

SEARCHING FOR TRUTH

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Some people in the Church love to make the claim that we have THE truth. This is obviously not true. Only God has THE truth. What we should say is that we have all truths necessary for salvation and... access to THE truth. We have a very good doctrinal foundation of some truths and the responsibility and opportunity of seeking more. If we say and believe that we have THE truth, we may be in danger of, first, believing that truth is our monopoly and, second, of excusing ourselves from having to search for more. As Hugh Nibley says, the result of this type of attitude has the potential “to breed a race of insufferable, self-righteous prigs and barren minds” (*Nibley on the Timely and Timeless* 270-271). God does not approve of such spiritual stagnation. In fact, he regularly challenges us in scripture to go beyond what we now know; nowhere is the challenge better stated than in *Doctrine and Covenants* 93.

Doctrine and Covenants 93 is, after all, the section that says that “The glory of God is intelligence, or...light and truth” (36). More importantly, it shows us that the search for a fullness of God’s glory is a search to know all things (27-28), and that even Jesus had to receive a fullness of truth over time, or, to quote the section exactly, “grace for grace” (12-14, also *Doctrine and Covenants* 98:11-12). Christ sets the pattern for us. We will gain truth as we seek it, line upon line. What we learn today permits us to learn more exponentially tomorrow.

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God challenges us in *Doctrine and Covenants* 93 to continue to learn by defining truth as knowledge of things as they are, were, and are to come (24). This definition is at heart an admonition to become as God is; He is the one who sees all things past, present, and future—things as they are, were, and are to come. He is the only one who can have that knowledge in perfection until the day when we ourselves are exalted. God challenges us to keep his commandments and receive truth and light until we know all things as He knows them (27-28).

Many things make this challenge difficult to accomplish. For one thing, in this life we see through a glass darkly (1 Corinthians. 13:12), getting glimpses of truth, but nothing, according to Brigham Young, in total perfection:

I do not even believe that there is a single revelation, among the many God has given to the Church, that is perfect in its fullness. The revelations of God contain correct doctrine and principle, so far as they go; but it is impossible for the poor, weak, low, groveling, sinful inhabitants of the earth to receive a revelation from the Almighty in all its perfections. He has to speak to us in a manner to meet the extent of our capacities. (JD 2:314)

There are many things that we learn by revelation. For example, we know God lives, that Jesus is the Savior, that Joseph and his successors held and hold the keys of the priesthood, that there are three degrees of glory, a spirit world, and a premortal existence. We know these and many other truths. But often the details are unclear—not perfect—as Brigham indicated. For example, we know that there is a spirit world, but do we know the exact nature of its existence? We know that Christ atoned for us, but do we know how he actually accomplished it? We know there is a God who loves us, but do we know exactly how much he intervenes in our lives? The answers to these questions will eventually be known, as the ninth Article of Faith declared, and these answers will be absolute. But since little is now revealed on these subjects, we are often left with speculations and hypotheses, some of which get passed off occasionally as absolute doctrine.

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Another difficulty in meeting God's challenge to know as he knows is what Plato called the shadows of the cave (*The Republic*, book VII), but what *Doctrine and Covenants* 93:39 calls the tradition of the fathers. Traditions of the fathers are inherited beliefs taught to us by our families and cultures, often with such insistence that we presume everyone must believe as we do. The paradigm by which we judge the cosmos normally derives from these beliefs. Shaking ourselves out of inherited paradigms in order to accept God's views can be terrifying. It is frightening to learn that our cherished viewpoints which we thought were absolutely true—whether concerning dress codes, social mores, child-rearing techniques, political philosophies, educational standards, or religious culture—may be irrelevant in other places and times. It is frightening because one realizes that new ideas can separate a person psychologically from all that one loves and is familiar with. It is so frightening that the temptation is to turn “fundamentalist” and deny outright anything that might challenge what we think. This tendency has been noticed, as Hugh Nibley points out, even among the members of the Church:

Many have noted the strong tendency of Latter-day Saints to avoid making waves. They seem strangely touchy on controversial issues. This begets an extreme lack of candor among the Saints, which in turn is supported by a new doctrine, according to which we have a Prophet at our head who relieves us of all responsibility for seeking knowledge beyond a certain point, making decisions, or taking action on our own... One way of seeking immunity from guilty feelings is to take the offensive behind the sanction in extreme conservatism, which is supposed to place one's loyalty beyond suspicion, while piously denouncing others. (*Temples of the Ancient World*. 610)

When our motives are to defend our position, rather than seek for greater light and knowledge, we generally can't obtain the humility necessary to be taught.

A final difficulty in reaching God's challenge is the relativity of many truths to time and place. On God's level there is absolute truth, but in mortality there are few things that are true all the time. A mundane example of relative truth is Idaho traffic laws. These laws are true in Idaho and necessary for me to know and keep if I am a citizen of this state, but of little consequence if I live in Wisconsin. A more profound example is God commanding Nephi to kill Laban as an exception to the sixth commandment. Joseph Smith taught this principle in these terms:

That which is wrong under one circumstance, may be, and often is, right under another. God said, 'Thou shalt not kill;' at another time He said, 'Thou shalt utterly destroy.' This is the principle on which the government of heaven is conducted—by revelation adapted to the circumstances in which the children of the kingdom are placed. Whatever God requires is right, no matter what it is, although we may not see the reason thereof till long after the events transpire. If we seek first the kingdom of God, all good things will be added. So with Solomon: first he asked wisdom, and God gave it him, and with it every desire of his heart, even things which might be considered abominable to all who understand the order of heaven only in part, but which in reality were right because God gave and sanctioned by special revelation (*Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, 1842-43, 255-6).

The idea of relative truth often causes alarm for anyone who fears trying to balance ambiguities in life. But it shouldn't. Balancing different truths and making choices is a major part of the process of learning to be like God. We know that God is loving, just, merciful, truthful, and will not do anything to hurt us. But he wisely treats his children differently according to their needs. Sometimes he uses mercy and sometimes he uses justice. Often he comforts but occasionally he chastens. Some things that were true religious requirements under the Law of Moses are not under the Law of the Gospel. The scriptures say that God gives to all nations "all that he seeth fit that they should have" (Alma 29:8). In other words, God works with us according to our needs, taking into account our backgrounds and culture, and using the appropriate principle with impeccable timing. As we do the same—make appropriate choices at the appropriate time—we grow in judgment and godliness, grace for grace.

Life is made up of a series of judgments that God will help us make as we study out divine principles and learn how to use the appropriate principle for the appropriate case. In this way, as we study and ponder

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and search and seek guidance, God teaches us and trains us to be like him. It is part of our mortal test. As Joseph Smith said in scripture, God “will give unto the faithful line upon line, precept upon precept; and [He] will try you and prove you herewith” (*Doctrine and Covenants* 98:11-12, italics added). As we go through the experience of mortality making studied choices, we understand a little more about the nature of God and what we have to do to be like him. He is unchangeable in the sense that he will always treat us justly and with our eternal good in mind. But he will treat us differently as the situation requires.

In summary, THE truth is only known by God. He will guide us on a path that leads to that truth. But at least three things can make this search very difficult: 1) In this life it is very difficult to know anything with perfection; 2) Most of us have many cherished, inherited traditions that keep us from seeking beyond what we know; and 3) Seeing the relative truths of mortality as absolute inhibits our ability to learn the process of gaining God’s truth. The solution to these difficulties is just as implied in *Doctrine and Covenants* 93:1: “Verily, thus saith the Lord: It shall come to pass that every soul who forsaketh his sins and cometh unto me, and calleth on my name, and obeyeth my voice, and keepeth my commandments, shall see my face and know that I am.” In this life if we follow the path that God inspires us to take—if we live, as we say, by the Spirit—we will eventually be taught by God himself. Only then do we begin the process of seeing as God sees and knowing truth as God knows it. ∞

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