

The Inexhaustible Gospel

NEAL A. MAXWELL

I give my sincere appreciation to President Lee and to those who have planned these important days for you and for this opportunity to be with you, brothers and sisters. My appreciation goes to Michael Ballam for the beautiful music and, just as important, for the quality of his and his wife's personal discipleship.

The title of my address, "The Inexhaustible Gospel," is intended to convey the vastness and preciousness of that enormous body of knowledge we call the gospel and—if I am at all successful—some of my ever-growing excitement over it.

Before using terms like *truth, knowledge, intelligence, education, and wisdom*, I stress at the outset that the scriptural definitions of these terms give us, as Latter-day Saints, an added understanding of these concepts. They differ from those of the world—markedly, in fact. Each is "added upon" by the relevant revelations. These differences are especially worth noting during an Education Week. Please be patient while I attempt to note certain of these distinctions.

For example, our being saved by gaining knowledge obviously refers to a particular form of knowledge, a "knowledge of God" and

knowledge of the things of God (see D&C 128:19; *Teachings*, p. 217). Nephi lamented, as you know, over those who "will not search knowledge, nor understand great knowledge" (2 Nephi 32:7). Clearly he was referring to a particular kind of knowledge. In fact, Joseph Smith's translation of Jesus' lamentation—about how those in his time had lost the "key of knowledge"—provides a definition; it adds five words defining what the word *key* means: "the fulness of the scriptures" (JST, Luke 11:53; see also D&C 84:19–20). So we view knowledge differently. Furthermore, Latter-day Saints know that certain knowledge comes only by revelation and, thereby, is only "spiritually discerned" (1 Corinthians 2:14). So we are in some important respects on a different footing from the people of the world.

In addition, brothers and sisters, multiple scriptures make it clear that *knowledge* is meant to be closely associated with other virtues such as patience, humility, charity, and kindness (D&C 4:6; 107:30–31; 121:41–42; 2 Peter 1:5–9).

Neal A. Maxwell is a member of the Council of the Twelve Apostles of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. This devotional talk was given at Brigham Young University on 18 August 1992.

Truth includes, but is not limited to, knowledge that corresponds to reality—things as they were, things as they are, and things as they will be (Jacob 4:13; D&C 93:24). Gospel truth is “morally richer,” therefore, than the world’s definition of truth, as Terry Warner has written (*Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, vol. 4 [New York: Macmillan Co., 1992], p. 1490). Jesus is “the way, the truth, and the life” (John 14:6). He has “received a fulness of truth” (D&C 93:26). Hence, we are to seek to have “the mind of Christ” (1 Corinthians 2:16). Furthermore, as to the “manner” of people we are to become, it is clear we are to strive to become “even as” Jesus is (3 Nephi 27:27; see also 2 Peter 3:11). If we keep the commandments, the promise is that we will receive “truth and light” until we are “glorified in truth and knoweth all things” (D&C 93:28).

Therefore, gaining knowledge and becoming more Christlike “are two aspects of a single process” (Warner, *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, vol. 4, p. 1490). This process is part of being “valiant” in our testimony of Jesus. Thus, while we are saved no faster than we gain a certain type of knowledge, it is also the case, as Richard Bushman has observed, that we will gain knowledge no faster than we are saved (*Teachings*, p. 217). So we have a fundamentally different understanding of knowledge and truth—behaving and knowing are inseparably linked.

So defined, the gospel is inexhaustible because there is not only so much to know, but also so much to become! The vital truths are not merely accumulated in the mind but are expressed in life as well.

Intelligence is “the glory of God,” as we all know. It is defined as “light and truth” (D&C 93:36). The revelations also inform us that if we have “more knowledge *and* intelligence in this life,” we will have “so much the advantage in the world to come” (D&C 130:18–19). I do not pretend to be able to be definitive with regard to this last verse, but, clearly, what we carry

forward, brothers and sisters, involves developing our capacity for cognition as well as application. This sets us apart from the world. I hope we understand some of the implications of all these things. Certainly, what we will carry forward is more than what we now term as *IQ* or *databases*. It is the entire being of the individual. Hence our approach to knowledge, truth, and wisdom is markedly different.

What are some of the implications of the foregoing?

First, some of us—and I include myself—sometimes casually speak of education for eternity. Brothers and sisters, it is clear from the verses of scripture that some truths may turn out to have a place in a yet-to-be-revealed hierarchy of truth that the world doesn’t understand. The scriptures tantalize us by saying, “All truth is independent in that sphere in which God has placed it” (D&C 93:30). One even wonders if truths, like planets, belong to a particular order (see Abraham 3:9). But we do not now know.

The highest education, therefore, includes salvational truths, bringing us a knowledge of “things as they really are, and of things as they really will be” (Jacob 4:13). This focus can be achieved without leaving the usual educational chores “undone” (Matthew 23:23). Scholars like the president of Brigham Young University, Rex Lee, have surely demonstrated this.

Ultimate orthodoxy—and orthodoxy isn’t a popular word nowadays—is expressed in the Christlike life that involves both mind and behavior. Christ’s manner of life is truly “the way, the truth, and the life,” and he has directed us to pursue his example (John 14:6; see also Matthew 5:48; 3 Nephi 12:48; 3 Nephi 27:27).

Another important implication of what we have been discussing is that all knowledge is not of equal significance. There is no democracy of facts! They are not of equal importance. Something might be factual but unimportant, as Elder Spencer Condie has observed. For

instance, today I wear a dark blue suit. That is true, but it is unimportant. The world does not quite understand this. As we brush against truth, we sense that it has a hierarchy of importance. We are dealing with some things of *transcending* importance. Some truths are salvationally significant, and others are not.

Another important insight is that knowledge is intended to travel in a convoy of other Christian virtues. It does not have final meaning by itself. If one possesses some knowledge, as Peter said, but “lacketh” these other qualities, he cannot “see afar off” (2 Peter 1:5–9). A most interesting concept! Precious perspective is missing unless knowledge is accompanied by these other truths.

Other insights bear down upon us as Latter-day Saints. Brilliance, by itself, is not wholeness, nor happiness. Knowledge, if possessed for its own sake and unapplied, leaves one’s life unadorned. A Church member, for instance, might describe the Lord’s doctrines but not qualify to enter the Lord’s house. One could produce much brilliant commentary without being exemplary. One might be intellectually brilliant but Bohemian in behavior. One might use his knowledge to seek preeminence or dominion.

Such are not Jesus’ ways, for he asks that perception and implementation be part of the same spiritual process. In Alma’s words, we are to “give place” in our lives for the good seed of the gospel to grow—which involves a form of knowing that combines cognition as well as implementation (see Alma 32).

As we all know, Christ does not dominate by his intellect. He leads by example and love. There is no arrogance flowing from his, the keenest of all intellects. He seeks neither to conquer nor to prosper “according to his genius” (see Alma 30:17).

Given these foregoing views of restoration theology as they pertain to knowledge, truth, education, and wisdom, there is, finally, no

comfort zone for vanity or hypocrisy. There is no sanctuary for them.

Clearly, in such a situation as I have attempted to describe altogether too briefly, a few individuals in the Church end up “looking beyond the mark,” missing the already obvious (Jacob 4:14). These few individuals let their minds seek to run far ahead of their confirming behavior. For them, exciting exploration is preferred to plodding implementation. Speculation and argumentation are more fun than consecration for these individuals. Some even try to soften the hard doctrines. What happens, however, is that by their not obeying, they lack knowing, as we are discussing knowing today. Thus, since they cannot defend the faith, a few of them become critics instead of defenders (John 7:17).

As far as salvational truths are concerned, therefore, the secular knowledge explosion in recent years—with all of its many and unarguable benefits to mankind—has not been a bang at all. It has been merely a whimper. It was the Restoration that provided the explosion of salvational knowledge.

I now hasten to add, having said these preliminary things, that the role of secular knowledge is very important. Latter-day Saints should have all the genuine excitement others have in the traditional adventure of learning, including learning secular truths—and we, of all people, should have a little more! In fact, when we are so learning and so behaving, we are truly “about [our] Father’s business.” This should bring to us a special and genuine zest for learning (see 2 Nephi 9:29; Luke 2:49).

Furthermore, those of us who have spent much of our lives involved with traditional education regard it as one of mankind’s most useful, productive, and cost-beneficial enterprises. It is even more beneficial, however, when it has the spiritual dimension added to it. Secular education wisely does not pretend to give us answers to the great “why” questions—any more than you and I, brothers and

sisters, would read a telephone directory in search of a plot!

Our different frame of reference should never cause us to preen or to be insensitive to the uncertainty or despair some feel in the world precisely because they believe sincerely that man exists in “godless, geometric space.”

I have always had a special appreciation for my friends who, though resolutely irreligious themselves, were not scoffers. Instead, though doubtless puzzled by me and their other religious friends, they were nevertheless respectful. I admire the day-to-day decency of such men and women. Though detached from theology, their decency is commendable.

I now share a lamentation from one character in a story that illustrates the confusion, despair, and pain felt by many. He says,

Are all men's lives . . . broken, tumultuous, agonized and unromantic. . . . Who knows? . . . I don't know. Why can't people have what they want? The things were all there to content everybody, yet everybody got the wrong thing. . . . It's beyond me. It's all darkness. [PBS production of “The Good Soldier,” by Ford Madox Ford, viewed in early 1983]

As if speaking to this very point, the Prophet Joseph Smith observed,

Knowledge does away with darkness, suspense and doubt; for these cannot exist where knowledge is.

There is no pain so awful as that of suspense. [Teachings, pp. 287–88]

Joseph, of course, was speaking about a particular kind of knowledge.

Thus our view of education is the same as that Jesus prescribed with regard to our other Christian duties: namely, the weightier matters should receive their deserved prominence without leaving the lesser learning chores “undone” (Matthew 23:23).

The Prophet Joseph also observed, “If you wish to go where God is, you must be like God, or possess the principles which God possesses” (Teachings, p. 216). God possesses perfect knowledge, but he also possesses perfect love and mercy. What a contrast he is to those mortals who are bright but bad, who are clever but carnal! Even genius without goodness can be dangerous.

No wonder, therefore, “to be learned is good if [we] hearken unto the counsels of God” instead of setting them aside as if we have somehow outgrown them (2 Nephi 9:29). How can one ever outgrow Christ’s example of knowing, behaving, and doing? What happens, however, is that some easily fall into the trap described by Paul, “Ever learning, and never able to come to the knowledge of the truth” (2 Timothy 3:7). One might learn a great deal about the physical characteristics of this planet earth but yet be ignorant of *why* it was created in the first place (see Isaiah 45:18; 1 Nephi 17:36; Moses 1:33,39).

Certainly during Education Week we need to know the plan for the week, what the presentations are, in which room, and at what time. Such information, for the moment, is essential. But compare having that information to knowing the truth about God’s plan of salvation!

For mortals, therefore, the gospel is inexhaustible, because “the Spirit searcheth all things, yea, the deep things of God” (1 Corinthians 2:10). Jacob’s words are strikingly similar to Paul’s: “For the Spirit speaketh the truth . . . of things as they really are, and of things as they really will be” (Jacob 4:13). Unsurprisingly, the scriptural definition of truth matches. It is the “knowledge of things as they are, and as they were, and as they are to come” (D&C 93:24). What vastness!

While encountering and exploring such vastness, we sometimes know more than our tongues can tell. Indeed, knowledge that is “spiritually discerned” is not always easily

communicated. But the ultimate place we hope to be in is one where “in the presence of God, . . . all things . . . are manifest, past, present, and future, and are continually before the Lord” (D&C 130:7). What a wondrous God we worship! The Prophet Joseph Smith said “the past, the present, and the future were and are, with [Jehovah], one eternal ‘now’” (*Teachings*, p. 220). How different the Lord’s “now” is from ours!

In exploring this comprehensiveness and everlastingness, there will be some surprises. Our understanding of some things will be restructured and expanded, especially in the world to come, for “Eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither have entered into the heart of man, the things which God hath prepared for them that love him” (1 Corinthians 2:9). In eternity, when the faithful receive “all that [the] Father hath,” this will include an enormous enlargement intellectually (D&C 84:38).

However, some divine disclosure can begin even now in mortality:

For by my Spirit will I enlighten them, and by my power will I make known unto them the secrets of my will—yea, even those things which eye has not seen, nor ear heard, nor yet entered into the heart of man. [D&C 76:10]

Having been given so many marvelous truths, we are to share them in order that “wise men and rulers may hear and know that which they have never considered” (D&C 101:94; see also 3 Nephi 20:45, 21:8). So much of the gospel we bring is what people have “never considered.”

Quite understandably, given its very nature, God’s latter-day work will be regarded with much skepticism by many. The Lord foresaw this, saying he would “bring to pass my act, my strange act, and perform my work, my strange work, that men may discern” (D&C 101:95; see also Isaiah 28:21; 29:14, Moffat version).

By accessing the inexhaustible divine data bank—through meekness and righteousness, thereby utilizing the Spirit, scriptures, and prophets—special wisdom is opened to us as the Spirit teaches us of “things as they really are, and of things as they really will be” (Jacob 4:13). President Brigham Young, who had his share of spiritual experiences, said, “When the voice of the Good Shepherd is heard, the honest in heart believe and receive it. It is good to taste with the inward taste, to see with the inward eyes” (JD 8:42).

In God’s “strange work,” his ways of informing mankind are likewise unusual:

Therefore he sent angels to converse with them, who caused men to behold of his glory.

And they began from that time forth to call on his name; therefore God conversed with men, and made known unto them the plan of redemption, which had been prepared from the foundation of the world. [Alma 12:29–30]

Ironically, many refuse to examine gospel truths simply because of *how* God reveals them. These very methods swell skepticism among many. Furthermore, these divine disclosures are not democratically dispensed because such things are “made known unto them according to their faith and repentance and their holy works” (Alma 12:30; see also 2 Nephi 1:10).

However, when people are left alone—without angelic visitations, without divine disclosures, without prophets, without scriptures, without the Spirit—many cease believing. Belief in the basics is the first thing to go, as happened with Book of Mormon peoples who ceased believing in God, in the resurrection, and in a redeeming Christ (Omni 1:17; Mosiah 26:2).

Many in the world hold back from making the “leap of faith” because they have already jumped to some other conclusions—often the Korihor conclusions, which are: God never was

nor ever will be; there is no redeeming Christ; man cannot know the future; man cannot know of that which he cannot see; whatsoever a man does is no crime; and death is the end (see Alma 30:13–18). The number of adherents to the Korihor conclusions will grow.

When so positioned, many mortals do not accept the fulness of the gospel. Their reactions to the gospel range from indifference to contempt. Happily, there are some who are meek enough to consider that which they have “never considered” and “never had supposed” (D&C 101:94; Moses 1:10).

When Moses was schooled by the Egyptians, what he learned there did not compare in eternal significance to what he learned from God’s revelations, things he said he “never had supposed” (Acts 7:22; Moses 1:10–33).

The great “who,” “what,” and “why” questions are those on which the transcending revelations focus. “What,” for instance, is God doing?

For behold, this is my work and my glory—to bring to pass the immortality and eternal life of man. [Moses 1:39]

“Who” is involved?

By him, and through him, and of him, the worlds are and were created, and the inhabitants thereof are begotten sons and daughters unto God. [D&C 76:24]

God’s revelations do not usually give us answers to the “how” and “when” questions, such as details concerning the creation of the earth. Yes, there are revelations such as that on the building of Noah’s ark—a revelation not reusable, by the way—and on other tactical matters, but the recurring themes of the revelations are spiritual.

Thus the Creator of the Universe does not choose to dazzle his audiences with data

concerning the Creation. Rather, as a Perfect and Loving Shepherd, he is interested in the central needs and concerns of his sheep in his many folds.

These revealed truths carry behavioral as well as intellectual responsibilities. When informed, we are accountable. Solomon, for instance, was widely celebrated for his wisdom (1 Kings 10:1, 6–7). Impressively wise as Solomon doubtless was in many respects, he was not wise enough to keep all God’s øcommandments (see 1 Kings 11:1–14).

Individuals are often otherwise commendable, as was Morianton, who “did do justice unto the people, but not unto himself because of his many whoredoms” (Ether 10:11). In gospel wisdom, knowing and behaving are irrevocably linked!

One basic limitation of worldly wisdom is its lack of longitudinality and of precious perspective. Worldly wisdom cannot “see afar off,” and, without a spiritual memory, past mistakes are repeated; folly is resumed! Winston Churchill chose, by the way, as the motto for his last volume of World War II history these words:

How the Great Democracies Triumphed, and so Were able to Resume the Follies Which Had so Nearly Cost Them Their Life. [Winston S. Churchill, *The Second World War*, vol. 6, *Triumph and Tragedy* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1953), p. ix]

The world in its search for physical security, for instance, tends to build Maginot Lines while naively neglecting its northern flank. It seeks to control the diseases flowing from sexual immorality but without honoring the principles of fidelity and chastity. The world in its wisdom constantly seeks to accommodate the natural man while gospel wisdom constantly urges us to put off the natural man (Mosiah 3:19). This is a pivotal point, and it makes all the difference!

Being so immersed in the gospel framework, we sometimes fail to realize how illuminating gospel truths are with regard to so many issues of the day. For instance, given the plan of salvation with our need to experience this mortal school, to acquire a mortal body, and then knowing the very preciousness of human life—we see the awful practice of widespread abortion differently. Similarly, struggling to have the “mind of Christ” includes purity of thought and letting virtue garnish our thoughts unceasingly. Hence we view pornography as an awful and enslaving thing. We cannot feel otherwise concerning such practices as abortion and pornography, even if practices such as abortion and pornography are legally and constitutionally protected.

This is not to say we expect others to share our views or even to understand them. Some will not even tolerate our views but, instead, attempt to shame us. If we really are “saints of the Holy One,” we will endure the “crosses of the world,” and despise “the shame of it” (2 Nephi 9:18). Whether it is worldly shame or worldly temptations, like Jesus, we should give “no heed unto them” (D&C 20:22; see also Alma 7:11–12).

Salvational truths combine longevity and relevancy; they contain both span and significance! Education that is only “for a season” is narrow; it pertains only to a knowledge of things as they temporarily are, like today’s weather forecast or an airline schedule. Temporary facts are useful but terminal. Jesus noted the intensity of the children of this world, but said their operative framework was only “in their generation” (see Luke 16:8).

Given such significant gradations among knowledge, we can resonate to T. S. Eliot’s lamentation: “Where is the wisdom we have lost in knowledge? Where is the knowledge we have lost in information?” (T. S. Eliot, *The Rock* [1934], I).

Thus our consuming of certain information is like consuming our daily bread. We need it,

but it is perishable. We will soon hunger again (see John 6:47–48, 51). Instead, the bread of life is inexhaustible!

Ultimate wisdom enables us to see Jesus as the Light of the World, but, further, we also come to realize that it is by his light that we are to see everything else! The gospel’s bright and illuminating light thereby helps us see God, ourselves, others, the world, and the universe more correctly and more deeply. Indeed, as Paul declared, “in [Christ] all things hold together” (RSV, Colossians 1:17).

For now, though we can mercifully see something of our eventual possibilities, you and I are aware of our present limitations. Tolkien wrote wisely:

*It is not our part to master all the tides of the world, but to do what is in us for the succour of those years wherein we are set, uprooting the evil in the fields that we know, so that those who live after may have clean earth to till. What weather they shall have is not ours to rule. [Gandalf in J. R. R. Tolkien, *The Return of the King* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1965), p. 190]*

Hence we desperately need the gospel’s wisdom not only for eternity, but also “for the succour of those years wherein we are set,” in order “to do what is in us.” Enoch obtained revelation and reassurance and gratefully exclaimed of God, “Yet thou art there” (Moses 7:30). This is what you and I want to know of him: Does he know me, love me, and care for me? We can have the same reassurance given to Enoch.

How intellectually amazing the restored gospel of Jesus Christ is! The gospel is truly inexhaustible! It is marvelous! It is a wonder!

Yet orthodoxy is required to keep all these truths in essential balance. In orthodoxy lies real safety and real felicity! Flowing from orthodoxy is not only correctness but happiness. Orthodoxy is especially vital in a time of raging relativism and belching sensualism. The

world’s morality is constantly being improvised. Some views are politically correct one day, but not another.

One writer recently observed that the relativistic forces at work

should warm every atheist’s heart. For if God is a socially conscious political being whose views invariably correspond to our own prejudices on every essential point of doctrine, he demands of us no more than our politics require. [H]ow would our worship of [this kind of being] constitute more than self-congratulation for our own moral standards?

The writer continued:

*As an atheist, I like this God. It is good to see him every morning while I am shaving. [Eugene D. Genovese, “Pilgrim’s Progress,” *The New Republic*, 11 May 1992, p. 38]*

Yes, being learned is good! It can supply us with the needed facts and help us develop a facility with facts and a discernment among facts. It can train us to use our minds, to cultivate an intellectual adroitness in connecting various patches of truth and insight. It certainly furthers the calisthenics of the intellect.

Finally, however, you and I should be fully qualified and certified in traditional education and its processes for yet another very good reason: bilinguality. The men and women of Christ should be truly educated and articulate as to secular knowledge but should also be educated and articulate in the things of the Spirit!

I close now by speaking further of Jesus, our Perfect Shepherd. His atoning experience placed upon him the sicknesses, sorrows, griefs, and pains of the human experience in order “that he may know according to the flesh how to succor his people according to their infirmities” (Alma 7:11, 12; see also 2 Nephi 9:21; Isaiah 53:4–5; Hebrews 2:18). He “suffered

the pain of all men,” women, and children and was “touched with the feeling of our infirmities” (D&C 18:11; Hebrews 4:15). Thus, in the agony of the Atonement, Jesus “descended below all things, in that he comprehended all things” (see D&C 88:6; see also D&C 122:8). How marvelous the “mind of Christ,” which we are to try to come to have (1 Corinthians 2:16).

Jesus, our Perfect Exemplar, was astonishingly exemplary even in the hours surrounding the awful but glorious Atonement. The intrigue of Pilate and Herod, for instance, who had earlier been “at enmity” but who “made friends together” because of Jesus, presented opportunities for Jesus to “shrink” from going through with the Atonement (Luke 23:12; D&C 19:18). Herod, who had been desirous “to see [Jesus] of a long season,” “hoped to have seen some miracle done by him” (Luke 23:8). Yet Jesus, under heavy questioning from Herod, “answered him nothing” (Luke 23:9; see also Mosiah 14:7). Jesus’ integrity and intellect were not for sale! Amid temptation, he maintained his integrity—even in the midst of an opportunity that a lesser individual would have seized to reduce his suffering and to increase the praise of men.

Ironically, when Jesus’ enemies came for him, the Light of the World, they came with lanterns and torches (John 18:3). Jesus, who by then might have understandably been so swollen with sorrow and self-concern that there was no time to think of others, nevertheless restored the severed ear of a hostile guard (Luke 22:50–51). Amid irony he kept his poise. He also kept his way, which is not the way of the sword.

Christ spoke only several sentences on the cross. One of them was to insure that his mother, Mary, would be cared for by John (John 19:25–27). Another sentence reassured a thief on an adjoining cross (Luke 23:43). He had empathy amid his agony.

Finally, he maintained his consecration in the midst of the deepest deprivation anyone can know. President Brigham Young taught us that in the course of the astonishing Atonement, the Father withdrew both his presence and his Spirit from Jesus, and, further, even cast a veil over Jesus (*JD* 3:206). Thus Jesus became utterly and totally alone! There then came that great cry of forsakenness! “Nevertheless,” Jesus did not “shrink,” but, instead, “finished [his] preparations unto the children of men” (D&C 19:18–19). Just as he promised premortally, even when he might have reflected a little credit upon himself for the glorious Atonement, meek Jesus, instead, gave all the glory to the Father (D&C 19:19).

We need not apologize for regarding Jesus as “the way, the truth, and the life” (John 14:6).

We need not apologize for regarding salvational knowledge, revealed by him, as being the most precious. Indeed, in Christ “all things hold together,” for he is perfect in knowing and perfect in doing. And, most marvelously, he has challenged us to become like him (Matthew 5:48; 3 Nephi 12:48; 27:27).

Of him, I testify! Of his standard of truth and knowledge and behavior, I testify! He is the Light of the World! May we reflect his light in our lives, distinguishing between the things of the moment—including the facts that dissolve—and the supernal, transcending knowledge of spiritual things, the great blessing he has given us through the restored gospel. This is my humble, heartfelt prayer, in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.