

Acquiring Spiritual Knowledge

RICHARD G. SCOTT

Can you sense the excitement in the air as we begin another marvel called BYU Campus Education Week? There is nothing quite like it in scope or quality in all the world. Over 180 of the world's best and brightest have spent long hours preparing their presentations to provide more than 1,100 classes ranging from deep doctrine to folk dancing, from family and marriage to the healing wings of music. Over 33,000 righteous, inquiring individuals like you have traveled near and far, many at great sacrifice, with the sincere desire to learn more and be better prepared to serve. We meet on this extraordinary campus where singularly worthy students gain knowledge from an intensely devoted faculty in a spiritually centered environment.

I thank President Rex Lee, Education Week director E. Mack Palmer, and the others who organized this remarkable activity for wisely selecting the inspiring theme: "Education, Guided by the Light." Fundamental principles undergird that theme. As one ponders the significance of the focus the theme provides, many appropriate applications become evident across the broad spectrum of meaningful education. I have chosen to concentrate on the subject "acquiring spiritual knowledge," although

the thoughts expressed have relevance to the acquisition of all worthy knowledge.

One may ask, "Why center on spiritual knowledge?" President Kimball gave this answer:

Spiritual learning takes precedence. The secular without the foundation of the spiritual is but like the foam upon the milk, the fleeting shadow.

Do not be deceived! One need not choose between the two . . . for there is opportunity to get both simultaneously; . . .

Secular knowledge, important as it may be, can never save a soul nor open the celestial kingdom nor create a world nor make a man a god, but it can be most helpful to that man who, placing first things first, has found the way to eternal life and who can now bring into play all knowledge to be his tool and servant. [TSWK, p. 390]

President J. Reuben Clark observed:

Richard G. Scott was a member of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints when this devotional address was given at Brigham Young University on 17 August 1993.

There is spiritual learning just as there is material learning, and the one without the other is not complete; yet, speaking for myself, if I could have only one sort of learning, that which I would take would be the learning of the spirit, because in the hereafter I shall have opportunity in the eternities which are to come to get the other, and without spiritual learning here my handicaps in the hereafter would be all but overwhelming. [CR, April 1934, p. 94]

President Gordon B. Hinckley stated:

This restored gospel brings not only spiritual strength, but also intellectual curiosity and growth. Truth is truth. There is no clearly defined line of demarcation between the spiritual and the intellectual when the intellectual is cultivated and pursued in balance with the pursuit of spiritual knowledge and strength.

*The Lord Almighty, through revelation, has laid a mandate upon this people in these words: "Seek ye out of the best books words of wisdom; seek learning, even by study and also by faith" (D&C 88:118). [CR, April 1986, p. 63; also, "Come and Partake," *Ensign*, May 1986, p. 48]*

Your presence here indicates that you understand and follow that admonition of the Lord.

Finally, the Savior emphasized: "Seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you" (Matthew 6:33).

Before I proceed, may I particularly commend you mothers in attendance. I know your presence indicates great sacrifice on your part as well as the cooperation of family and others who temporarily care for the children upon whom you concentrate the cream of your effort to train them "in the way of the Lord." We thank you for such devotion. You are following this admonition of Sister Camilla Kimball:

I have always had an inquiring mind. I am not satisfied just to accept things. I like to follow through and study things out. I learned early to put aside those gospel questions that I could not answer. I had a shelf of things I did not understand, but as I have grown older and studied and prayed and thought about each problem, one by one I have been able to understand them better.

*A woman, to be well rounded in her personality, needs many experiences in and out of the home. . . . She needs to keep growing, to keep aware of the world in which her children are growing. In order to do this, she should be interested in educational advancement. [Caroline Eyring Miner and Edward L. Kimball, *Camilla* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1980), pp. 126–27]*

I commend you for having the interest in educational advancement.

My message is centered in a statement of principle that is then illustrated by examples from the scriptures, the lives of prophets, and the crucible of personal experience.

That statement of principle is:

To acquire spiritual knowledge and to use it with wisdom, one must:

In humility, seek divine light.

Exercise faith in Jesus Christ.

Strive diligently to keep his commandments.

As knowledge unfolds it must be understood, valued, used, remembered, and expanded.

The balance of this message will center on explaining what is meant by that statement in the hope that the suggestions given will help you in your quest for truth throughout your life. Then, in time, you and I may accomplish this objective given by President Joseph F. Smith:

The greatest achievement mankind can make in this world is to familiarize themselves with divine truth, so thoroughly, so perfectly, that the example

or conduct of no creature living in the world can ever turn them away from the knowledge that they have obtained. “In the footsteps of the Master” . . . is the safest and surest course to pursue. . . . We can absorb the precepts, the doctrines and the divine word of the Master, without any fear that the exemplar will fail of carrying [them] out. . . .

From my boyhood I have desired to learn the principles of the gospel in such a way and to such an extent that it would matter not to me who might fall from the truth, . . . who might fail to continue to follow the example of the Master, my foundation would be sure and certain in the truths that I have learned. . . .

I know of but One in all the world who can be taken as the first and only perfect standard for us to follow, and he is the Only Begotten Son of God. [GD, pp. 3–4]

Why seek divine light? These scriptures answer that question.

Thy word is a lamp unto my feet, and a light unto my path. [Psalms 119:105]

The entrance of thy words giveth light; it giveth understanding unto the simple. [Psalms 119:130]

The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear? the Lord is the strength of my life; of whom shall I be afraid? [Psalms 27:1]

I, the Lord, the king of heaven, will be their king, and I will be a light unto them forever, that hear my words. [2 Nephi 10:14]

For, behold, it is I that speak; behold, I am the light which shineth in darkness, and by my power I give these words unto thee.

And now, verily, verily, I say unto thee, put your trust in that Spirit which leadeth to do good—yea, to do justly, to walk humbly, to judge righteously; and this is my Spirit.

Verily, verily, I say unto you, I will impart unto you of my Spirit, which shall enlighten your mind, which shall fill your soul with joy;

And then shall ye know, or by this shall you know, all things whatsoever you desire of me, which are pertaining unto things of righteousness, in faith believing in me that you shall receive. [D&C 11:11–14]

And I now give unto you a commandment . . . to give diligent heed to the words of eternal life.

For you shall live by every word that proceedeth forth from the mouth of God.

For the word of the Lord is truth, and whatsoever is truth is light, and whatsoever is light is Spirit, even the Spirit of Jesus Christ.

And the Spirit giveth light to every man that cometh into the world; and the Spirit enlighteneth every man through the world, that hearkeneth to the voice of the Spirit.

And everyone that hearkeneth to the voice of the Spirit cometh unto God, even the Father. [D&C 84:43–47]

The glory of God is intelligence, or, in other words, light and truth. . . .

. . . I have commanded you to bring up your children in light and truth. [D&C 93:36, 40]

Analogies with physical light help us understand the power of spiritual light. A bulb illuminated in a dark room overpowers darkness. Yet if the darkness is too intense, it can overpower light, as with a bulb plunged into a bucket of black printer’s ink. Spiritual light overcomes the darkness of ignorance and disbelief. When transgression severely clouds a life, the focused spiritual truths of repentance cut the blackness as a laser penetrates the darkest ink.

Why must one, in humility, earnestly seek divine light? Does it really require that much effort? Elder Henry B. Eyring, Commissioner of Education, learned a treasured lesson that has served him well from his father, Henry Eyring.

We remember that father as a world-renowned scientist and educator whose brilliance left a heritage of fundamental scientific principles that remain prized today. At a time when his son was at a pinnacle of formal education, having received his master's and doctoral degrees from Harvard and serving as a professor in the Stanford Graduate School of Business and as a Visiting Sloan Faculty Fellow at MIT, the father said:

Hal, you have a problem. You are confused. You think education is where you have been. It is not. It is what you do, not where you go to do it. You can get an education anywhere if you work hard enough at it. You can go into the desert with a good book and blackboard, and with diligent work you can become educated.

Brigham Young paid the price of learning by carefully listening to the Prophet Joseph Smith and striving to understand in context everything that was taught by word, example, or the Spirit. The resulting tutoring has blessed generations. It conditioned Brigham Young to learn additional truths and to share far more than he had received personally from Joseph Smith.

In my judgment, so much effort and personal investment is required to gain and use worthwhile knowledge that one cannot sample from every fascinating area of life but must select carefully the few vital areas where focused energy can be applied to bless our lives and those we serve. My personal experience confirms that to gain knowledge of great worth requires extraordinary effort through personal involvement. This is particularly true when our desire is to gain spiritual knowledge. President Kimball said it this way:

The treasures of both secular and spiritual knowledge are hidden ones—but hidden from those who do not properly search and strive to find them. . . . Spiritual knowledge is not available merely for

the asking; even prayers are not enough. It takes persistence and dedication of one's life. The knowledge of things in secular life are of time and are limited; the knowledge of the infinite truths are of time and eternity.

Of all treasures of knowledge, the most vital is the knowledge of God: his existence, powers, love, and promises. [TSWK, pp. 389–90]

Why is humility essential to the acquiring of spiritual knowledge? Humility permits us to be taught from on high through the Spirit, or to be taught from sources whose origin was inspiration from the Lord, such as the scriptures. The seeds of personal understanding and growth germinate and flourish in the fertile soil of humility. Their fruit is spiritual knowledge to guide us here and in the hereafter. A proud individual cannot know the things of the Spirit. Paul taught this truth, saying:

For what man knoweth the things of a man, save the spirit of man which is in him? even so the things of God knoweth no man, but the Spirit of God. . . .

But the natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God: for they are foolishness unto him: neither can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned. [1 Corinthians 2:11, 14]

What do I mean by this statement: “As knowledge unfolds it must be understood, valued, used, remembered, and expanded”? I’ll explain each concept.

Understood: As each element of truth is encountered, it should be carefully examined in the light of prior knowledge to determine where it fits. It needs to be twisted, turned inside out, and studied from every vantage point to discover any hidden meaning. It must be viewed in perspective to confirm that you have not jumped to false conclusions. Prayerful pondering engenders further understanding. Such evaluation is particularly

important when the truth comes as an impression from the Spirit.

Valued: The Lord said: “And he who receiveth all things with thankfulness shall be made glorious; and the things of this earth shall be added unto him, even an hundred fold, yea, more” (D&C 78:19). To value knowledge is to show appreciation for it, especially in heartfelt prayers of gratitude.

Used: Application of truth is the surest way of making it eternally ours. It is the use of knowledge that causes it to bear fruit in our lives. One of the best examples of the use of knowledge gained is expressed in these familiar words of President Kimball:

We hope that the leaders and the members of the Church who have attended and listened to the conference have been inspired and uplifted. We hope you have made copious notes of the thoughts that have come to your mind as the Brethren have addressed you. Many suggestions have been given that will help you as leaders in the perfection of your work. Many helpful thoughts have been given for the perfection of our own lives, and that, of course, is the basic reason for our coming. [Now you’re going to have a similar experience here at Education Week. You’ll take copious notes, you’ll be inspired, you’ll record those impressions that come to you. Afterwards, we should follow President Kimball’s example.]

While sitting here, I have made up my mind that when I go home from this conference this night there are many, many areas in my life that I can perfect. I have made a mental list of them, and I expect to go to work as soon as we get through with conference. [CR, October 1975, p. 164; also, Ensign, November 1975, p. 111]

And then the real learning begins!

Remembered: Brigham Young declared, “If you love the truth you can remember it” (JD 3:358). Knowledge carefully recorded is knowledge available in time of need. Spiritually sensitive information should be kept in a sacred

place that communicates to the Lord how it is treasured. That practice enhances the likelihood of receiving further light.

Powerful spiritual direction in our lives can be overcome or be forced into the background unless we provide a way to remember it. Joseph Smith taught the Twelve the importance of recording spiritual direction with these words:

If you assemble from time to time, and proceed to discuss important questions, and pass decisions upon the same, and fail to note them down, by and by you will be driven to straits from which you will not be able to extricate yourselves, because you may be in a situation not to bring your faith to bear with sufficient perfection or power to obtain the desired information; or, perhaps, for neglecting to write these things when God had revealed them, not esteeming them of sufficient worth, the Spirit may withdraw and God may be angry; and there is, or was, a vast knowledge, of infinite importance, which is now lost. [From minutes of instruction to the Council of the Twelve, February 27, 1835; HC 2:198–99]

That advice is meticulously followed in the presiding councils of the church. Each of us will be blessed as we heed it in our own private life.

Expanded: This thought refers to the rich benefits that result as we diligently strive to enlarge, extend, and increase our understanding of truth. Productive resources for expanding our knowledge are the scriptures and the declarations of the prophets. President Benson counseled that we should make daily study of the scriptures a lifetime pursuit.

I . . . say to you that one of the most important things you can do . . . is to immerse yourselves in the scriptures. Search them diligently. Feast upon the words of Christ. Learn the doctrine. Master the principles that are found therein. . . . Few other

efforts . . . will bring greater dividends to [you.] Few other ways [will result in] greater inspiration. . . .

You must . . . see that studying and searching the scriptures is not a burden laid upon [us] by the Lord, but a marvelous blessing and opportunity. [“The Power of the Word,” Ensign, November 1986, p. 81]

When one understands that acquiring and using knowledge with wisdom takes substantial commitment, that person will avoid the tragedy that can occur when teaching and learning become mechanical. Taken to an extreme, there results a process Elder Maxwell characterizes as transferring the professor’s notes to the student’s notebook without passing through either’s mind. You who have made the sacrifice to be present realize that education can begin by listening to an array of qualified experts where their stimulating presentations spark our imaginations and motivate us to learn more. The process can start there, but for us to acquire useful knowledge it must be understood, valued, remembered, used, and expanded.

The need to exercise faith in Jesus Christ is understood by each of us. That is a fundamental requisite of the plan of salvation. When that exercise of faith is coupled with urgent need, the personal growth and blessings that flow are transcendent. I’d like to read Elder Faust’s words when he expressed his feelings regarding such experiences at a conference. As I read them, think of how his struggling brought knowledge and growth.

During the years of my life, and often in my present calling, and especially during a recent Gethsemane, I have gone to my knees with a humble spirit to the only place I could for help. I often went in agony of spirit, earnestly pleading with God to sustain me in the work I have come to appreciate more than life itself. I have, on occasion, felt the terrible aloneness of the wounds of the heart, of the

sweet agony, the buffetings of Satan, and the encircling warm comfort of the Spirit of the Master.

I have also felt the crushing burden, the self-doubts of inadequacy and unworthiness, the fleeting feeling of being forsaken, then of being reinforced an hundredfold. I have climbed a spiritual Mount Sinai dozens of times seeking to communicate and to receive instructions. It has been as though I have struggled up an almost real Mount of Transfiguration and upon occasion felt great strength and power in the presence of the Divine. A special sacred feeling has been a sustaining influence and often a close companion.

I’m sure many of you have had similar experiences as you have paid the price to learn them.

The role of obedience in gaining spiritual knowledge is crucial, as this comment of President Joseph Fielding Smith demonstrates:

Now the Lord would give us gifts. He will quicken our minds. He will give us knowledge that will clear up all difficulties, and put us in harmony with the commandments that he has given us, and with a knowledge that will be so deeply rooted in our souls that the knowledge can never be rooted out, if we will just seek for the light and the truth and the understanding which is promised to us, and which we can receive if we will only be true and faithful to every covenant and obligation pertaining to the gospel of Jesus Christ. [CR, October 1958, p. 22]

To keep the commandments, we must know them. The best single source for learning them is the scriptures. Regarding such a search for light, President Joseph Fielding Smith gave this admonition:

Today we are troubled by evil-designing persons who are endeavoring with all their power to destroy the testimonies of members of the Church, and many members of the Church are in danger because of lack of understanding and because they have not sought the guidance of the Spirit of the Lord. Every

baptized member of the Church receives the gift of the Holy Ghost, by the laying on of hands. This, however, will not save them unless they continue in the spirit of light and truth. Therefore it is a commandment from the Lord that members of the Church should be diligent in their activities and study of the fundamental truths of the gospel as it has been revealed. The Spirit of the Lord will not continue to strive with the indifferent, with the wayward and the rebellious who fail to live within the light of divine truth. It is the privilege of every baptized person to have an abiding testimony of the restoration of the gospel, but this testimony will grow dim and eventually disappear unless we are constantly receiving spiritual good through study, obedience, and diligent seeking to know and understand the truth. [CR, October 1963, p. 22]

Profound spiritual knowledge cannot be poured from one mind and heart into another. It takes faith, trust, and diligent effort. Precious knowledge comes a small piece at a time with great exertion and at times with wrenching struggles. The Lord intends that it be that way so that we can grow, mature, and progress. We are asked to do all we are capable of doing first before asking for divine assistance. In explaining that truth, President Harold B. Lee gave this insightful instruction:

When we . . . cannot get anything to help ourselves, then we may call upon the Lord and His servants who can do all. But it is our duty to do what we can within our own power.

That is a tremendous principle. In order to teach young people how to approach the Lord and how to prepare to receive what the Lord has promised for those who are faithful, we must teach them these fundamental steps. After Moroni had read [the] great experience of the brother of Jared, he added: "Wherefore, dispute not because ye see not, for ye receive no witness until after the trial of your faith" (Ether 12:6).

The grandson of Lehi illustrates this principle also. Enos went out in the mountains to pray and

to ask forgiveness for his sins. He closed his brief record about this experience by saying: "And my soul hungered; and I kneeled down before my Maker, and I cried unto him in mighty prayer and supplication for mine own soul; and all the day long did I cry unto him; yea, and when the night came I did still raise my voice high that it reached the heavens" (Enos 4).

I once read that scripture to a woman who laughed and said, "Imagine anybody praying all night and all day." I replied, "My dear sister, I hope you never have to come to a time where you have a problem so great that you have to so humble yourself. I have; I have prayed all day and all night and all the next day and all the next night, not always on my knees but praying constantly for a blessing that I needed most."

Enos continued: "While I was thus struggling in the spirit, behold, the voice of the Lord came into my mind again, saying: I will visit thy brethren according to their diligence in keeping my commandments" (Enos 10).

Now President Lee gives a marvelous conclusion:

*The Savior's blood, His atonement, will save us, but only after we have done all we can to save ourselves by keeping His commandments. All of the principles of the gospel are principles of promise by which the plans of the Almighty are unfolded to us. [Harold B. Lee, *Stand Ye in Holy Places* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1976), p. 245–46]*

As you seek spiritual knowledge, search for principles. Carefully separate them from the detail used to communicate or explain them. Principles are encapsulated knowledge, packaged to be applicable to a wide variety of circumstances. It is worth great labor to reduce information we gather to succinct statements of principle.

While there is much of value to be learned, there is only one arena of study where we may

learn absolute truth—and that is centered in the gospel of Jesus Christ.

The following personal experience integrates several of the points I have attempted to emphasize today. Every time I contemplate this event, I am moved by how kind the Lord is in answering our pleas for help. It occurred some time ago when I had responsibilities in Mexico and Central America that were far beyond my personal capacity to fulfil. I spent much sincere effort in seeking guidance and understanding from the Lord in study, prayer, fasting, and anxious service. Help came unexpectedly one Sunday as I attended a meeting where a humble, unschooled, Mexican priesthood leader struggled to communicate truths of the gospel identified in his lesson manual. It was obvious they had touched his life profoundly. I felt his intense desire to communicate those principles because they would be of great worth to his brethren. In his manner there was evidence of a pure love of the Savior and love for those he taught.

That love, sincerity, and purity of intent permitted a spirit to envelop the room. I was so touched that in addition to receiving again a witness of the truths he presented, I began to receive some personal impressions as an extension of those principles taught by the humble instructor. These impressions, intended for me personally, were related to my assignments in the area. They came in answer to my prolonged efforts to learn.

As each impression came, I wrote it down. I was given precious truths needed for me to be more effective. The specific counsel began with this impression: “Continue to build the Church on the foundation of true principles, but with increased expression of love and appreciation for the great Lamanite people.” There followed matters of great benefit to me.

Next I visited the Sunday School class, where a well-educated individual presented his lesson. That experience was a striking contrast to that of the priesthood meeting. It

seemed as though the instructor had purposely chosen obscure references and unusual examples to illustrate the principles in the lesson. I will confess that I had the distinct impression that he was using the teaching opportunity to impress the class with his vast store of knowledge. He did not seem as intent on communicating truth as the humble priesthood leader had been.

This experience also created an environment where strong impressions flowed. I wrote them down. One paragraph began, “Testify to instruct, edify, and lead others to full obedience, not to demonstrate anything of self. All who are puffed up shall be cut off.” Another signaled, “You are nothing in and of yourself, Richard.” That was followed with some specific counsel on how to be a better servant. The impressions became so personal that I felt it inappropriate to record them in the midst of a Sunday School class. I sought a more private location. There I continued to write the feelings that flooded into my mind and heart as accurately and as faithfully as possible. After each powerful impression was recorded, I meditated upon it and pondered the feelings I had received to determine if I had accurately interpreted them. Then I studied their meaning and application in my own personal life.

Subsequently I prayed, expressing to the Lord what I thought I had felt. There came a feeling of peace and serenity when it was confirmed. I asked if there was yet more that I should be given to understand. There came further impressions, and the process was repeated until I received the most precious, specific direction for which I will ever be grateful.

This event embodies several principles I feel are true regarding communication from the Lord to his children here on earth. I believe that we often do not learn the truths the Lord would freely share because we do not in humility earnestly seek light. We also can leave the most precious personal direction of

the Spirit unheard because we do not strive to understand, value, use, remember, and expand the first promptings that come to us when we are in need or when impressions come in response to earnest, intense prayer.

You can see the things that I have been teaching you are not theory. I have learned them in the crucible of personal experience. I am sorry I cannot communicate them more clearly, but I know how you can also receive that kind of direction: Ask the Lord, seek the light, have faith in the Savior, strive to obey his

commandments. He will bless you with light to lead you as you walk through this treacherous world in which we live.

I know he lives. I certify he lives. He knows each of us personally. Your efforts to learn of him, to learn truth, to be better prepared are appreciated by the Redeemer. As you continue faithfully, he will bless your efforts and inspire you and lead you to greater knowledge and capability. I testify that he guides this church, in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.