for instance, frequently found elite institutions to be places of belonging, since their talents were often valued in spite of their unpopular religious identities.²

There was a price to be paid for that secular ideal, however. Universities, fearful of favoring a single religious tradition or having religious institutions command special sway, gradually drew back from the idea of the university as an engine for moral, ethical, or spiritual development. Though early universities had sometimes

seen themselves as critical partners in fostering public morality or human flourishing in a broad sense, modern universities have increasingly left these big questions to others. Partly as a result, academic disciplines increasingly have drawn narrow lines around intellectual inquiry, with methods and training designed for ever-increasing specialization. In extreme cases, universities have focused their efforts on preparing laborers for labor markets and little else.

Wrestling with Difficult Questions

Important for Latter-day Saints, the university looms larger than a mere historical accident in what we call “the Restoration.” When the early Saints scarcely had resources for food and shelter, they were organizing universities. Joseph Smith, who had plenty to do leading the Church in its infant years, seemed inspired by the university ideal, especially so for someone who lacked all but the meager beginnings of formal education himself. Joseph Smith was spiritually and intellectually voracious—if indeed it makes sense in his case to separate the two. He incessantly collected beauty and truth from the world around him with what one prominent scholar has described as a process of inspired, eclectic gathering from disparate sources.³ He gathered good and virtuous things where he found them and then repurposed them to enrich and propel the kingdom of God.

The university surely counts as one of those inspired borrowings. Subsequent prophets and apostles have consistently elaborated on Joseph’s seedling ideas. It should not escape our attention that the Saints planned a University of the City of Nauvoo or that the seeds of a University of Deseret were in place by 1850 or that a Brigham Young Academy was a fledgling reality by 1875. Simply put, prioritizing something like a university when so much else seemed so tenuous surely tells us something about the place of the life of the mind in God’s kingdom. The plain fact of this university shouts quite a sermon, don’t you think? In truth, with the full history of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in view, we dare say that the world of ideas is indispensable for the

Restoration. As the late Elder Neal A. Maxwell put it, most memorably:

*For a disciple of Jesus Christ, academic scholarship is a form of worship. It is actually another dimension of consecration.*⁴

As a result, Brigham Young University will not and cannot divorce itself from the big questions of human experience. Unlike other institutions, there is no secularizing retreat here that permits any discipline or field to imagine itself apart from questions of human flourishing or morality or even holiness. Put another way, where does God's light not seek to shine? What field of inquiry can stand apart from questions of ultimate reality? Of divine love? Of God's design in creation and redemption? To paraphrase a modern revelation, which powerfully echoes ancient ones, God's light proceeds from His presence to fill the immensity of space and is thereby in all things.⁵ Would we dare circumscribe that light? An eminent scholar and Christian believer wrote this of faith and scholarship: "Put most simply, for believers to be studying created things is to be studying the works of Christ."⁶ This insight hardly limits learning. It should set it free.

Nearly a century ago, Elsie Talmage Brandley urged the Latter-day Saints on:

*To know the fundamental truths of the gospel is to leave one free to go far and wide, anchored by that knowledge, in search of all else that earth and sea and skies have to teach.*⁷

Indeed, for us there are only hazy, probably illusory, boundaries between the compartments modern people often draw within their lives and around their institutions. Elder Jeffrey R. Holland, speaking last year to Maxwell Institute scholars on this campus wrestling with these very matters, put this powerfully and succinctly: "Your soul must be one—integrated, intact, and whole."⁸ The same holds true for a university in Zion. Where do Christ's claims on us end? Where do charity and justice not demand a hearing? In medicine? In law? In the management of resources? In the

deployment of technology? In politics? If we can imagine a field of knowledge here, at this university, about which the gospel of Jesus Christ has nothing to say, we may have traded our birthright in Zion for a mess of secular pottage. There can be no wholesale acquiescence to modern categories here. Religion pours out, hot and demanding, into every field at this university because it must. Again, from Elder Maxwell:

*The redeeming presence of our loving Father-God in the universe is the grand fact pertaining to the human condition. It is the supernal truth which, along with His plan of happiness, reigns preeminent and imperial over all other realities.*⁹

So business as usual cannot be business as usual here. That redemptive presence, that "grand fact," must organize and prioritize every effort at this university.

These realities will make the disciplines more demanding, not less. A steady diet of religious or intellectual Twinkies—sugary sweet but without real nourishment—as one of my colleagues describes them, has no place in God's kingdom. The intersection of academic disciplines and the Restoration's grand facts should be electric and, in every sense, rigorous. This university, after all, must call forth our best selves to be worthy of its place. To be casual about our collective aspirations would be to trifle with sacred things. Expect your courses to be difficult. Expect your professors to wrestle mightily with their topics. Expect unfinished business all around. Expect theory and hypothesis to jostle alongside settled conviction. Expect now and again to fall short of our stated aspirations—those failures are crushing but necessary. And above all, expect to wrestle yourself. There is deep magic in the spiritual struggles demanded here. Joseph Smith hinted at this when he wrote of what it would take to make a difference in this world. Notice how he connects mind and redemption:

Thy mind, O Man! if thou wilt lead a soul unto salvation, must stretch as high as the utmost heavens, and search into and contemplate the lowest considerations of the

*darkest abyss, and expand upon the broad considerations of eternal expanse; he must commune with God.*¹⁰

It will not be all sunshine and angels, in other words. Expect some abyss. One of our finest theological minds, Francine R. Bennion, reminded us why the way is so often clouded: “We have to [learn to] be real ourselves and not dependent on externals.”¹¹ We must labor, in other words, with a clear sense of the world and its deepest problems, or none of us will be ready to lead anyone to any kind of salvation. To commune with God, according to Joseph Smith, is to begin to comprehend reality as broadly and as viscerally as He does. Superficiality and slothfulness would thwart that kind of education as surely as sin or oppression.

Accordingly, we can’t simply steer around difficult questions here. We have to wrestle right through them, and we must do it together. My marching orders came years ago in BYU’s new faculty orientation. When asked about dealing with difficult questions as a featured visitor in that setting, the late Elder Richard G. Scott warned us that avoiding them might actually harm faith down the road because we would have missed an opportunity to engage them here, together, within the household of faith. I have never forgotten that apostolic warning.

In my many years of teaching, I have seen students and faculty meet that challenge in memorable ways. Last year, when a colleague and I team-taught a course on Latter-day Saint political engagement, we joked the first day that we would rather casually combine the two topics one should never discuss in polite company! Our students marveled throughout the course that we refused to maneuver around tough questions. Each class period featured some fresh, daunting challenge, from violence to race to immigration to gender and sexual orientation. And we marveled back as our students navigated these issues with rigor and faith and, especially, that they chose to do it together, as difficult as it was for Saints from such varied backgrounds and perspectives. I wept as I read their course evaluations. To a person, they left the course more committed to the things that matter most, not less.

A Gathering of God’s Children

Looking ahead at the challenges that await each of us, it might be helpful to remember that this university has both direction and magnitude. (That’s right, *Despicable Me* fans, this university is a vector!) Its direction is unalterable. It is chiseled in Wasatch granite. It must build God’s kingdom or wither away. Its magnitude, however, is variable. Its significance in the world depends on our collective intellectual and spiritual force as a gathering of God’s children. If we reduce our time here to personal calculations about jobs and salaries and individual futures, we will have failed to recognize this place’s embeddedness in the overarching project of the Almighty. If, on the other hand, we see ourselves firmly within that grand project, our time here will feel less like a breathless sprint toward a certificate and more like the gift that it is.

You might think of yourself as seeking God here, but, in truth, He has been seeking you. He is fitting you for a world that needs you. There are always problems afoot that will demand our very best and then some. From poverty to racism to ecological collapse to rampant inequality to sexual violence to poor healthcare to religious freedom to deficient education—this world groans under the weight of our collective failures. This world yearns for a people with a broad and compelling vision infused with the hope and compassion the gospel of Jesus Christ inspires in each of us. In short, this world needs you. Our numbers will always be miniscule, but where there is great need, Latter-day Saints must be there. We will be motivated by something beyond self-interest, I hope. We will stay a little longer, I hope. We will do the things that no one else wants to do. I trust that we will be out of the spotlight, helping the forgotten ones. Do you want to make a difference in your communities? You are at the right university. Do you want to change the world? You are in the right church. You will learn from both our successes and our failures, but, make no mistake, your time here will be a wide-ranging education if you will let it be.

At this point I offer a caution as one who has intermittently done it wrong in the past.

Sometimes academic training can work to distance us from the body of Christ. Because we ask different questions, or ask them differently, we can come to believe that our perspectives are more important than those of others who may lack our training or our experience. We can grow impatient or condescending with our fellow Saints. We can become cynical. I have experienced some of this. I have bite marks on the insides of my lips from past Sunday School lessons to prove it! But I rarely experience those frustrations these days. What changed things for me was church service, actually.

As I have come to better comprehend the scale of human suffering around us, my questions have changed. Rather than being haunted by the fact that other Saints don't care about the same questions I do in every instance, I have been obliged to reframe the problem this way: "How can my academic training answer the problem of human suffering or contribute to the redemption of the human family?" This is, I suspect, what Elder Maxwell was getting at when he equated scholarship and worship for the disciple. Such a question challenges us to consecrate our minds and training to God's purposes. It moves us toward that primeval command to love God with all our minds.¹² In this pivot, my cynicism has faded—mostly. As God has brought me into closer proximity to suffering, I have had far less time for cynicism. Ultimately, reframing in this way has drawn me profoundly toward, rather than away from my fellow Saints.

In the final tally then, this university should help facilitate our spiritual renovation—that process of transformation at the heart of God's great plan of happiness. Indeed, it must function as an instrument of redemption, writ large. In what I consider Joseph Smith's mature, perhaps final sense of Christ's Atonement's net effect on the human family, he portrayed God's plan as one of unceasing expansion. Preaching his most famous sermon just two months before his death, he characterized true religious life as a process of "going from one small degree to another, and from a small capacity to a great one; from grace to grace, [and] from exaltation to exaltation."¹³

Joseph Smith's understanding of Jesus Christ's Atonement as facilitating an ongoing renovation of our capacity for good seems to provide a direct link to the university experience. No wonder our institutional mission is so audacious! How could a university propose "to assist individuals in their quest for perfection and eternal life"¹⁴ unless it understood itself in these terms?

So we should leave this place with expanded capacities, yes, but that word *capacity* deserves our careful attention. It certainly relates to what we can do. Our capacity for hard work, for critical thinking, for expression, for creativity, and for collaboration should expand during our time here. But the word *capacity* also relates to what we can hold. Think of Joseph Smith's statement in that light. How much light can I hold? How much patience can I hold? How much compassion? How much love? When we begin to see our university time—and our lives, for that matter—as a renovation of our capacity for both good works and for holding beauty and truth and every other good thing, then we will be learning indeed. And if in the complexities and contradictions we must all face along the way we are driven to our knees before the beautiful, startling mystery of it all, then we will be Latter-day Saints indeed.

Pursuing Zion Together

This intellectual and spiritual work can be difficult. It can be exhausting. I know some of you are tired. You are not sure you can keep at it. You go ahead and find some stillness today. Gather your strength today. Rest up today, because tomorrow we ride for Zion. And it is not quite Zion if you are not there. Remember, you don't ride alone. Step back and consider the thousands around you. Consider the thousands who preceded you. Consider the unnumbered hosts yet to come. You don't ride alone.

This path takes courage and vision, yes. It takes faith, and faith will always be counterintuitive in this world. So is love. Why believe or hope or care when the data seem so often stubbornly trailing in other directions? Faith, hope, and charity are audacious in such a world as this. But make no mistake, we will find the place that

God for us has prepared, even if it seems far away today. Just when your strength is flagging, you will catch the glint of some gleaming tower off in the distance, and you will sense that God is there.¹⁵ He is. Keep going. God is playing the long game, and we should too, if we understand the scale of the struggle. The ride will not end and the Restoration will not conclude until every daughter and son of God who will come has been safely gathered into the Lord's extended, covenantal embrace.

As a result, the critical moment in Church history is now, because it is the one that falls to us. Each generation in the Church gifts to the next the faith that has lighted our way. In return, the rising generation reveals to us those facets of the gift that are most meaningful now. That is what you students gift to us. So I thank you, my students, numbered in the thousands now, for showing me what is both timely and timeless and durable about this faith that has won my devotion.

In the early history of the Church, holy temples of necessity functioned as classrooms too. Those Saints had no other choice. The first temples became sites of teaching and learning on a wide range of topics. As a result, those early believers understood well that teaching and learning in this Church operate in sacred space. Think about the classrooms of Brigham Young University. Think about those library carrels. Think about those late-night study sessions. Remember endlessly parsing those Hebrew verbs on the chalkboards of the empty Martin Building. Remember your time learning. Recall the steep price you and others paid for it. Now look back and behold what God has wrought in you. Are you not a marvelous work and a wonder? The teaching spaces of this university are "old-school" temples to me. They are spaces made holy by the teaching you have done, by the learning I have done, and by the glorious Zion we have been pursuing together. May God continue to illuminate our way in the bright light of His Son and fit us for the weighty moment that has fallen to each of us is my prayer, in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

Notes

1. University of Wisconsin—Madison Board of Regents report, 1894; Wikipedia, s.v. "sifting and winnowing," en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sifting_and_winnowing.

2. See George M. Marsden, *The Soul of the American University: From Protestant Establishment to Established Nonbelief* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994); Steven K. Green, *The Second Disestablishment: Church and State in Nineteenth-Century America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010); Thomas W. Simpson, *American Universities and the Birth of Modern Mormonism, 1867–1940* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2016).

3. See Terryl L. Givens, *Wrestling the Angel: The Foundations of Mormon Thought: Cosmos, God, Humanity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 34–41. See also Philip L. Barlow, "To Mend a Fractured Reality: Joseph Smith's Project," *Journal of Mormon History* 38, no. 3 (Summer 2012): 28–50.

4. Neal A. Maxwell, "The Disciple-Scholar," in Henry B. Eyring, ed., *On Becoming a Disciple-Scholar* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1995), 7.

5. See D&C 88:12–13.

6. Mark A. Noll, *Jesus Christ and the Life of the Mind* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 2011), 25.

7. Elsie Talmage Brandley, "The Religious Crisis of Today," Mutual Improvement Association conference, Salt Lake City, 9 June 1934, in Jennifer Reeder and Kate Holbrook, eds., *At the Pulpit: 185 Years of Discourses by Latter-day Saint Women* (Salt Lake City: Church Historian's Press, 2017), 139.

8. Jeffrey R. Holland, "The Maxwell Legacy in the 21st Century," Neal A. Maxwell Lecture, BYU Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, 10 November 2018, reprinted in the 2018 Maxwell Institute Annual Report, 18, mi.byu.edu/about.

9. Neal A. Maxwell, "From Whom All Blessings Flow," *Ensign*, May 1997.

10. Joseph Smith, "Letter to the Church and Edward Partridge, 20 March 1839," 12, josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/letter

-to-the-church-and-edward-partridge-20-march-1839/12. Spelling, capitalization, and punctuation modernized.

11. Francine R. Bennion, "A Latter-day Saint Theology of Suffering," BYU Women's Conference address, 28 March 1986, in Reeder and Holbrook, *At the Pulpit*, 229.

12. See, among many, Matthew 22:37.

13. Joseph Smith, *HC* 6:306, 7 April 1844; also "Classics in Mormon Thought: The King Follett Sermon," *Ensign*, April 1971.

14. The Mission of Brigham Young University (4 November 1981).

15. D&C 97:19–20.