

## “The Pursuit of All Truth”

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Each year Oxford Dictionaries selects a word of the year—“a word, or expression, that . . . is judged to reflect the . . . mood . . . of that particular year and to have lasting potential as a word of cultural significance.” Past selections include *unfriend* in 2009 and *selfie* in 2013. In 2015 the word of the year was not a word but a pictograph: the “face with tears of joy” emoji.<sup>1</sup>

Recently, Oxford Dictionaries announced that the word of the year for 2016 is *post-truth*, a word they define as “an adjective . . . denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief.”<sup>2</sup> Casper Grathwohl, president of Oxford Dictionaries, explained the selection: “Fuelled by the rise of social media as a news source and a growing distrust of facts offered up by the establishment, *post-truth* as a concept has been finding its linguistic footing for some time. . . . I wouldn’t be surprised if *post-truth* becomes one of the defining words of our time.”<sup>3</sup> Reflecting this view, several commentators have recently asserted that we live in a post-truth world, or a world in which truth “has become unimportant or irrelevant.”<sup>4</sup>

It is hard to know with certainty whether truth is really less important than it has been in the past. But it is clear that because we live in a digital age, in which there is so much information and there are so many different contending views of

what is accurate, some people find that new information confounds and confuses rather than clarifies and enlightens. Modernizing the plight of the thirsty Ancient Mariner, who proclaimed, “Water, water, everywhere, Nor any drop to drink,”<sup>5</sup> many today lament, “Data, data, everywhere, and not a thought to think.”<sup>6</sup>

Living in a post-truth world in which there is more information available than there is time to process it presents particular challenges. Many do not know how to determine the accuracy or the truthfulness of new information. Some deal with the matter by looking for reinforcement of their own preexisting, and sometimes ill-informed, notions, limiting their pursuit of truth to only those sources that support their views. Stuck in an echo chamber of their own making, they stunt their ability to learn truth by sealing themselves off from any meaningful dialogue with any who may have different viewpoints. A manifestation of this is the increasing polarization in American politics.<sup>7</sup>

Others go to the opposite extreme, finding any piece of information that disrupts their prior views as sufficient reason to throw aside, without

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further inquiry, truths that have provided sure guidance to them and others in the past. These individuals, to use the words of the apostle Paul, are “tossed to and fro, and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the sleight of men.”<sup>8</sup> This tendency sometimes manifests itself as a crisis of faith—triggered by the receipt of pieces of information, true or not, that do not coincide with previously held views.

While there are many causes for political polarization and crises of faith, one common feature is that they are often a partial result of living in a post-truth world in which truth seems so difficult to discern that many may wonder whether it is worth the effort—or even possible at all.

### The Existence and Importance of Truth

My message to you today is that truth does exist, it does matter, and it can be discerned. A major part of your purpose here at BYU is to enhance your knowledge of the truth and your ability to discern it. In fact, a major part of our purpose in this mortal existence is to enhance and refine our ability to discern, apply, and ultimately internalize truth.

Scriptures reveal that one of the defining characteristics of Christ—and one source of His supreme power—is that He is full of truth.<sup>9</sup> His knowledge of all truth and His adherence to those principles gives Him all power. Indeed, He has internalized truth so well that He rightly proclaimed that He is “the truth.”<sup>10</sup> He further declared that if we come to know the truth in its fullest sense, the truth will make us free<sup>11</sup>—free to realize our full potential as sons and daughters of God and “joint-heirs with Christ.”<sup>12</sup> One of our hymns thus correctly asserts that truth is “the brightest prize To which mortals or Gods can aspire.”<sup>13</sup>

To give us hope that we can eventually realize this almost incomprehensible goal of being full of truth, the scriptures make clear that Christ “received not of the fulness at first, but continued from grace to grace, until he received a fulness.”<sup>14</sup>

Thus it is both important and possible for us to be able to discern, apply, and internalize truth,

despite the fact that we may be living in a post-truth world. And one of the major purposes of your education here is to progress in that manner.

The BYU mission statement indicates that “students at BYU should receive a broad university education.” One of the principal ways we do that is through our general education requirements. Because of those requirements, most of you are familiar with this part of our mission and mission statement. However, we too often skip over the introductory phrase to that charge. BYU students are to receive a broad university education, the mission statement says, “because the gospel encourages the pursuit of all truth.”<sup>15</sup> That statement implies at least three things: (1) that there is such a thing as truth, (2) that its acquisition is possible, and (3) that facilitating its pursuit is one of the purposes of this university.

### The Definition of Truth

But all this begs the question that Pontius Pilate put to the Savior: “What is truth?”<sup>16</sup> We could spend well more than several devotionals pursuing that question in depth. Indeed, there are courses on this and other campuses dedicated to that very question,<sup>17</sup> and philosophers have for centuries debated both the nature and the existence of truth without coming to any definite consensus. While Christ did not answer Pilate’s question directly, in modern revelation He has provided both testimony that truth exists and a general definition of what it encompasses.

In section 93 of the Doctrine and Covenants, the Lord declared, “Truth is knowledge of things as they are, and as they were, and as they are to come.”<sup>18</sup> The Book of Mormon prophet Jacob echoed the same theme, observing that truth includes “things as they really are, and . . . things as they really will be.”<sup>19</sup>

That simple definition is more profound than it may at first appear. For example, because it defines things as they *really* are, truth is not dependent on popular opinion or the assent of experts. It is, to use the scriptural phrase, “independent in that sphere in which God has placed it.”<sup>20</sup>

President Spencer W. Kimball explained it this way:

*The earth is spherical. If all the . . . people in the world think it flat, they are in error. That is an absolute truth, and all the arguing in the world will not change it. . . .*

*God, our Heavenly Father, . . . lives. That is an absolute truth. All . . . the children of men on the earth might be ignorant of him and his attributes and his powers, but he still lives. All the people on the earth might deny him and disbelieve, but he lives in spite of them. They may have their own opinions, but he still lives, and his form, powers, and attributes do not change according to men's opinions. In short, opinion alone has no power in the matter of an absolute truth.<sup>21</sup>*

Truth is not only independent; it is completely comprehensive. It encompasses all knowledge and all accurate information—in all worlds that have ever been or ever will be. As B. H. Roberts put it:

*When you say that truth is that which is, that which has been, and that which is to be in future, . . . you make it “the sum of existence”: You will include the past, present, and future of all existences—their “sum”; and this is truth: The “sum” of existences, past, present, and yet to be.<sup>22</sup>*

Given that there are worlds—or existences—“without number,”<sup>23</sup> knowledge of all aspects of each of their pasts, presents, and futures is vast and comprehensive.

Thus, in one sense, as Elder Roberts noted, “The absolute truth as . . . set forth [in section 93] is beyond the grasp of the finite mind.”<sup>24</sup> However, it is incumbent upon us to learn as much of the truth as we can as part of our pathway in becoming like Him who embodies all truth.

Brigham Young put it this way: “[Our] religion . . . prompts [us] to search diligently after knowledge. There is no other people in existence more eager to see, hear, learn, and understand truth.”<sup>25</sup> And this is where your current experience at BYU comes in.

### **The Role of Study and Faith in Pursuing Truth**

BYU is an educational institution. It is a place dedicated to the acquisition of knowledge. In section 88 of the Doctrine and Covenants, the Lord provided a list of things we should learn. You should be familiar with it. It sounds much like the broad general education that we provide to all our students as part of our mission statement. We are to

*be instructed . . . in theory, in principle, in doctrine, in the law of the gospel, in all things that pertain unto the kingdom of God . . . ;*

*Of things both in heaven and in the earth, and under the earth; things which have been, things which are, things which must shortly come to pass; things which are at home, things which are abroad; the wars and the perplexities of the nations, and the judgments which are on the land; and a knowledge also of countries and of kingdoms.<sup>26</sup>*

That description seems to cover pretty much everything from geology to geography and from astronomy to anthropology. But note especially these three subjects in the middle of the list: “things which have been, things which are, things which must shortly come to pass.” While this is not a verbatim repetition of the definition of truth in section 93, it is so close that the two are surely connected. That it is embedded in the middle of this more specific list of subjects suggests that truth is found in each of these other subjects and, correspondingly, that when we study any of these topics, we are engaged in “the pursuit of all truth,” as our mission statement challenges us to do. Thus all courses at this university—indeed, all we do at this university—should be focused on the pursuit of truth.

But the pursuit of truth requires that we be able to recognize it and that we be able to distinguish information that is true from that which is not. How are we to do that, especially in a world that is increasingly post-truth? The familiar scriptural injunction that we “seek learning . . . by study and also by faith”<sup>27</sup> is fully applicable in this regard.

The role of study in the identification and acquisition of truth is more well-known and widespread in universities. That is likely the primary means by which you will come to develop the skills and capacity to discern and apply truth in the subjects you are studying. You will hopefully develop your capacity to think clearly and rationally about the matters put before you. That is how most students at most colleges spend most of their time, and that is how most of you will spend most of your time here.

But at BYU we are committed to the proposition that faith can also play a critical role in the recognition and acquisition of truth. Alma distinguished faith from perfect knowledge. He noted that “faith is not to have a perfect knowledge of things” but instead is a “hope for things which are not seen, which are true.”<sup>28</sup> But this hope is not a self-created wish. Faith is, as described in Hebrews, “the substance [or the assurance<sup>29</sup>] of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen.”<sup>30</sup> Thus faith seems to be a God-granted way of discerning truth before one has perfect knowledge of the matter. Faith is an extra-rational means of discerning truth—through revelation.

Elder Dallin H. Oaks has observed that “revelation . . . occurs when a scientist, an inventor, an artist or great leader receives flashes of enlightenment from a loving God for the benefit of His children.”<sup>31</sup> I suspect that many of you have had the experience of being stuck on a problem for hours or days or even weeks or months and then having the solution come to you in a flash. I certainly have. I can best account for those sudden insights by reference to Joseph Smith’s description of the revelatory process, in which he said, “You feel pure intelligence flowing into you, [giving] you sudden strokes of ideas.”<sup>32</sup> Such revelatory experiences are greatly enhanced, as the Prophet Joseph taught, by the exercise and enhancement of our faith in Jesus Christ.<sup>33</sup>

The fact that faith is a lesser-known means of discerning truth should not obscure the reality that it is, in the long run, more reliable than mere rational argument, which depends on the

experience and limited reasoning abilities of imperfect, mortal beings. It is, after all, “by the power of the Holy Ghost” that we “may know the truth of all things.”<sup>34</sup> Indeed, the most important truths can be learned only by revelation based on faith. As Elder Neal A. Maxwell explained, “God’s plan . . . is not something to be deduced by logic alone, nor is human experience deep enough or long enough to inform us adequately. It requires revelation from God.”<sup>35</sup>

While study and faith are two different tools in the process of discerning and acquiring truth, the two are interconnected in that process. For example, faith can be the initial impetus for productive study. Faith in a perfect God whose word does not fail and who created worlds governed by eternal laws that do not change<sup>36</sup> gives us an assurance that the often difficult, and sometimes tedious and frustrating, work of acquiring truth by study is an endeavor worth pursuing. If we truly had no belief or hope that there are ultimate answers to our questions, we would be less likely to engage in a deep, meaningful search for the answers. Faith in God can provide the hope, and—in its more advanced stages—even the certainty, that we are seeking for something that can be found.

Similarly, study is often a prerequisite for the revelatory experience that characterizes learning by faith. As President Spencer W. Kimball once observed, “Perspiration must precede inspiration; there must be effort before there is excellence.”<sup>37</sup> Elder Oaks explained that “revelation in a particular discipline or skill is most likely to come to one who has paid the price of learning all that has previously been revealed [on that subject].”<sup>38</sup>

Discerning truth by study and by faith is not an easy process. You should not expect that if you study enough and have enough faith that you will be able to complete the process before you graduate, either from this university or even this mortal existence. In a post-truth environment—indeed, in any mortal environment—challenges will come and questions will arise to which we don’t have ready answers. How do we know in those situations what is truth?

Let me provide four suggestions that I believe are specific applications of the “by study and also by faith” paradigm I have described. These are four things that may help you better distinguish truth from falsehood and productively deal with the uncertainty inherent in the truth-seeking process.

**First**, when you receive new information, consider the source. Some sources are more reliable than others. In the digital age, everyone has a platform. That has some upside, as it allows voices that were previously unheard to participate in the conversation that is part of the pursuit of truth. At the same time, it allows almost anyone to claim almost anything without the same fact-checking filter that has existed for many mainstream sources in the past. If the information comes from a source with which you are not familiar, both the source and the information might require more in-depth scrutiny. At one level, we all know the assertion “it is on the Internet, so it must be true” is a false statement. But too many act as if it is true.

On the flip side, there are sources of information that have a long track record of reliability and veracity. Peer-reviewed texts and articles are usually more likely to be trusted for that very reason. That is why the educational process relies so heavily upon them.

More important, the scriptures are always reliable and are always true. They therefore serve as a measuring stick for other information. That is one reason they are called “standard works.” The teachings of modern prophets are similarly reliable, particularly if they are repeated over a period of time.<sup>39</sup>

**Second**, consider the context in which the information arose and is presented. A statement may be accurately reported but still be untrue because it is taken out of context. The story is told of a candidate for election to the local school board who urged voters not to support his opponent because witnesses accurately reported that she had said that the first thing she would do would be to burn down the school. What the candidate failed to

reveal is that his opponent made the statement forty years earlier when she was unprepared for an assignment in her second-grade class. Context does matter.

In that regard, I urge you to evaluate new information in light of the entire plan of salvation—one guiding truth that provides accurate context for all aspects of our lives. Evaluating new information in light of the plan of salvation is helpful both because it helps determine the veracity of the information and because it helps determine how important the information is.

**Third**, be patient, both with yourself and with the process. It is important to understand and remember that one purpose of our mortal experience is to learn to operate by faith—to discern truth without perfect knowledge. Thus, in this life there will never be ready answers to all our questions, despite what modern technology may cause us to think. As Elder M. Russell Ballard observed, “James did not say, ‘If any of you lack wisdom, let him Google!’”<sup>40</sup> Instead, God created an entire earthly experience to allow us to develop our ability to recognize and apply truth through trial and error so that we could increase our ability to act by faith.

Furthermore, there are likely eternal truths that we simply cannot comprehend in our current mortal and finite condition. And without all truth, we cannot answer all questions. As Elder Neal A. Maxwell once observed, sometimes “we can’t make it all add up because clearly we do not have all the numbers.”<sup>41</sup>

So don’t be distressed if you don’t find all the answers immediately. The pursuit of truth is a lifetime and likely eternal pursuit. In the meantime, hold on to what you know to be true, as Elder Jeffrey R. Holland and President Dieter F. Uchtdorf have both implored us to do.<sup>42</sup>

**Fourth**, and most important, if you want to understand truth, draw closer to Him who is the source of all truth and light, who declared Himself—even Jesus Christ—to be “the way, the truth, and the life.”<sup>43</sup> Every single point I have made—the existence of truth, the definition of

truth, the importance of truth, and the role of study and faith in pursuing the truth—rises or falls with Jesus Christ. If you have doubts about Him, that is where you need to begin the process.

President Joseph Fielding Smith once observed:

*The greatest truth [is] . . . that Jesus Christ is the Son of God, the Redeemer of the world, who came into this world to die that men might live. . . . It is far more important to know that . . . than it is to know all that can be obtained in secular education.*<sup>44</sup>

I close by bearing my witness that Jesus Christ lives. He is the Truth. He and only He can lead you to all truth. He is anxious to bless you not only in your educational endeavors here but in all your doings in all places at all times. If you will focus on Him in your pursuit of truth, you will succeed here and beyond. This I witness in His holy name, even Jesus Christ, amen.

## Notes

1. Oxford Dictionaries, “Oxford Dictionaries Word of the Year 2016 Is . . . Post-Truth,” Press and News, 16 November 2016, [oxforddictionaries.com/press/news/2016/12/11/WOTY-16](http://oxforddictionaries.com/press/news/2016/12/11/WOTY-16).

2. Oxford Dictionaries, “Word of the Year: Post-Truth,” [en.oxforddictionaries.com/word-of-the-year/word-of-the-year-2016](http://en.oxforddictionaries.com/word-of-the-year/word-of-the-year-2016).

3. Oxford Dictionaries, “Word of the Year 2016 Is . . .”

4. Oxford Dictionaries, “Post-Truth”; see, e.g., Ruth Marcus, “Welcome to the Post-Truth Presidency,” Opinions, *Washington Post*, 2 December 2016, [washingtonpost.com/opinions/welcome-to-the-post-truth-presidency/2016/12/02/baaf630a-b8cd-11e6-b994-f45a208f7a73\\_story.html?utm\\_term=.b700661a92b2](http://washingtonpost.com/opinions/welcome-to-the-post-truth-presidency/2016/12/02/baaf630a-b8cd-11e6-b994-f45a208f7a73_story.html?utm_term=.b700661a92b2); see also Margaret Sullivan, “The Post-Truth World of the Trump Administration Is Scarier Than You Think,” Style, *Washington Post*, 4 December 2016, [washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/style/the-post-truth-world-of-the-trump-administration-is-scarier-than-you-think/2016/12/02/ebda952a-b897-11e6-b994-f45a208f7a73\\_story.html?utm\\_term=.85a9ad21a74b](http://washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/style/the-post-truth-world-of-the-trump-administration-is-scarier-than-you-think/2016/12/02/ebda952a-b897-11e6-b994-f45a208f7a73_story.html?utm_term=.85a9ad21a74b).

5. Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* (1798), part 2, stanza 9.

6. Jesse H. Shera, “Librarianship and Information Science,” in Fritz Machlup and Una Mansfield, eds., *The Study of Information: Interdisciplinary Messages* (New York: Wiley, 1983), 384; punctuation added.

7. See, e.g., Nicholas DiFonzo, “The Echo-Chamber Effect,” Room for Debate, *New York Times*, 22 April 2011, [nytimes.com/roomfordebate/2011/04/21/barack-obama-and-the-psychology-of-the-birther-myth/the-echo-chamber-effect](http://nytimes.com/roomfordebate/2011/04/21/barack-obama-and-the-psychology-of-the-birther-myth/the-echo-chamber-effect); see also Claire Cain Miller, “Social Media Deepens Partisan Divides. But Not Always,” The Upshot, *New York Times*, 20 November 2014, [nytimes.com/2014/11/21/upshot/social-media-deepens-partisan-divides-but-not-always.html](http://nytimes.com/2014/11/21/upshot/social-media-deepens-partisan-divides-but-not-always.html).

8. Ephesians 4:14.

9. See, e.g., John 1:14; 2 Nephi 2:6; Alma 5:48, 9:26, 13:9; D&C 93:11; Moses 1:6, 1:32, 5:7, 6:52, 7:11. Each of these scriptures indicates that Christ is full of both truth and grace. The way in which those two attributes contribute to Christ’s power to redeem mankind is a topic worth pursuing.

10. John 14:6.

11. See John 8:32.

12. Romans 8:17; see also verse 16.

13. “Oh Say, What Is Truth?” *Hymns*, 2002, no. 272; text by John Jaques.

14. D&C 93:13.

15. *The Mission of Brigham Young University and The Aims of a BYU Education* (Provo: BYU, 2014), 2.

16. John 18:38.

17. For example, there is a Philosophy 350R course entitled “Truth” in the BYU Undergraduate Catalog, [catalog.byu.edu/humanities/philosophy/truth](http://catalog.byu.edu/humanities/philosophy/truth).

18. D&C 93:24.

19. Jacob 4:13.

20. D&C 93:30.

21. Spencer W. Kimball, “First Presidency Message: Absolute Truth,” *Ensign*, September 1978.

22. B. H. Roberts, *The Truth, the Way, the Life: An Elementary Treatise on Theology*, ed. John W. Welch (Provo: BYU Studies, 1994), 23. Roberts cited John

Jaques's lyrics in "Oh Say, What Is Truth?": "Truth, the sum of existence, will weather the worst, Eternal, unchanged, evermore" (*The Truth, the Way*, 28).

23. Moses 1:33.

24. Roberts, *The Truth, the Way*, 23.

25. *JD* 8:6; quoted in *Teachings of Presidents of the Church: Brigham Young* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1997), 194.

26. D&C 88:78–79.

27. D&C 88:118.

28. Alma 32:21.

29. See JST, Hebrews 11:1.

30. Hebrews 11:1.

31. Dallin H. Oaks, "Fundamental Premises of Our Faith," talk given at Harvard Law School, 26 February 2010, [mormonnewsroom.org/article/fundamental-premises-of-our-faith-talk-given-by-elder-dallin-h-oaks-at-harvard-law-school](http://mormonnewsroom.org/article/fundamental-premises-of-our-faith-talk-given-by-elder-dallin-h-oaks-at-harvard-law-school).

32. *HC* 3:381; quoted in *Teachings of Presidents of the Church: Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2007), 132.

33. In 1839, Joseph Smith wrote:

*We believe that we have a right to revelations . . . and light and intelligence, through the gift of the Holy Ghost, in the name of Jesus Christ, on all subjects pertaining to our spiritual welfare; if it so be that we keep his commandments, so as to render ourselves worthy in his sight. ["Communications," letter from Joseph Smith to Isaac Galland, 22 March 1839, *Times and Seasons* 1, no. 4 (February 1840): 54; quoted in *Teachings of Presidents: Joseph Smith*, 132]*

The importance of keeping the commandments as an aid in discerning truth is made clear by Doctrine and Covenants 93:28: "He that keepeth his commandments receiveth truth and light, until he is glorified in truth and knoweth all things."

34. Moroni 10:5.

35. Neal A. Maxwell, "God Will Yet Reveal," *Ensign*, November 1986.

36. See D&C 88:13, 21–26, 34–38.

37. Spencer W. Kimball, "The Second Century of Brigham Young University," BYU devotional address, 10 October 1975; see also excerpted text in "Climbing the Hills Just Ahead: Three Addresses," in John W. Welch and Don E. Norton, eds., *Educating Zion* (Provo: BYU Studies, 1996), 72.

38. Dallin H. Oaks, "A House of Faith," BYU annual university conference address, 31 August 1977, 14; see also Oaks, "A House of Faith," in Welch and Norton, *Educating Zion*, 126.

39. As Elder D. Todd Christofferson noted:

*With the keys of the kingdom, the Lord's servants can identify both truth and falsehood and once again authoritatively state, "Thus saith the Lord." Regrettably, some resent the Church because they want to define their own truth, but in reality it is a surpassing blessing to receive a "knowledge of things as they [truly] are, and as they were, and as they are to come" [D&C 93:24] insofar as the Lord wills to reveal it. The Church safeguards and publishes God's revelations—the canon of scripture. ["Why the Church," *Ensign*, November 2015]*

40. M. Russell Ballard (referring to James 1:5), "The Opportunities and Responsibilities of CES Teachers in the 21st Century," An Evening with Elder M. Russell Ballard, address to CES religious educators, 26 February 2016, Salt Lake City, Ids. [org/broadcasts/article/evening-with-a-general-authority/2016/02/the-opportunities-and-responsibilities-of-ces-teachers-in-the-21st-century?lang=eng](http://org/broadcasts/article/evening-with-a-general-authority/2016/02/the-opportunities-and-responsibilities-of-ces-teachers-in-the-21st-century?lang=eng).

41. Neal A. Maxwell, *Notwithstanding My Weakness* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1981), 68.

42. See Jeffrey R. Holland, "Lord, I Believe," *Ensign*, May 2013; see also Dieter F. Uchtdorf, "Come, Join with Us," *Ensign*, November 2013.

43. John 14:6.

44. Joseph Fielding Smith, *CR*, April 1955, 51.