

Faith, Reason, Knowledge, and Truth

RICHARD N. WILLIAMS

The premise of all my remarks is that a glorious restoration has taken place in our time. We have come to understand that the history of the world is marked in dispensation units. The world has suffered through periods of relative darkness, ignorance, and error. It has also been blessed with periods of truth and light. You and I have the blessed privilege of living in the full light of day—the dispensation of the fulness of times. This, as they say, changes everything. The scripture in Isaiah 29:14 and repeated in 2 Nephi 27:26 concerning the “marvelous work and a wonder” of the Restoration is well known to all of us. We are not as familiar with the verse that follows. I quote from 2 Nephi 27:27, where the prophet spoke of those who are not enlightened nor made joyful at the news of the restoration of the fulness of the gospel. These people respond: “Surely, your *turning of things upside down* shall be esteemed as the potter’s clay” (emphasis added). This is a powerful metaphor.

The implications of the restored gospel are dramatic and far-reaching. Elder Neal A. Maxwell and Elder Dallin H. Oaks have pointed out that a notable aspect of the Apostasy was the incorporation into the doctrine of the Church ideas and philosophies prevalent in that day, largely Greek in origin (Maxwell, “From the

Beginning,” *Ensign*, November 1993, 18–20; Oaks, “Apostasy and Restoration,” *Ensign*, May 1995, 84–87). Since religion went significantly wrong in large part because of those ideas and presuppositions, we Latter-day Saints ought to be as wary of accepting them in our academic disciplines and social institutions as we are in our religion.

The restored gospel of Jesus Christ has the potential to redefine and redeem our understanding of faith, reason, knowledge, and truth in ways that liberate us from problems that, lacking the Restoration perspective, continue to vex and trouble the world and, too often, the souls of many of us.

Among all the factors contributing to the Apostasy, three are preeminent: first, the loss of the understanding of the true nature of God and thus of our own nature and purpose; second, the loss of apostolic authority and the special witness it provides; and, third, the loss of the fulness of the gifts of the Spirit. It is interesting to me that these three things were among the very first restored in our dispensation.

Richard N. Williams was a BYU professor of psychology and assistant to the associate academic vice president when this devotional address was given on 1 February 2000.

These three essential characteristics of the true Church bear directly on our experience and understanding of faith, reason, knowledge, and truth.

Faith and Reason

Discourse about the relationship between faith and reason is centuries old, very sophisticated, and finely nuanced. What I have to say will be incomplete, but I hope not misleading. I believe that discussions of faith and reason have suffered over the centuries because they have not been informed by the truths of the restored gospel. When thus informed, the classic and timeworn tensions between faith and reason disappear. Faith is seen in a new light. In turn, the proper understanding of faith and reason casts new light on common understandings of knowledge and truth.

It seems unarguable that reason—our capacity and tendency to “make sense” and to engage in consistent, meaningful understanding and expression—is intrinsic to our nature. Scholars have had a tendency, however, to privilege reason over other expressions of our nature. The effect has been that reason has achieved unassailed authority in matters of knowledge and truth. In recent years various postmodern movements have mounted serious challenges to the hegemony of reason, noting that it is as capable of being deployed for oppressive as for noble purposes. In my own scholarly career I have enjoyed the luxury of using powerful postmodern arguments against the excesses of modern rationalism and then using powerful rationalist arguments against the excesses of postmodernism. Through this endeavor I have come to the conclusion that reason as we contemporaneously understand and experience it is fallible, but mostly not pernicious. It is like any other human language—good for certain things, not so good for others.

Early in the Christian era, attempts were made to reconcile the life-changing power of faith with the compelling persuasive power of

reason. Most attempts at reconciliation during the apostate period had one of two results. One result was that faith and reason were reconciled because the foundations of faith were shown ultimately to be reasonable—as in those views that fold easily in a general “natural law” perspective. Those aspects of faith that were reasonable were retained, what was not reasonable was dismissed as mystical. Thus faith and mysticism became strongly connected. The second approach upheld both faith and reason as different approaches to knowledge, ultimately leading to different kinds of knowledge. Reason was thought to lead to certainty, scientific knowledge, and knowledge of the essential. Faith was thought to lead to knowledge of the religious, of that which, by implication, cannot be known with rational certainty. It is easy to see that these two approaches to reconciling faith and reason are essentially the same. Briefly put, reason trumps faith.

But the reconciliation thus achieved has never been a happy one. As the philosophy of mind progressed and as science and technology developed, reason came to be more and more powerful and persuasive, whereas faith came to be concomitantly less persuasive and the sort of knowledge it provided more mystical and ephemeral. Finally, with the Enlightenment, knowledge was grounded ultimately in what was intuitively perceived as true by the rational mind, and real knowledge became associated with rational certainty—grounded in that which was rationally and logically impossible to doubt. The unintended result of this powerful analytic approach to reason was that faith came to be understood in opposition to certainty, and was thus always vulnerable to doubt. In fact, faith, in a very real sense, came to be that which one believes in the face of doubt.

Thus it is fair to say that the modern view is essentially that reason and logic ultimately ground knowledge and truth, whereas faith is what we are forced to rely on when we lack indubitable certainty. Faith, on this view, is a

sort of positive thinking, what we cling to when we do not know. It is a believing haunted from the fringes by doubt. This is the seemingly paradoxical stuff that many self-styled intellectuals exult in—a seedbed of tragic heroism characterizing the lives of thoughtful persons. This view has, unfortunately, even found its way into LDS culture. However, this understanding of faith and reason is unsatisfactory because it obscures the nature of and attenuates the power of faith. Furthermore, it does not square with the increased knowledge provided by the Restoration.

If we push the traditional understanding of faith and reason just a bit, we arrive at some rather odd conclusions. If faith is what we “settle for” in the absence of knowledge, then the more we know the less faith we need, or, indeed, the less faith we can have. The more faith we have, the less we know. God, who has all knowledge, has no faith at all. This line of thinking feeds the stereotype that only the ignorant need or have faith. Religion is a crutch, you know. Sometimes this view of faith provides fuel for faith crises, particularly for people who base their identity and worth on their intellectual powers of reason and logic. We Latter-day Saints are in a peculiar position vis-à-vis this understanding of faith because we often begin our most poignant expressions of our faith with the words “I know.” I believe we can enrich faith and expand our view of knowledge and truth by entertaining an alternative conception of faith and its relation to reason. For example, the idea of faith as what we cling to in the absence of knowledge does not work very well scripturally. Permit me to paraphrase Hebrews 11:3–5:

Through [what we cling to when we don't know] we understand that the worlds were framed by the word of God. . . .

By [what we cling to when we don't know] Abel . . . obtained witness that he was righteous. . . .

By [what we cling to when we don't know] Enoch was translated.

Nevertheless, this definition of faith and its presumed contrast with reason is so strong that it even moves us to translate the Doctrine and Covenants admonition to “seek learning, even by study and also by faith” (D&C 88:118) into a proclamation of our belief in two types of knowledge—one coming by reason and one by faith. Often, even on this campus, we academics divide truth neatly into sacred truths and secular truths. In our reason-driven intellectual pursuits we are on the trail of what we call secular truths, and we even claim to have found some. Although this is a convenient way of speaking about our disciplines, we should ponder why the phrase “secular truth” is not found in scripture. In fact, my computer tells me that *truth* is never used in scripture in the plural except in two passages (D&C 52:17, 66:1), both referring to things the Lord had previously revealed and was recalling in the present. Rather than a scriptural distinction between types of *truths*, we find the Lord’s proclamation that “all things unto [Him] are spiritual” (D&C 29:34). From Doctrine and Covenants 29:31–35 we learn that there are temporal (not secular) and spiritual created *things*, but this does not necessarily imply that there are secular *truths*. If the distinction between sacred and secular truth were a genuine epistemological watershed, we might reasonably expect in holy writ at least a mention of it. Indeed, most scriptural references to the secular are quite negative. Sometimes we may receive through spiritual means answers to temporal questions and problems. This would seem to imply that all things are indeed spiritual, even when their application is temporal. It may be that from the perspective of the Restoration, the categories of faith, reason, and truth do not have quite the same meaning we have received from our intellectual traditions.

In place of the common conceptual dimension anchored by faith at one end and reason at the other, I suggest that there are really two dimensions. It might be helpful to picture them

as perpendicular to one another. One dimension is anchored on one end by reason and on the other end by its opposite: irrationality, promiscuous subjectivity, or even solipsism. The other dimension is anchored on one end by faith and on the other by the opposite of faith. I have pondered a bit about what the opposite of faith is. I believe the anchor opposite faith is darkness, nihilism, despair—that state of the soul that comes from living “without God in the world” (Ephesians 2:12). To portray faith and reason in this relationship leads us to the conclusion that faith is not what one settles for in the absence of reason and knowledge; it is a type of knowledge, sure and trustworthy and eminently attainable. Portrayed in this way, one could very well have great faith and be also entirely reasonable and rational. That is what we strive for most of the time.

The other three quadrants created by our axes are interesting. One can have faith and be irrational. This is one stereotype of religious people. Depending on what standards are used to judge rationality, this might be a positive or a problematic lifestyle. One can also have little faith and yet be very reasonable, rational, and logical. We meet many such persons in academic life and in the broader culture. Finally, there is a possibility of being both dark and despairing as well as beyond the pale of reason.

I want to consider briefly the scriptural case for the suggestion that faith is not merely a state of mind contrived to fill the void created by the absence of reasoned knowledge but rather a very important kind of knowledge. First, I want to consider chapters 30 to 35 of Alma in the Book of Mormon. These chapters, I believe, must be read as a whole. Chapter 29 brings the mission to the Lamanites to a close. Chapter 36 begins the account of Alma’s blessing of his sons, and the account of the Lamanite wars follows. Chapters 30 to 35 have a separate message.

In chapter 30 we meet Korihor, the antichrist. He propounded insidious and destructive doctrine. However, he “had much success,” and

what he taught was “pleasing unto the carnal [that is, earthly] mind” (vs. 53). Much of Korihor’s preaching centered on the nature of knowledge. His major premise was that we can only know what we can see. From this it followed that no one can know the future, so that prophecy is impossible and, thus, merely foolish tradition. From this line of analysis his other doctrines followed. His arguments were both reasonable and logical. If they were to be faulted or refuted, such refutation had to be aimed at the major premise—the starting point of the argument.

Significantly, this is always where reason shows itself to be finite and vulnerable. In chapter 30 Alma immediately responded to Korihor by challenging his starting point and offering an alternative major premise. This teaches us something very important about faith and its relation to reason and knowledge. Interestingly, chapter 31 introduces us to the Zoramites, who espoused religious doctrines similar to Korihor’s. They, too, believed that the words of the prophets were foolish traditions, and they were proud “that their hearts were not stolen away to believe in things to come, which they knew nothing about” (Alma 31:22).

Korihor and the Zoramites so persuasively presented their view of faith, knowledge, and truth that Alma, as well as Moroni, sensed that it needed a powerful response. It is no coincidence then that what follows in chapter 32 is perhaps the most profound exposition on faith in all of scripture. It is a discourse on faith and knowledge. Time will not permit me to do it justice, but I have come to believe that Alma 32 is a discourse on two types of “perfect” knowledge. One type propounded by Korihor is knowledge grounded purely in sensory experience and reason. The other type of knowledge is grounded in a different kind of experience and is manifested in faith.

Alma begins the discourse by reminding us that “there are many [including, notably, Korihor] who do say: If thou wilt show unto

us a sign from heaven, then we shall know of a surety; then we shall believe" (vs. 17). He then makes a subtle but important point bearing on the nature of faith, reason, belief, and knowledge. He says that this attitude is not faith because "if a man knoweth a thing he hath no cause to believe, for he knoweth it" (vs. 18). We can easily read this as the old contrast between knowing and clinging to faith that we have come to expect. However, Alma might also be pointing out that what we see or otherwise experience sensorially—e.g., a visual fact or event—is not the sort of thing that requires belief or produces faith. If I meet a friend on the sidewalk, he will not ask, "Do you believe I am here?" If he were to do that, I would try to get him professional help. By the same token, when I bump my head, no one asks whether I believe I really bumped it or whether I believe I am in pain. Faith and belief are irrelevant to such experiences. What matters is what they mean for us and what we do about them. It is not by seeing a sign but by responding to it that we enter the domain where faith can be understood.

Alma goes on in verse 19 to point out that lacking this sort of sensory knowledge and residing in belief is a great blessing, a protection from the condemnation that comes from sinning against certain kinds of knowledge. The veil between this life and the next is, it seems, a great protection to people like me who might not be quite able to stop sinning, even in the factual and unarguable presence of God Himself. I am grateful to live in a world of belief and faith for now while I prepare to live better.

In that verse we all know so well, Alma teaches us that faith, like belief, is not to have this sort of "perfect knowledge" (vs. 21). Faith is like belief in this way, but Alma makes it clear that it is not merely belief. Faith grows into a knowledge that is, in its crucial attributes, perfect. In contrast to knowledge founded on what we see, and also subtly different from mere belief, faith is allied with "hope for things which

are not seen, which are true." Faith thus is not a clinging to in the absence of knowledge of truth but a hope for what is true. A skeptic might well want to call Alma's bluff at this point: "Okay, how can you hope for what is true if you don't already know it?" (Korihor was a clever man.) The answer is that faith leads to and indeed already is just such knowledge because it is the hope of truth; if it were not, it would not be *real* hope. Faith is not a placeholder for truth. As we learn later in the chapter, it is more like the seed of truth—alive, growing, pushing upward. After reminding us that God speaks to us and after reiterating the importance of being humble, Alma asks us in verse 27 to begin not with mere belief but with a "desire to believe"—the first stirrings of faith. He invited us "to an experiment." Note that an experiment is not the same as sight or rationality. It engages the entire person.

If we exercise our faculties and develop the moral character necessary for the experiment to work, the seed, which is the true word of Christ, "swelleth, and sprouteth, and beginneth to grow" (vs. 30). Alma then makes the crucial distinction: "Are ye *sure* that this is a good seed? I say unto you, Yea" (vs. 31; emphasis added). And in conclusion:

And now, behold, is your knowledge perfect? Yea, your knowledge is perfect in that thing, . . . for ye know that the word hath swelled your souls, and ye also know that it hath sprouted up, that your understanding doth begin to be enlightened, and your mind doth begin to expand.

O then, is not this real? I say unto you, Yea.
[Alma 32:34–35; emphasis added]

We have come a long distance in our understanding of faith. We have come from faith not being a perfect knowledge to a knowledge which *is* perfect. I believe that this entire process whereby we begin to experience the fruits of truth and to know one thing and then another is faith. As this process, faith leads us to a

knowledge as sure and as perfect as any we could ever want. Faith could not become knowledge unless it already were knowledge. In a very real sense faith *is* knowledge—not the knowledge whose claim to perfection is in sensory experience or in rational argument but whose claim to perfection is in discernible and undeniable experience. Note the image Alma uses to describe the experience of this sure knowledge: “Ye have *tasted this light*” (vs. 35; emphasis added). There is nothing unsure about the experience of taste. Alma’s use of *taste* is significant. Psychologists have discovered many visual illusions that demonstrate that what we see is often not what is really there. However, not a single “taste illusion” has ever been discovered.

Interestingly, after having told us that our knowledge is perfect in verse 34, Alma says in verses 35 and 36 that it is not perfect and that we still need faith. So we have a knowledge that is perfect and not perfect. I take this to mean that this entire process of faith gives us knowledge that is perfect in the sense of being sure, nothing lacking, but that it is not perfect in the sense of coming to an end. Here again the contrast with knowledge anchored only in reason is sharp. As reason is understood in our modern age, the point of reason or logical analysis is to bring a question or argument to a close. Having made the logical argument, there is nothing more to know on the matter—that is the goal of perfect reason. As children of the eternal God, with a destiny described as “eternal progression,” what might we expect but a perfect knowledge that continues, a knowing that is a way of life—we might say eternal life—the rewards of which are fruit “most precious, . . . sweet above all that is sweet,” so that we can be “filled, that [we] hunger not, neither shall [we] thirst” (vs. 42).

Chapters 33 and 34 of Alma are aimed at explaining how this faith experiment works, how we know by faith. Chapter 33 teaches of the role of scriptures and prayer. Chapter 34 reframes the question of faith. The question the

Zoramites had was how to plant the seed and do the experiment. Amulek, no doubt moved upon by the Spirit, tells us what the real question of faith is: “And we have beheld that the great question which is in your minds is whether the word be in the Son of God, or whether there shall be no Christ” (Alma 34:5).

Faith is anchored in Jesus Christ, the Son of God, and the knowledge of Him is both sure and possible. The contrast between faith as sure knowledge and the knowledge reason can provide is evident when we compare Amulek’s testimony of Christ as the anchor to sure knowledge with the conclusion of many Nephites just before His coming:

And they began to reason and to contend among themselves, saying:

That it is not reasonable that such a being as a Christ shall come. [Helaman 16:17–18; emphasis added]

Not “reasonable,” but nonetheless true.

Knowledge

As I mentioned earlier, historically, faith and reason have been distinguished by the different types of knowledge each produces. This unhappy resolution meant that reason was granted preeminence over faith, laying claim to certain knowledge. Faith became the absence of knowledge. However, there is another distinction between the sort of knowledge associated with faith and that associated with reason. We can perhaps understand the distinction better by referring to a distinction made in Latin languages between two types of knowledge. I will refer to the Spanish verbs *saber* and *conocer*. Although the difference is complex, at least it can be said that *saber* means to know such things as facts, to assert propositional knowledge, and to know that something is the case. *Conocer*, on the other hand, is “to be intimately acquainted with.” It is used to express knowledge of persons, places, and experiences.

I might say that I know my wife, and no one could reasonably ask, “Are you sure?” This kind of knowing is a type to which traditional issues of rational certainty do not apply. And yet it is no less sure than propositional knowledge. Indeed, in many ways it is more sure. We must remember that our faith is faith *in* the Lord Jesus Christ. Faith in a person is a very different thing from faith that some proposition is true.

The perfect knowledge of reason is only as perfect as its anchors—those premises from which all processes of reason must begin. If the premises are true, reason may take us to truth—a propositional truth giving us confidence that our sense of the world corresponds with what is. The problem is that all reason must begin with premises that reason itself cannot validate—except on other premises, thus begging the question. If Alma was right, faith leads us to another kind of perfect knowledge—to truth—and reason, in a way, leads us away. That is, once we know what is true, reason provides a wonderful tool for sorting out our obligations, anticipating consequences, and persuading others that what we know is true. Truth, I am convinced, can be rendered reasonable, but it does not arise from reason.

For example, the truth of Mormonism does not rest on reason. We do not draw our authority, our identity, or our mission from any set of propositions or from any interpretation of doctrine. We do not draw upon theology at all as justification for our truth claims. The truth of Mormonism rests on the occurrence of certain events. Chief among the founding events are these: the Father and the Son either appeared to Joseph Smith in New York or They did not; there either were gold plates holding a history of real people or there were not; apostles and prophets laid hands on Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery or they did not. We can go beyond this. The truth of the gospel of Jesus Christ itself rests on the occurrence of events. There was a Man, Jesus, or there was not; He overcame the whole of sin and darkness in the

garden or He did not; the tomb was empty or it was not. The truth of an event is very different from the truth of a proposition. The truth of propositions is established by reason and argument, the difficulty of which I have just described. The truth of events is established by witnesses. Because of the restoration of the true gospel, we are blessed with an abundance of witnesses. This is why the apostolic authority of special witnesses and the restoration of the gifts of the Spirit are essential to the true church. Scriptures also witness of these things, and we Latter-day Saints have an embarrassment of riches where scripture is concerned. In this context, faith is not what we cling to when we do not know truth, faith is the knowledge of truth nourished by good acts. It is strengthened by witnesses capable of penetrating our very souls and culminates in the palpable fruits of sure and certain experience.

Faith is not a placeholder for knowledge or what we cling to in its absence. This common reading of faith has led me to misread a very important passage from Hebrews: “Faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen” (Hebrews 11:1). I used to translate this scripture to mean faith is only evidence, not the real thing—it is only a hope that unseen substances are real. But I misread. Straightforwardly it says faith is substance, it is evidence—the evidence Alma talked about; the evidence God gives us by many witnesses; the evidence we give to each other; and what we evidence in our own lives. It is not the substitute for things hoped for but their very substance. Faith as this substance “maketh an anchor to the souls of men, which would make them sure and steadfast, always abounding in good works” (Ether 12:4).

One of the supernal blessings of the restored gospel is knowing that the anchor of faith is itself anchored in the embodied God whose existence is not established by reason but whose literal existence itself grounds our knowledge of Him. He only is the God who can say:

Arise and come forth . . . that ye may thrust your hands into my side, . . . feel the prints of the nails in my hands and in my feet, that ye may know that I am the God of Israel, and the God of the whole earth, and have been slain for the sins of the world.
[3 Nephi 11:14]

Faith in Him is in every sense truth. It is knowledge perfect in every way.

It is true that in this life we must live by faith. We are consigned to live outside the presence of our God. The purpose of life is to be proven even as we prove God's promises. God declared:

*We will make an earth whereon these may dwell;
And we will prove them herewith, to see if they will do all things whatsoever the Lord their God shall command them.* [Abraham 3:24–25]

The test of life is to do the will of our God. Faith is not the part of the test designed to make it difficult to return to Him; it is what our God has given us to make it possible to return to Him. The trial of faith is not to see what we will do without Him but to see what we can do with

Him. I believe we are asked to live by faith not so much to pass the test of being on our own but because we need to learn things of eternal and enduring import. We must learn to know how to respond to witnesses. We must learn to know in the very important way faith makes it possible to know—something that might not develop otherwise in God's presence. We must live by faith. For this I am most grateful, because to live by faith is to live with God.

The Savior has said, "I am . . . the truth" (John 14:6). He also warned us: "Wherefore, let all men beware how they take my name in their lips" (D&C 63:61).

Let us then be clear in our vision as we pursue and proclaim truth. After being involved for years as a scholar in issues of faith, reason, knowledge, and truth, I have learned that it is much easier for the Lord to make a good man or woman smart than it is to make a smart man or woman good. May we be protected from crises in our faith occasioned by the precepts of men. May we experience faith as a blessing and not as a burden, I pray, in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.