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Elder David A. Bednar

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Seek Learning by Faith

Elder David A. Bednar

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I express my love to and for you—and the gratitude of the Brethren for the righteous influence you have upon the youth of the Church throughout the world. Thank you for blessing and strengthening the rising generation. I pray that the Holy Ghost will bless and edify us as we share this special time together.

Companion Principles: Preaching by the Spirit and Learning by Faith

We are admonished repeatedly in the scriptures to preach the truths of the gospel by the power of the Spirit (see D&C 50:14). I believe the vast majority of us as parents and teachers in the Church are aware of this principle and generally strive appropriately to apply it. As important as this principle is, however, it is only one element of a much larger spiritual pattern. We also frequently are taught to seek learning by faith (see D&C 88:118). *Preaching by the Spirit* and *learning by faith* are companion principles that we should strive to understand and apply concurrently and consistently.

I suspect we emphasize and know much more about a teacher teaching by the Spirit than we do about a learner learning by faith. Clearly, the principles and processes of both teaching and learning are spiritually essential. However, as we look to the future and anticipate the ever more confused and turbulent world in which we will live, I believe

it will be essential for all of us to increase our capacity to seek learning by faith. In our personal lives, in our families, and in the Church, we can and will receive the blessings of spiritual strength, direction, and protection as we seek by faith to obtain and apply spiritual knowledge.

Nephi teaches us, “When a man speaketh by the power of the Holy Ghost the power of the Holy Ghost carrieth [the message] unto the hearts of the children of men” (2 Nephi 33:1). Please notice how the power of the Spirit carries the message *unto* but not necessarily *into* the heart. A teacher can explain, demonstrate, persuade, and testify and do so with great spiritual power and effectiveness. Ultimately, however, the content of a message and the witness of the Holy Ghost penetrate into the heart only if a receiver allows them to enter.

Brothers and sisters, learning by faith opens the pathway *into* the heart. We will focus upon the individual responsibility each of us has to seek learning by faith. We also will consider the implications of this principle for us as teachers.

The Principle of Action: Faith in the Lord Jesus Christ

The Apostle Paul defined faith as “the substance of things hoped for, [and] the evidence of things not seen” (Hebrews 11:1). Alma declared that faith is not a perfect knowledge; rather, if we have faith, we “hope for things which are not seen, [but] are true” (Alma 32:21). Additionally, we learn in the *Lectures on Faith* that faith is “the first principle in revealed religion, and the foundation of all righteousness” and that it is also “the principle of action in all intelligent beings.”¹

These teachings of Paul and of Alma and from the *Lectures on Faith* highlight three basic elements of faith: (1) faith as the *assurance* of things hoped for which are true, (2) faith as the *evidence* of things not seen, and (3) faith as the principle of *action* in all intelligent beings. I describe these three components of faith in the Savior as simultaneously facing the future, looking to the past, and initiating action in the present.

Faith as the assurance of things hoped for looks to the future. This assurance is founded upon a correct understanding about and trust in God and enables us to “press forward” (2 Nephi 31:20) into uncertain and often challenging situations in the service of the Savior. For example, Nephi relied upon precisely this type of future-facing spiritual assurance as he returned to Jerusalem to obtain the plates of brass—“not knowing beforehand the things which [he] should do. Nevertheless [he] went forth” (1 Nephi 4:6–7).

Faith in Christ is inextricably tied to and results in hope in Christ for our redemption and exaltation. And assurance and hope make it possible

for us to walk to the edge of the light and take a few steps into the darkness—expecting and trusting the light to move and illuminate the way.² The combination of assurance and hope initiates action in the present.

Faith as the evidence of things not seen looks to the past and confirms our trust in God and our confidence in the truthfulness of things not seen. We stepped into the darkness with assurance and hope, and we received evidence and confirmation as the light in fact moved and provided the illumination we needed. The witness we obtained after the trial of our faith (see Ether 12:6) is evidence that enlarges and strengthens our assurance.

Assurance, action, and evidence influence each other in an ongoing process. This helix is like a coil, and as it spirals upward it expands and grows wider. These three elements of faith—assurance, action, and evidence—are not separate and discrete; rather, they are interrelated and continuous and cycle upward. And the faith that fuels this ongoing process develops and evolves and changes. As we again turn and face forward toward an uncertain future, assurance leads to action and produces evidence, which further increases assurance. Our confidence waxes stronger, line upon line, precept upon precept, here a little and there a little.

We find a powerful example of the interaction among assurance, action, and evidence as the children of Israel transported the ark of the covenant under the leadership of Joshua (see Joshua 3:7–17). Recall how the Israelites came to the River Jordan and were promised the waters would part, or “stand upon an heap” (Joshua 3:13), and they would be able to cross over on dry ground. Interestingly, the waters did not part as the children of Israel stood on the banks of the river waiting for something to happen; rather, the soles of their feet were wet before the water parted. The faith of the Israelites was manifested in the fact that they walked into the water *before* it parted. They walked into the River Jordan with a future-facing assurance of things hoped for. As the Israelites moved forward, the water parted, and as they crossed over on dry land, they looked back and beheld the evidence of things not seen. In this episode, faith as assurance led to action and produced the evidence of things not seen which were true.

True faith is focused in and on the Lord Jesus Christ and always leads to action. Faith as the principle of action is highlighted in many scriptures with which we are all familiar:

“For as the body without the spirit is dead, so *faith without works is dead* also” (James 2:26; emphasis added).

“But be ye *doers of the word*, and not hearers only” (James 1:22; emphasis added).

“But behold, . . . awake and arouse your faculties, even to an *experiment upon my words*, and exercise a particle of faith” (Alma 32:27; emphasis added).

And it is faith as the principle of action that is so central to the process of learning and applying spiritual truth.

Learning by Faith: To Act and Not to Be Acted Upon

How is faith as the principle of action in all intelligent beings related to gospel learning? And what does it mean to seek learning by faith?

In the grand division of all of God’s creations, there are things to act and things to be acted upon (see 2 Nephi 2:13–14). As sons and daughters of our Heavenly Father, we have been blessed with the gift of agency—the capacity and power of independent action. Endowed with agency, we are agents, and we primarily are to act and not only to be acted upon—especially as we seek to obtain and apply spiritual knowledge.

Learning by faith and from experience are two of the central features of the Father’s plan of happiness. The Savior preserved moral agency through the Atonement and made it possible for us to act and to learn by faith. Lucifer’s rebellion against the plan sought to destroy the agency of man, and his intent was that we as learners would only be acted upon.

Consider the question posed by Heavenly Father to Adam in the Garden of Eden, “Where art thou?” (Genesis 3:9). Obviously the Father knew where Adam was hiding, but He, nonetheless, asked the question. Why? A wise and loving Father enabled His child to act in the learning process and not merely be acted upon. There was no one-way lecture to a disobedient child, as perhaps many of us might be inclined to deliver. Rather, the Father helped Adam as a learner to act as an agent and appropriately exercise his agency.

Recall how Nephi desired to know about the things his father, Lehi, had seen in the vision of the tree of life. Interestingly, the Spirit of the Lord begins the tutorial with Nephi by asking the following question, “Behold, what desirest thou?” (1 Nephi 11:2). Clearly the Spirit knew what Nephi desired. So why ask the question? The Holy Ghost was helping Nephi to act in the learning process and not simply be acted upon. (I encourage you at a later time to study chapters 11–14 in 1 Nephi and notice how the Spirit both asked questions and encouraged Nephi to “look” as active elements in the learning process.)

From these examples we recognize that as learners, you and I are to act and be doers of the word and not simply hearers who are only acted upon. Are you and I agents who act and seek learning by faith, or are we waiting to be taught and acted upon? Are the students we serve acting

and seeking to learn by faith, or are they waiting to be taught and acted upon? Are you and I encouraging and helping those whom we serve to seek learning by faith? You and I and our students are to be anxiously engaged in asking, seeking, and knocking (see 3 Nephi 14:7).

A learner exercising agency by acting in accordance with correct principles opens his or her heart to the Holy Ghost—and invites His teaching, testifying power, and confirming witness. Learning by faith requires spiritual, mental, and physical exertion and not just passive reception. It is in the sincerity and consistency of our faith-inspired action that we indicate to our Heavenly Father and His Son, Jesus Christ, our willingness to learn and receive instruction from the Holy Ghost. Thus, learning by faith involves the exercise of moral agency to act upon the assurance of things hoped for and invites the evidence of things not seen from the only true teacher, the Spirit of the Lord.

Consider how missionaries help investigators to learn by faith. Making and keeping spiritual commitments, such as studying and praying about the Book of Mormon, attending Church meetings, and keeping the commandments, require an investigator to exercise faith and to act. One of the fundamental roles of a missionary is to help an investigator make and honor commitments—to act and learn by faith. Teaching, exhorting, and explaining, as important as they are, can never convey to an investigator a witness of the truthfulness of the restored gospel. Only as an investigator's faith initiates action and opens the pathway to the heart can the Holy Ghost deliver a confirming witness. Missionaries obviously must learn to teach by the power of the Spirit. Of equal importance, however, is the responsibility missionaries have to help investigators learn by faith.

The learning I am describing reaches far beyond mere cognitive comprehension and the retaining and recalling of information. The type of learning about which I am speaking causes us to put off the natural man (see Mosiah 3:19), to change our hearts (see Mosiah 5:2), and to be converted unto the Lord and to never fall away (see Alma 23:6). Learning by faith requires both “the heart and a willing mind” (D&C 64:34). Learning by faith is the result of the Holy Ghost carrying the power of the word of God both unto and into the heart. Learning by faith cannot be transferred from an instructor to a student through a lecture, a demonstration, or an experiential exercise; rather, a student must exercise faith and act in order to obtain the knowledge for himself or herself.

The young boy Joseph Smith instinctively understood what it meant to seek learning by faith. One of the most well-known episodes in the life of Joseph Smith was his reading of verses about prayer and

faith in the book of James in the New Testament (see James 1:5–6). This text inspired Joseph to retire to a grove of trees near his home to pray and to seek for spiritual knowledge. Please note the questions Joseph had formulated in his mind and felt in his heart—and which he took into the grove. He clearly had prepared himself to “ask in faith” (James 1:6) and to act:

In the midst of this war of words and tumult of opinions, I often said to myself: What is to be done? Who of all these parties are right; or, are they all wrong together? If any one of them be right, which is it, and how shall I know it? . . .

My object in going to inquire of the Lord was to know which of all the sects was right, that I might know which to join. No sooner, therefore, did I get possession of myself, so as to be able to speak, than I asked the Personages who stood above me in the light, which of all the sects was right . . . and which I should join. (Joseph Smith—History 1:10, 18)

Notice that Joseph’s questions focused not just on what he needed to know but also on what he needed to do. And his very first question centered on action and what was to be *done*! His prayer was not simply which church is right. His question was which church should he join. Joseph went to the grove to learn by faith. He was determined to act.

Ultimately, the responsibility to learn by faith and apply spiritual truth rests upon each of us individually. This is an increasingly serious and important responsibility in the world in which we do now and will yet live. What, how, and when we learn is supported by—but is not dependent upon—an instructor, a method of presentation, or a specific topic or lesson format.

Truly, one of the great challenges of mortality is to seek learning by faith. The Prophet Joseph Smith best summarizes the learning process and outcomes I am attempting to describe. In response to a request by the Twelve Apostles for instruction, Joseph taught, “The best way to obtain truth and wisdom is not to ask it from books, but to go to God in prayer, and obtain divine teaching.”³

And on another occasion, the Prophet Joseph explained that “reading the experience of others, or the revelation given to *them*, can never give us a comprehensive view of our condition and true relation to God.”⁴

Implications for Us as Teachers

The truths about learning by faith we have discussed thus far have profound implications for us as teachers. Let us now consider together three of these implications.

Implication 1. The Holy Ghost is the only true teacher. The Holy Ghost is the third member of the Godhead, and He is *the* teacher and witness of all truth. Elder James E. Talmage explained: “The office of the Holy Ghost in His ministrations among men is described in scripture. He is a teacher sent from the Father; and unto those who are entitled to His tuition He will reveal all things necessary for the soul’s advancement.”⁵

We should always remember that the Holy Ghost is the teacher who, through proper invitation, can enter into a learner’s heart. Indeed, you and I have the responsibility to preach the gospel by the Spirit, even the Comforter, as a prerequisite for the learning by faith that can be achieved only by and through the Holy Ghost (see D&C 50:14). In this regard, you and I are much like the long, thin strands of glass used to create the fiber-optic cables through which light signals are transmitted over very long distances. Just as the glass in these cables must be pure to conduct the light efficiently and effectively, so we should become and remain worthy conduits through whom the Spirit of the Lord can operate.

But brothers and sisters, we must be careful to remember in our service that we are conduits and channels; we are not the light. “For it is not ye that speak, but the Spirit of your Father which speaketh in you” (Matthew 10:20). It is never about me and it is never about you. In fact, anything you or I do as an instructor that knowingly and intentionally draws attention to self—in the messages we present, in the methods we use, or in our personal demeanor—is a form of priestcraft that inhibits the teaching effectiveness of the Holy Ghost. “Doth he preach it by the Spirit of truth or some other way? And if it be by some other way it is not of God” (D&C 50:17–18).

Implication 2. We are most effective as instructors when we encourage and facilitate learning by faith. We are all familiar with the adage that giving a man a fish feeds him for one meal. Teaching the man to fish, on the other hand, feeds him for a lifetime. As gospel instructors, you and I are not in the business of distributing fish; rather, our work is to help individuals learn to “fish” and to become spiritually self-reliant. This important objective is best accomplished as we encourage and facilitate learners acting in accordance with correct principles—as we help them to learn by doing. “If any man will do his will, he shall know of the doctrine, whether it be of God” (John 7:17).

Please notice this implication in practice in the counsel given to Junius F. Wells by Brigham Young as Brother Wells was called in 1875 to organize the young men of the Church:

At your meetings you should begin at the top of the roll and call upon as many members as there is time for to bear their testimonies and at the next meeting begin where you left off and call upon others, so that all shall take part and get into the practice of standing up and saying something. Many may think they haven't any testimony to bear, but get them to stand up and they will find the Lord will give them utterance to many truths they had not thought of before. More people have obtained a testimony while standing up trying to bear it than down on their knees praying for it.⁶

President Boyd K. Packer has given similar counsel in our day:

Oh, if I could teach you this one principle. A testimony is to be *found* in the *bearing* of it! Somewhere in your quest for spiritual knowledge, there is that "leap of faith," as the philosophers call it. It is the moment when you have gone to the edge of the light and stepped into the darkness to discover that the way is lighted ahead for just a footstep or two. "The spirit of man," as the scripture says, indeed "is the candle of the Lord." (Prov. 20:27.)

It is one thing to receive a witness from what you have read or what another has said; and that is a necessary beginning. It is quite another to have the Spirit confirm to you in your bosom that what *you* have testified is true. Can you not see that it will be supplied as you share it? As you give that which you have, there is a replacement, with increase!⁷

I have observed a common characteristic among the instructors who have had the greatest influence in my life. They have helped me to seek learning by faith. They refused to give me easy answers to hard questions. In fact, they did not give me any answers at all. Rather, they pointed the way and helped me take the steps to find my own answers. I certainly did not always appreciate this approach, but experience has enabled me to understand that an answer given by another person usually is not remembered for very long, if remembered at all. But an answer we discover or obtain through the exercise of faith, typically, is retained for a lifetime. The most important learnings of life are caught—not taught.

The spiritual understanding you and I have been blessed to receive, and which has been confirmed as true in our hearts, simply cannot be given to another person. The tuition of diligence and learning by faith must be paid to obtain and personally "own" such knowledge. Only in this way can what is known in the mind be transformed into what is felt in the heart. Only in this way can a person move beyond relying upon the spiritual knowledge and experience of others and claim those blessings for himself or herself. Only in this way can we be spiritually prepared for what is coming. We are to "seek learning, even by study and also by faith" (D&C 88:118).

Implication 3. An instructor's faith is strengthened as he or she helps others seek learning by faith. The Holy Ghost, who can “teach [us] all things, and bring all things to [our] remembrance” (John 14:26), is eager to help us learn as we act and exercise faith in Jesus Christ. Interestingly, this divine learning assistance is perhaps never more apparent than when we are teaching, either at home or in Church assignments. As Paul made clear to the Romans, “Thou therefore which teachest another, teachest thou not thyself?” (Romans 2:21).

Please notice in the following verses from the Doctrine and Covenants how teaching diligently invites heavenly grace and instruction: “And I give unto *you* a commandment that you shall teach one another the doctrine of the kingdom. Teach ye diligently and my grace shall attend *you*, that *you* may be instructed more perfectly in theory, in principle, in doctrine, in the law of the gospel, in all things that pertain unto the kingdom of God, that are expedient for you to understand” (D&C 88:77–78; emphasis added).

Consider that the blessings described in these scriptures are intended specifically for the teacher: “Teach . . . diligently and my grace shall attend you”—that you, the teacher, may be instructed! The same principle is evident in verse 122 from the same section of the Doctrine and Covenants: “Appoint among yourselves a teacher, and let not *all* be spokesmen at once; but let one speak at a time and let *all* listen unto his sayings, that when *all* have spoken that *all* may be edified of *all*, and that every man may have an equal privilege” (D&C 88:122; emphasis added).

As all speak and as all listen in a dignified and orderly way, all are edified. The individual and collective exercise of faith in the Savior invites instruction and strength from the Spirit of the Lord.

Seek Learning by Faith: A Recent Example

All of us were blessed by the challenge from the First Presidency last August to read the Book of Mormon by the end of 2005. In extending the challenge, President Gordon B. Hinckley promised that faithfully observing this simple reading program would bring into our lives and into our homes “an added measure of the Spirit of the Lord, a strengthened resolution to walk in obedience to His commandments, and a stronger testimony of the living reality of the Son of God.”⁸

Please note how this inspired challenge is a classic example of learning by faith. First, you and I were not commanded, coerced, or required to read. Rather, we were invited to exercise our agency as agents and act in accordance with correct principles. President Hinckley, as an inspired teacher, encouraged us to act and not just be acted upon. Each of us,

ultimately, had to decide if and how we would respond to the challenge—and if we would endure to the end of the task.

Second, in proffering the invitation to read and to act, President Hinckley was encouraging each of us to seek learning by faith. No new study materials were distributed to members of the Church, and no additional lessons, classes, or programs were created by the Church. Each of us had our copy of the Book of Mormon—and a pathway into our heart opened wider through the exercise of our faith in the Savior as we responded to the First Presidency challenge. Thus, we were prepared to receive instruction from the only true teacher, the Holy Ghost.

In recent weeks I have been greatly impressed by the testimonies of so many members concerning their recent experiences reading the Book of Mormon. Important and timely spiritual lessons have been learned, lives have been changed for the better, and the promised blessings have been received. The Book of Mormon, a willing heart, and the Holy Ghost—it really is that simple. My faith and the faith of the other Brethren have been strengthened as we have responded to President Hinckley's invitation and as we have observed so many of you acting and learning by faith.

As I stated earlier, the responsibility to seek learning by faith rests upon each of us individually, and this obligation will become increasingly important as the world in which we live grows more confused and troubled. Learning by faith is essential to our personal spiritual development and for the growth of the Church in these latter days. May each of us truly hunger and thirst after righteousness and be filled with the Holy Ghost (see 3 Nephi 12:6)—that we might seek learning by faith.

I witness that Jesus is the Christ, the Only Begotten Son of the Eternal Father. He is our Savior and Redeemer. I testify that as we learn of Him, listen to His words, and walk in the meekness of His Spirit (see D&C 19:23), we will be blessed with spiritual strength, protection, and peace.

As a servant of the Lord, I invoke this blessing upon each of you: even that your desire and capacity to seek learning by faith—and to appropriately help others to seek learning by faith—will increase and improve. This blessing will be a source of great treasures of spiritual knowledge in your personal life, for your family, and to those whom you instruct and serve. In the sacred name of Jesus Christ, amen. **RE**

Notes

1. Joseph Smith, comp., *Lectures on Faith* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1985), 1.
2. See Boyd K. Packer, “The Candle of the Lord,” *Ensign*, January 1983, 54.
3. Joseph Smith, *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, ed. B. H. Roberts, 2nd ed. rev. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1957), 4:425.
4. Smith, *History of the Church*, 6:50.
5. James E. Talmage, *The Articles of Faith*, 12th ed. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1924), 162.
6. Brigham Young, in Junius F. Wells, “Historic Sketch of the YMMIA,” *Improvement Era*, June 1925, 715.
7. Packer, “The Candle of the Lord,” 54–55.
8. Gordon B. Hinckley, “A Testimony Vibrant and True,” *Ensign*, August 2005, 6.