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Teachers should not be ashamed to admit they do not know answers to some questions.

“I Know Not”

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“Do you think that the weapons buildup we are seeing in some countries will lead to Armageddon?”

It was a priesthood session of stake conference, and the presiding General Authority had opened the meeting to questions. He looked at the person who had asked the question and simply responded, “I don’t know. Next question.”

Throughout the meeting, the General Authority was asked many questions, several of which did not have answers that could be found in the scriptures or teachings of living prophets. To each of these questions, he answered, “I don’t know.”

One of the major temptations gospel teachers face is the feeling that they need to answer every question—even questions to which there are no answers.

The prophet Alma once found himself at a point where he had reached the limits of his knowledge. Speaking of the sacred records, Alma said, “And who knoweth but what they will be the means of bringing many thousands of them, yea, and also many thousands of our stiffnecked brethren, the Nephites, who are now hardening their hearts in sin and iniquities, to the knowledge of their Redeemer? *Now these mysteries are not yet fully made known unto me;*

therefore I shall forbear” (Alma 37:10–11; emphasis added). Alma was able to resist the temptation to speculate on issues that he didn’t fully understand and to “forbear,” or leave those matters alone.

As a more modern example, shortly before he was called to the Quorum of the Twelve, Elder D. Todd Christofferson was interviewed by the media company Reuters. One of the questions he was asked was, “Women cannot enter the lay priesthood if I understand that correctly. Can you imagine a time when that might change? Is that conceivable?”

His answer was intriguing. Although some religious educators would have been quick to say no (or yes), Elder Christofferson said: “*I don’t know. I really don’t know.* We do honestly believe in the reality of revelation. Both in the past and the present and the future . . . In that sense it would be conceivable.”¹

In an address to religious educators, President Henry B. Eyring emphasized the importance of acknowledging the limits of what we know. He said: “We must teach the gospel in its simple purity. To do that we must pray in faith that the Spirit will warn us away from teaching false doctrine, from giving personal interpretation, and from all speculation as we teach the gospel. That restraint may become more difficult as we read more books and hear more talks with what seem to us to be novel or more profound expositions of the gospel.”²

President Joseph F. Smith put it this way: “It is no discredit to our intelligence or to our integrity to say frankly in the face of a hundred speculative questions, ‘I do not know.’”³ And President Harold B. Lee said, “It would be far better to say [‘I do not know’] than to indulge in faulty speculation.”⁴

In addition to the potential embarrassment of not being able to answer a question posed by a student, some religious educators may find that some gospel questions cause them trouble on a personal level. Robert L. Millet, former dean of Religious Education at BYU, said, “One thing I have learned through the years is not to become preoccupied with unanswered questions, not to obsess over them, not to allow them to make me spiritually dysfunctional . . . I have learned to place many items *on the shelf* for the time being to allow time and study and seasoning and maturity either to prepare me for an answer down the road or to prepare me not to receive an answer, perhaps even in this life.”⁵

If we are asked a question that we do not have an answer to, there is no need to worry. Others have had this experience as well. An angel asked Nephi if he knew the meaning of a book. Nephi responded, “I know not” (1 Nephi 13:22). On another occasion, Nephi responded to a question, saying, “I know that he loveth his children; nevertheless, I do not know the meaning of all

things” (1 Nephi 11:17). Many people in the scriptures admit to not knowing everything. From these accounts, we can learn several principles about what to do when we do not know the answer. These principles can be helpful both in terms of how to respond as a teacher when the correct answer is not known and also how to deal with personal doubts that may arise when one cannot answer every question.

Principle 1: Trust That the Lord Knows

While compiling the Book of Mormon, the prophet Mormon received promptings from the Spirit regarding the small plates of Nephi. He frankly admitted that he did not know the reason he was supposed to include these plates, saying, “And now, I do not know all things; *but the Lord knoweth all things* which are to come” (Words of Mormon 1:7; emphasis added).

Speaking nearly one thousand years earlier, Nephi used almost identical language. Speaking of the small plates, he said, “The Lord hath commanded me to make these plates for a wise purpose in him, which purpose I know not. *But the Lord knoweth all things from the beginning*” (1 Nephi 9:5–6; emphasis added).

If the issue of what would become of the small plates seems like a minor issue to us today, it is because we have the benefit of knowing how they were eventually used. For Nephi, the effort to engrave the small plates was huge. If anyone had the right to know why he needed to do it, it was Nephi. However both Nephi and Mormon were content with the knowledge that “the Lord knoweth all things.”

In a more modern setting, when dealing with a difficult issue (the death of children), President Wilford Woodruff said, “The question may arise with me and with you—‘Why has the Lord taken away my children?’ But that is not for me to tell, because I do not know; it is in the hands of the Lord.”⁶ President Woodruff did not hesitate to say that he did not know the answer to this difficult question. But he also expressed faith that the Lord was involved in the situation.

When we encounter questions that we do not have answers to, we can take comfort in the fact that even if we do not have all of the answers, the Lord does. As President Ezra Taft Benson plainly taught, “God knows all things, the end from the beginning”⁷

Our faith should not diminish just because we do not have answers to every question. We can also express our confidence to students that just

because we do not have an answer does not mean that an answer does not exist. An answer does exist, for God knows all things.

Principle 2: Some Things Do Not Matter

A second principle is that some things are not important to know. Elder Bruce R. McConkie wrote:

There is so much to learn about the great eternal verities which shape our destiny that it seems a shame to turn our attention everlastingly to the minutiae and insignificant things. So often questions like this are asked: 'I know it is not essential to my salvation, but I would really like to know how many angels can dance on the head of a pin and if it makes any difference whether the pin is made of brass or bronze?' There is such a thing as getting so tied up with little fly specks on the great canvas which depicts the whole plan of salvation that we lose sight of what the life and the light and the glory of eternal reward are all about. There is such a thing as virtually useless knowledge.⁸

As Alma talked with his son Corianton, he explained that some things were just not important to know: "Now, whether there shall be one time, or a second time, or a third time, that men shall come forth from the dead, *it mattereth not*; for God knoweth all these things; and it sufficeth me to know that this is the case—that there is a time appointed that all shall rise from the dead." (Alma 40:5; emphasis added).

In this case, Alma knew some of the details, and he also knew that some of the other details really did not matter. Understanding that some things are not important to know can often itself be an important thing to know.

Principle 3: Continue to Do What Is Right, Even If You Do Not Know All of the Answers

At times, if people have doubts or do not understand everything they want to know, they may stop doing things that they know are right. For example, Elder M. Russell Ballard related an experience in which one of his missionaries had become preoccupied with doubts about the Church, based on anti-Mormon literature he had read. Elder Ballard asked him, "How long has it been since you read from the Book of Mormon?" The missionary just looked at the floor and said, "It's been a long time."

In this case, doubts about what he *didn't* know had stopped this young man from doing the things he *did* know that he should do.

The examples of Nephi and Mormon cited in the previous section provide scriptural examples of individuals who followed this principle. Even though they did not know the "why" behind the commandment they were given, they nonetheless obeyed.

As another example, when Adam and Eve were driven out of the Garden of Eden, they were commanded to "offer the firstlings of their flocks, for an offering unto the Lord" (Moses 5:5). They obeyed this counsel, and "after many days an angel of the Lord appeared unto Adam, saying: Why dost thou offer sacrifices unto the Lord? And Adam said unto him: *I know not*, save the Lord commanded me" (Moses 5:6; emphasis added).

Even though Adam and Eve were not sure why they were given a commandment, they faithfully obeyed it. Regardless of doubts or questions we may have, we can keep the commandments that we have received.

Principle 4: Continue to Study and Inquire of the Lord

Although we do not know all of the answers now, we may find them as we go through life, continually studying. For example, speaking of the Three Nephites, Mormon wrote, "And now, whether they were mortal or immortal, from the day of their transfiguration, *I know not*" (3 Nephi 28:17; emphasis added). However, later in the chapter we read, "Since I wrote, I have inquired of the Lord, and he hath made it manifest unto me that there must needs be a change wrought upon their bodies, or else it needs be that they must taste of death" (3 Nephi 28:37). As Mormon inquired of the Lord, additional knowledge came to him.

Similarly, the prophet Alma provides an example of how diligent inquiry can lead to understanding. He explained to his son Corianton, "There are many mysteries which are kept, that no one knoweth them save God himself. But I show unto you one thing which I have inquired diligently of God that I might know—that is concerning the resurrection" (Alma 40:3). Alma went on to demonstrate that while there were limits to what he could learn, there were some things that he previously had not known but was able to learn:

Behold, there is a time appointed that all shall come forth from the dead. Now when this time cometh *no one knows*; but *God knoweth* the time which is appointed . . .

And now I would inquire what becometh of the souls of men from this time of death to the time appointed for the resurrection? . . .

. . . And now, concerning this space of time, what becometh of the souls of men *is the thing which I have inquired diligently of the Lord to know; and this is the thing of which I do know*. (Alma 40:4, 7, 9; emphasis added)

In our day, an important part of studying is to read the words of the living prophets. Many questions have been answered by modern prophets; it is our responsibility to search out these answers diligently. Through our study and prayer, we too may find answers to questions we once thought unknowable.

Principle 5: Testify of What You Do Know

No matter how much one studies, some things will not be revealed in this life. When that happens, the following counsel is particularly pertinent: “When there is something you do not know, testify of what you do know.”¹⁰

Alma provides a scriptural example of this admonition. When speaking of the Savior, Alma taught, “Behold, I do not say that he will come among us at the time of his dwelling in his mortal tabernacle; for behold, the Spirit hath not said unto me that this should be the case. Now as to this thing *I do not know; but this much I do know*, that the Lord God hath power to do all things which are according to his word” (Alma 7:8; emphasis added).

We can apply this principle in a variety of settings. A teacher confronted with a difficult question about an aspect of Church history could say, “I do not know the specific answer to that question, but I do know that Joseph Smith was a prophet of God.” Similarly, if a friend of another faith asks a doctrinal question to which you do not know the answer—or to which there is no clear answer—you could respond by saying something like, “That’s a great question. I don’t know the answer; however, I do know that Jesus Christ is our Savior and that we can learn more of him through the Book of Mormon. Would you be interested in learning more about this book of scripture?”

Conclusion

As gospel instructors, we can strengthen the faith of our students when we, in situations in which we don’t know the answer, simply say, “I don’t know.” The Prophet Joseph stated, “I do place unremitted confidence in your word, for I believe you to be men of truth. And I ask the same of you, *when I tell you anything, that you place equal confidence in my word, for I will not tell you I know anything that I do not know.*”¹¹

What a powerful statement that we can apply today: *I will not tell you I know anything that I do not know.*

As other prophets have done, President Brigham Young was willing to answer difficult questions with a frank “I don’t know.” In answer to the question “[During the Millennium] will there be this variety of classes and faiths

that we now behold?” he said, “I do not know whether there will be as many, or whether there will be more.”¹²

While working on this article, I received an e-mail from a student who asked a difficult doctrinal question. As I pondered the question, I realized that I didn’t know the answer. I spent some time researching the question and reading to see what others had written on it. Ultimately, I had to write my student back and say, “I am sorry, but I don’t know.” And that’s OK.

As I watched the General Authority in stake conference say, “I don’t know,” I realized that some questions do not need to be answered. As a parent, teacher, learner, and friend, I have been blessed by understanding that sometimes it is OK to say with Nephi, “I know not” (1 Nephi 13:22). **RE**

Notes

1. “Q&A with Mormon Elder,” *Reuters*, last modified June 11, 2007, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2007/06/11/us-usa-mormons-qa-idUKFLE15338920070611>; emphasis added.
2. Henry B. Eyring, “To Know and to Love God” (address to CES religious educators, Salt Lake Tabernacle, February 26, 2010).
3. Joseph F. Smith, *Gospel Doctrine*, 5th ed. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1939), 9, quoted in Eyring, “To Know and to Love God.”
4. Harold B. Lee, “Place of the Church Educational System” (address to CES religious educators, June 15, 1954), in *Seminaries and Institutes of Religion Summer School Talks, 1954 and 1958* (unpublished collection), 4, quoted in Eyring, “To Know and to Love God”; see also Smith, *Gospel Doctrine*, 9.
5. Robert L. Millet, *Holding Fast: Dealing with Doubt in the Latter Days* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2008), 75–76; emphasis in original.
6. Wilford Woodruff, in *Journal of Discourses* (London: Latter-day Saints’ Book Depot, 1854–86), 18:31–32.
7. Ezra Taft Benson, “Jesus Christ—Gifts and Expectations,” *Speeches of the Year: BYU Centennial Devotional and Fireside Addresses 1974* (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University Press, 1975), 303.
8. *Doctrines of the Restoration: Sermons and Writings of Bruce R. McConkie*, ed. Mark L. McConkie (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1989), 232.
9. M. Russell Ballard, “When Shall These Things Be?” *Brigham Young University Speeches, 1995–96* (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University, 1996), 191.
10. Jeffrey R. Holland, “Our Consuming Mission” (address to CES religious educators, Salt Lake Tabernacle, February 5, 1999).
11. *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, ed. B. H. Roberts, 2nd ed. rev. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1976), 2:374.
12. Brigham Young, in *Journal of Discourses*, 12:274.