



EDITOR'S CONCLUSION

How Spiritual Things Are Known

A FEW years ago, a Baptist pastor friend and I were driving through Boston in an effort to get to the Latter-day Saint institute of religion building at Cambridge. During our search for the institute building, we chatted. My colleague commented on a matter that we had discussed several times, namely the idea that Latter-day Saints are prone to rely more on feelings than on tangible evidence for truth of religious claims. Being just a bit weary of that accusation, I asked, “Do you believe in the literal bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ?”

He looked at me as if the question was inane. “Of course I believe in the resurrection, Bob; I’m an ordained minister.”

I followed up: “Why do you believe in the resurrection? How do you know it really happened?”

He answered: “Because the New Testament teaches of the resurrection of Jesus.”

I shot right back, "But how do you know the New Testament accounts are reliable? How do you know the Bible can be trusted? Maybe someone just made all this up. Maybe the Bible is a giant hoax."

"No," he said, "there is strong evidence to support the truthfulness of the Bible."

"Like what?" I asked.

"Well, there are archaeological, historical, and cultural evidences that what is being described actually happened."

I then queried, "And so that's how you know the resurrection is real?"

"Yeah, I suppose so," he said.

At this point, my mind began to race. I found myself saying something I hadn't planned to say. "You know, I feel a great sense of sadness right now."

My evangelical friend was surprised and asked, "Sadness? Why are you sad?"

"I was just thinking of a good friend of mine, an older woman in Montgomery, Alabama, and of how sad it is that this wonderful and devoted Christian, a person who has given her life to Jesus and studied and memorized her Bible like few people I know, a woman whose life manifests her complete commitment to the Savior, is not really entitled to have a witness of the truthfulness of the Bible."

"Why is that?" he followed up.

"Well, she knows precious little about archaeology or languages or culture or history or manuscripts, and so I suppose she can't really know that the Bible is the word of God."

"Of course she can," he said. "She has her faith, her personal witness that the Bible is true."

I turned to him, smiled, and stated, "Do you mean that she can have the power of the Holy Spirit testify to her soul that her Bible is completely trustworthy and can be relied upon as God's word?"

"Yes, that's what I mean."

My smile broadened as I added, "Then we've come full circle."

At that point, my friend looked into my eyes and smiled, saying, “I see where you’re going with this.” We then engaged in one of the most productive conversations of our time together as friends. We agreed between us that it is so easy to yield to the temptation to categorize and pigeonhole and stereotype and even demonize persons whose faith is different from your own. It is so easy to overstate, to misrepresent, to create “straw men” in an effort to establish our own points.

We agreed that evangelical Christians and Latter-day Saint Christians both base their faith upon evidence—both seen and unseen. While saving faith is always built upon that which is true, upon an actual historical moment in time, upon something that really took place (whether Jesus rose from the tomb or Joseph Smith had that experience in the Sacred Grove), true believers will never allow their faith to be held hostage by what science has or has not found at a given time. I know, for example, that Jesus fed the five thousand, healed the sick, raised the dead, calmed the storm, and rose from the dead—not just because I have physical evidence for each of those miraculous events (I don’t), nor even because I can read of these things in the New Testament, which I accept with all my heart. I know these things actually happened, because the Spirit of the Living God bears witness to my spirit that the Lord of Life did all the scriptures say he did and more.

Many years ago on a Sunday morning, I opened the door and reached down to pick up the morning newspaper when I saw beside the paper a plastic bag containing a paperback book. I brought both inside and laid the newspaper aside as I browsed the paperback. The cover was a lovely picture of a mountain stream, but the title of the book revealed to me what in fact the book was all about—it was an anti-Mormon treatise. Many of the arguments in the book against The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints were old and worn-out, dead horses that have been beaten since the days of E. D. Howe,

arguments to which Mormons had provided responsible replies many, many times.

One section of the book did, however, prove to be of some interest to me. The author pointed out that eventually two Mormon missionaries would come to the reader's door. If they do come, he pleaded, do not let them in. If, however, you do let them in, then do not listen to them. If they are allowed to tell you about their message, about Joseph Smith and angels and golden plates, they will ask you to kneel and pray about the truthfulness of these things. Whatever you do, don't pray! The writer then made this unusual observation: in determining the truthfulness of a religious claim, there are three things a person can never trust: (1) their thoughts, (2) their feelings, and (3) their prayers.

I was all ears at this point, wondering how we could ever know anything. I didn't have to wait long, for the writer then noted that the only thing that could be trusted was the Holy Bible. I shook my head and felt a deep sense of sadness for the author, for I wondered how indeed a person could even know of the truthfulness of the Bible if he or she could not think, feel, or pray. It was obvious that the author could not see the blatant inconsistency and irrationality of his own words. I tried to put myself into the place of a reader who was not a Latter-day Saint and wondered how I might feel upon reading such things. To be honest, I would feel insulted, knowing that I could not be trusted enough in my pursuit of truth to rely upon my mind, my heart, or even the most tried and true method of obtaining divine direction—prayer itself.

In a very real sense, believing is seeing. No member of the Church need feel embarrassed when they cannot produce the golden plates or the complete Egyptian papyri. No member of this Church should ever feel hesitant to bear testimony of those verities that remain in the realm of faith, that are seen only with the eyes of faith. Elder Neal A. Maxwell has written, "It is the author's opinion that all the scriptures, including the Book of Mormon, will remain in the realm

of faith. Science will not be able to prove or disprove holy writ. However, enough plausible evidence will come forth to prevent scoffers from having a field day, but not enough to remove the requirement of faith. Believers must be patient during such unfolding.”¹

Similarly, President Ezra Taft Benson pointed out, “We do not have to prove the Book of Mormon is true. The book is its own proof. All we need to do is read it and declare it. The Book of Mormon is not on trial—the people of the world, including the members of the Church, are on trial as to what they will do with this second witness for Christ.”²

President Gordon B. Hinckley put things in proper perspective:

I can hold [the Book of Mormon] in my hand. It is real. It has weight and substance that can be physically measured. I can open its pages and read, and it has language both beautiful and uplifting. The ancient record from which it was translated came out of the earth as a voice speaking from the dust. . . .

The evidence for its truth, for its validity in a world that is prone to demand evidence, lies not in archaeology or anthropology, though these may be helpful to some. It lies not in word research or historical analysis, though these may be confirmatory. The evidence for its truth and validity lies within the covers of the book itself. The test of its truth lies in reading it. It is a book of God. Reasonable individuals may sincerely question its origin, but those who read it prayerfully may come to know by a power beyond their natural senses that it is true, that it contains the word of God, that it outlines saving truths of the everlasting gospel, that it came forth by the gift and power of God.³

While we seek to make friends and build bridges of understanding with persons of other faiths where possible, we do not court favor, nor do we compromise one whit on what we believe. Some

doctrines, like the doctrine of ours being “the only true and living church” (D&C 1:30), by their very nature, arouse antagonism from those of other faiths. Would it not be wise on our part to avoid or at least downplay such divisive points? Perhaps, some say, we should consider focusing solely on matters we have in common and put aside, for the time being, the distinctive teachings of the Restoration. Elder Boyd K. Packer declared:

If we thought only in terms of diplomacy or popularity, surely we should change our course. But we must hold tightly to it even though some turn away. . . .

It is not an easy thing for us to defend the position that bothers so many others. But, brethren and sisters, never be ashamed of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Never apologize for the sacred doctrines of the gospel. Never feel inadequate and unsettled because you cannot explain them to the satisfaction of all who might inquire of you. Do not be ill at ease or uncomfortable because you can give little more than your conviction. . . .

If we can stand without shame, without hesitancy, without embarrassment, without reservation to bear witness that the gospel has been restored, that there are prophets and Apostles upon the earth, that the truth is available for all mankind, the Lord’s Spirit will be with us. And that assurance can be affirmed to others.⁴

In the end, the only way that the things of God can and should be known is by the quiet whisperings of the Holy Ghost. How did Alma the Younger know? Was it because he was struck to the ground by an angel? Was it because he lay immobile and speechless for three days while he underwent a confrontation with himself and his sinful and rebellious past? No, Alma knew as we know: he may have undergone a serious turnaround in his life through the intervention

of a heavenly messenger, but the witness that drove and directed this magnificent convert was the witness of the Spirit. In his own words, “Behold, I testify unto you that I do know that these things whereof I have spoken are true. And how do ye suppose that I know of their surety? Behold, I say unto you *they are made known unto me by the Holy Spirit of God*. Behold, I have fasted and prayed many days that I might know these things of myself. And now I do know of myself that they are true; for the Lord God hath made them manifest unto me by his Holy Spirit; and this is the spirit of revelation which is in me” (Alma 5:45–46; emphasis added).

On the other hand, we can come to sense the *significance* of a spiritual reality by the loud janglings of opposition it engenders. For example, what do the following locations have in common: Accra, Atlanta, Dallas, Denver, Nashville, Portland, Stockholm, and White Plains? In each of these places, the announcement that a Latter-day Saint temple was to be built there brought opponents and even crazed zealots out of the woodwork. If I did not already know by the quiet whisperings of the Spirit within me that what goes on within temples is true and is of eternal import, I just might sense the significance of the temple by the kind of opposition that seems to flow almost naturally from those who refuse to see.

Consider another illustration. Why is it that so many people throughout the world write scathing books, deliver biting addresses, and prepare vicious videos denouncing the Book of Mormon? What is it about black words on a white page—all of which are uplifting and edifying, that invite men and women to come unto Christ and be perfected in him—that would arouse such bitter antagonism? Once again, if I did not already know, by the quiet whisperings of the Spirit, that the Book of Mormon is truly heaven-sent and indeed another testament of Jesus Christ, I would recognize its significance—its power to settle doctrinal disputes, touch hearts, and transform the lives of men and women—by the loud and hostile reactions people tend to have toward it.

Hugh Nibley, one of the great defenders of the faith, stated:

The words of the prophets cannot be held to the tentative and defective tests that men have devised for them. Science, philosophy, and common sense all have a right to their day in court. But the last word does not lie with them. Every time men in their wisdom have come forth with the last word, other words have promptly followed. The last word is a testimony of the gospel that comes only by direct revelation. Our Father in heaven speaks it, and if it were in perfect agreement with the science of today, it would surely be out of line with the science of tomorrow. Let us not, therefore, seek to hold God to the learned opinions of the moment when he speaks the language of eternity.⁵

Those who believe in and teach the scriptures, who choose to follow the Brethren, and who are loyal to the Church, no matter the extent of their academic training or intellectual capacity, open themselves to ridicule from the cynic and the critic. Ultimately, doctrinal truth comes not through the explorations of scholars but through the revelations of God to apostles and prophets. And if such a position be labeled as narrow, parochial, or anti-intellectual, then so be it. We cast our lot with the prophets.

Elder Bruce R. McConkie testified:

True religion deals with spiritual things. We do not come to a knowledge of God and his laws through intellectuality, or by research, or by reason. . . . In their sphere, education and intellectuality are devoutly to be desired.

But when contrasted with spiritual endowments, they are of but slight and passing worth. From an eternal perspective what each of us needs is a Ph.D. in faith and righteousness. The things that will profit us everlastingly are not the power

to reason, but the ability to receive revelation; not the truths learned by study, but the knowledge gained by faith; not what we know about the things of the world, but our knowledge of God and his laws.⁶

Notes

1. Neal A. Maxwell, *Plain and Precious Things* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1983), 4.
2. Ezra Taft Benson, *A Witness and a Warning* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1988), 13.
3. Gordon B. Hinckley, *Faith: The Essence of True Religion* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1989), 10–11.
4. Boyd K. Packer, in Conference Report, October 1985, 104, 107.
5. Hugh Nibley, *The World and the Prophets* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book; Provo, UT: FARMS, 1987), 134.
6. Bruce R. McConkie, in Conference Report, April 1971, 99.