

# “One of the Great Lights of the World”: Seeking Learning by Study and Faith at BYU

JOHN S. TANNER

As I prepared for this talk, wondering what I might say or do that would make any lasting difference, I recalled the example of another Miltonist turned administrator. When the Renaissance scholar Bart Giamatti became president of Yale, he wondered:

*What was it that Yale needed most, wanted most, and would most contribute to solving our deficit, enhancing our quality, and making me a Manager?*

*One night . . . , crouched in my garage, as I was trying to memorize the Trustees’ names . . . , it came to me, and I wrote, right there, between the lawnmower and the snow tires, a memo. On July 1, 1978, my first day in office, I issued this memo to an absent and indifferent University. It read,*

*To the members of the University Community:*

*In order to repair what Milton called the ruin of our grand parents, I wish to announce that henceforth, as a matter of University policy, evil is abolished and paradise is restored.*

*I trust all of us will do whatever possible to achieve this policy objective.<sup>1</sup>*

I considered issuing such a policy today. Then I remembered that it would be redundant at BYU, where, as a matter of university policy, evil is already abolished and, to a degree perhaps, paradise is restored in this little green world of ours, ringed by mountains, that we call campus.

So I have sought for some other principled way to address the challenges we face in our quest to become “the very best that we can be”<sup>2</sup>—as President Hinckley has charged—and to become better without necessarily becoming bigger—as President Samuelson has reminded us—in this season when in order to grow we need to prune. Pruning is not easy. It is wrenching for me even to prune my poor overgrown fruit trees. How much harder to prune the BYU vineyard—to reallocate, repurpose, refocus, live within limits. (Notice how rapidly I am picking up manager-speak.)

Limits, however, need not be seen merely as impediments to growth, as the pruning metaphor reminds us. Wise limits can help us focus on qualitative rather than quantitative growth. And this can be salutary. In fact, I believe that qualitative improvement is precisely what is most needed at this juncture in our history. For in the main, we enjoy adequate tangible resources at BYU. To shine, we need to burnish our intangible resources of mind and will and purpose. And shine we must if we are to fulfill prophetic expectations not

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*John S. Tanner was academic vice president when this address was delivered at the BYU Annual University Conference faculty session on 23 August 2005.*

only of President Hinckley but also of modern prophets back to the days of Joseph Smith, who hoped to establish a university that would become “one of the great lights of the world.”<sup>3</sup>

So I hereby issue the following memo to the faculty:

*In order to realize the visions and expectations of this institution’s inspired leaders, henceforth, as a matter of university policy, BYU shall be “one of the great lights of the world,” where learning is diligently sought by rigorous study and also by profound faith. I trust all of us will do whatever possible to achieve this policy objective.*

I offer this memo only partly in jest. For, in fact, in our quest for quality, I can think of nothing more needful than a renewed commitment at every level to become a learning community that could aptly be described as “one of the great lights of the world.” BYU has ever been built of dreams and ideals as much or more than of brick and mortar. It has been built on sacrifice—as President Samuelson has reminded us—and on vision. I know of no vision more core to our mission than the revelation that we are to diligently “seek learning, even by study and also by faith.”<sup>4</sup>

Today I want to encourage us to reflect on and embrace this familiar divine injunction even more fully than we heretofore have—not as an occasion for self-congratulation but as an ongoing challenge to raise our level of performance. I like what John Churchill wrote: “Institutions and individuals [are] better off when they are animated by a vision of the good rather than by a belief that they possess it.”<sup>5</sup>

The gospel imperative to “seek learning, even by study and also by faith” constitutes the single-most important revealed statement of the common good at BYU. It applies to both student and faculty alike. It was first revealed in a profound revelation to the Prophet Joseph called the Olive Leaf. Over the years the Olive Leaf, which guided the School of

the Prophets, has become, as then President Dallin H. Oaks observed, “the basic constitution of Church education. It defines Brigham Young University’s role in the kingdom.”<sup>6</sup> The injunction to “seek learning, even by study and also by faith” articulates a core concept in this core LDS vision on education.<sup>7</sup> This phrase is repeated twice elsewhere in scripture.<sup>8</sup> It likewise has been invoked repeatedly by prophets and by BYU presidents. It summarizes our distinctive LDS educational philosophy as well as BYU’s special educational mission. Yet for some reason it has not been used as a university preschool theme—at least not since the 1980s, which is as far back as the records went that I was given when asked to recommend a theme.

I recommended that this be our theme in 2005 for two main reasons: accreditation and the bicentennial of the Prophet’s birth. University accreditation is a time for serious and sustained institutional reflection about how we are doing against our core values. I could think of no scripture that stated our core educational objective more clearly and succinctly than the injunction to “seek learning, even by study and also by faith.” It also seemed an appropriate scripture for a year in which we commemorate the bicentennial of the Prophet Joseph Smith’s birth. This gospel mandate not only was revealed to Joseph but embodies his personal approach to learning. His example bids us to become a university where learning is more diligently sought by even more rigorous study and by more profound faith. In this year of the bicentennial I want to honor the Prophet as the spiritual architect of BYU. His precepts and practice challenge us to become an even better learning community—one worthy of Joseph’s dream to found a Church university that would be “one of the great lights of the world.”

In a very real sense BYU extends the long shadow of the Prophet’s personal and prophetic commitment to seek learning by study

and by faith. Joseph loved to learn. “No man of his time loved knowledge more than he,” wrote George Q. Cannon.<sup>9</sup> He sought education for himself, his children, and his people. Through him the Lord established schools everywhere that the early Saints congregated, including the School of the Prophets, the School for the Elders, the Kirtland High School, the Hebrew School, and the University of the City of Nauvoo—not to mention a host of small primary schools.<sup>10</sup> In fact, the early Saints regarded school building as “one of the principal objects” to gather in compact communities: “Intelligence is the great object of our holy religion,” early Church leaders said. “Intelligence is the result of education, and education can only be obtained by living in compact society; so compact, that schools of all kinds can be supported.”<sup>11</sup>

Joseph was not only a temple builder but a school builder. Indeed, these two enterprises were regularly conflated by the early Saints. Schools operated in temples. Temples functioned as schools. The “house of faith” was to be “a house of learning” and vice versa.<sup>12</sup> Church school buildings for the early Saints were to have a “double purpose, of a house of worship and an institution of learning.”<sup>13</sup> I often think about this on Sundays at BYU as sacrament trays are laid out on lab tables, lecterns turn into pulpits, and classrooms become chapels. I also am struck by the fact that the Church has chosen to locate Church schools and temples in close proximity. The new temple in Rexburg continues this pattern.

In June of 1831, barely a year after the Church was organized, Joseph received a revelation commissioning W. W. Phelps, who had not yet even joined the Church, to collaborate with Oliver Cowdery in selecting and writing books for Church schools:

*You [W. W. Phelps] shall be ordained to assist my servant Oliver Cowdery to do the work of printing, and of selecting and writing books for schools in*

*this church, that little children also may receive instruction before me as is pleasing unto me.*<sup>14</sup>

This is the first mention in modern revelation that there were to be schools in the Church. BYU’s beginnings may be traced back to this revelation. Note that from the beginning it was revealed to Joseph that the Lord takes pleasure in education, books, and schools.

So did his Prophet. Joseph sought out teachers for his own children. My great-grandmother, a graduate of Amherst, served as such a teacher. I love Joseph’s sentiments in a tender letter from Liberty Jail to Emma encouraging her to educate their children: “Tell them Father loves them with a perfect love, and he is doing all he can to get away from the mob to come to them. Do teach them all you can, that they may have good minds.”<sup>15</sup> Like many a parent who lacked formal education, Joseph had fond hopes that his children would receive the blessings of education of which he had been deprived.

He wanted the same for his people. Under Joseph’s inspired direction the Saints established schools in Ohio, Missouri, and Illinois—wherever they gathered. And these schools were not just for children but for adults. The early Saints were pioneers in adult education, for they understood lifelong learning by both study and faith to be a doctrine of the restored gospel.<sup>16</sup> Joseph inspired the Saints “with an extravagant thirst after knowledge,” according to John Corry, an elder from Missouri visiting Kirtland.<sup>17</sup> Well over a hundred early Saints attended Hebrew School in Kirtland.<sup>18</sup> The scene was so impressive that even an anti-Mormon acknowledged that

*the Mormons appear to be very eager to acquire education. Men, women and children lately attended school, and they are now employing [a] Hebrew teacher, to instruct them in Hebrew; and about seventy men in middle life, from twenty to forty years of age, are most eagerly engaged in*

*the study. They pursue their studies alone until twelve o'clock at night, and attend to nothing else. . . . They are by no means, as a class, men of weak minds.*<sup>19</sup>

In this effort to seek learning by study, Joseph himself led the way. I am frankly in awe of the Prophet's assiduous efforts to pursue learning by study amidst all the persecutions and other demands on his time and energy. He studied many subjects but had a particular passion for languages. Entry after entry in his journal finds him studying Latin, Greek, German, and especially Hebrew. He was an avid participant in the Kirtland Hebrew School, which met in the west room of the third floor of the temple.<sup>20</sup> On 17 February 1836, Joseph exclaimed in his journal:

*My soul delights in reading the word of the Lord in the original, and I am determined to pursue the study of the languages, until I shall become master of them, if I am permitted to live long enough.*<sup>21</sup>

What remarkable determination to learn language "by study"—and this from a translator and seer! As Terry L Givens recently observed, Joseph "consistently merged the gift of prophecy with the gritty work of language study."<sup>22</sup> To become "one of the great lights of the world," we cannot afford to be less committed to learning by study than was the Prophet.

He also set the example of diligently learning by faith. Joseph knew, as President Harold B. Lee taught, that "learning by faith is no task for a lazy man. . . . Such a process requires the bending of the whole soul, the calling up of the depths of the human mind and linking them with God."<sup>23</sup> The Prophet also knew that learning by faith requires personal worthiness. Those privileged to learn and teach in the School of the Prophets were required to be essentially temple worthy, setting a pattern that continues today in the Church Educational System:

*And ye shall not receive any among you into this school save he is clean.*<sup>24</sup>

*Therefore, cease from all your light speeches . . . , from all your lustful desires, from all your pride and light-mindedness, and from all your wicked doings.*<sup>25</sup>

The Lord instructed those who would learn by faith to "draw near unto me and I will draw near unto you; seek me diligently. . . . And if your eye be single to my glory, your whole bodies shall be filled with light."<sup>26</sup> Similarly, if BYU is to become "one of the great lights of the world," we must be worthy and do our work with our eyes single to God so He can "unveil" His will to us "in his own time, and in his own way."<sup>27</sup>

The Prophet taught that learning by study and faith applies to all realms of knowledge—sacred and secular. He learned early on that revelation requires the recipient to "study it out in your mind," just as learning wisdom from the "best books" required the exercise of faith.<sup>28</sup> We, by contrast, sometimes assume that secular subjects are to be learned exclusively by study while religious subjects are to be apprehended solely by revelation. The Prophet did not draw sharp distinctions between how we are to learn sacred and secular truth.

Further, the early elders were taught that the gospel embraced all truth. Brigham Young remarked:

*Were you to ask me how it was that I embraced "Mormonism," I should answer, for the simple reason that it embraces all truth in heaven and on earth, in the earth, [and] under the earth. . . . There is no truth outside of it.*<sup>29</sup>

Likewise, the Lord revealed in the Olive Leaf that the Saints were to learn "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” and so forth. Why? To “be prepared in all things” to go forth into the world.<sup>30</sup> I never cease to be inspired by the breadth of the curriculum endorsed by the Lord. This has profoundly influenced my passionate individual commitment to general education. It has shaped our institutional commitment to general education at BYU as well.

The Prophet taught the early Saints to gather up knowledge and books and bring them to Zion. I am moved every time I visit the Seventies Hall in Nauvoo, which houses a library containing copies of some of the books collected and studied by early LDS missionaries so that they might “be prepared in all things when I shall send you again”<sup>31</sup> as missionaries. The Prophet himself contributed 50 books to establish an early lending library. “In view of the losses the Prophet suffered during the Missouri persecutions,” wrote one historian, “one cannot help but marvel at the library he had gathered since then.”<sup>32</sup> By the time of the exodus, the Seventies Library contained 675 volumes. This was “taken west to become the nucleus of the first library in Utah and reportedly the first one west of the Missouri River.”<sup>33</sup>

Having hauled heavy books from place to place during my days as a poor graduate student, I am moved by the thought that the pioneers lugged books across the plains along with plows and bedding. In the words of one writer:

*Behind them they would leave the beautiful city. . . . But in their wagons, packed away with their essential tools and seed grain, were their beloved books, the tools and seed grain for the future schools and libraries of Utah.*<sup>34</sup>

Also packed away deep in their hearts was the Prophet’s vision of building a university that would become “one of the great lights of the world.” The Prophet had hoped that the University of the City of Nauvoo would

*enable us to teach our children wisdom, to instruct them in all the knowledge and learning, in the arts, sciences, and learned professions. We hope to make this institution one of the great lights of the world, and by and through it to diffuse that kind of knowledge which will be of practicable utility, and for the public good, and also for private and individual happiness.*<sup>35</sup>

BYU’s institutional genealogy harks directly back to the University of the City of Nauvoo. We are the inheritors of the Prophet’s dream to build a university that would become “one of the great lights of the world,” where knowledge is diligently pursued by rigorous study and profound faith. Let us resolve to honor our founding Prophet of the Restoration by striving to fulfill this dream here at BYU.

Now let me spell out a few specific implications for BYU inherent in the Prophet’s precept and practice of seeking learning by study and by faith. I could mention many more, such as the implications for hiring, tenuring, and faculty development that flow from the imperative to engage in lifelong learning.

First, lifelong learning must be a fundamental institutional goal at BYU. Many universities embrace lifelong learning as an institutional objective because it is a practical necessity whose importance is becoming ever more apparent in a world witnessing a rapid knowledge explosion. For us at BYU, lifelong learning is more than a practical necessity: It is a gospel imperative. We understand that we are on earth to learn; that “the glory of God is intelligence”;<sup>36</sup> that “intelligence is the great object of our holy religion,”<sup>37</sup> as early Church leaders put it; and that a “man is saved no faster than he gains knowledge.”<sup>38</sup> Of all universities, BYU ought to be committed to lifelong learning as a matter of principle. It is deeply rooted in our doctrine and in our history.

It follows that faculty as well as students must be lifelong learners. All Latter-day Saints

are under the same gospel imperative to be energetically and passionately committed to learning. But as faculty we have a special obligation to become lifelong learners, for learning enlivens teaching. This is why research is so crucial at a fine “teaching university” like BYU. And research is not valuable only because it gives us more—and more current—things to teach. Our students also benefit from seeing us as learners rather than as know-it-all authorities. This is one of the best features of mentored-student research at BYU. But it can occur in more pedestrian ways as well. For example, when I teach writing, I generally try to do one or two assignments myself, then bring my draft to class and open my work up to critique. I discuss the problems I faced as a writer and the strengths and weaknesses of my draft. It makes me feel vulnerable, but I think that my students learn more when they see me as a learner. Similarly, I recently audited a Spanish class. It was humbling to be an adult learner—not to be the authority, not even always to be the sharpest tack in the class. It made me admire Joseph even more—a translator, seer, and revelator willing to study Hebrew grammar alongside his brethren.

A serious institutional commitment to lifelong learning also, of course, has profound implications for how we teach our students. It forces us to focus less on what *we* teach and more on what *they* learn. This can be a difficult paradigm shift for those of us who sometimes indulge exclusively in the “sage-on-the-stage” model of teaching. It is, however, a paradigm shift that for more than a decade has radically altered the landscape of higher education.

Further, a commitment to our students’ lifelong learning forces us to extend our horizon of concern. In the past we may have been satisfied if the student knew enough to pass the final exam. If we truly care about lifelong learning, we must think more seriously about the half-life of our courses in the lives of our students. I am often sobered and surprised to

talk with students years after they have been in my classes and find what they remember. Often it is coming to my home or performing scenes from a play or doing a major research paper or project: that is, it is something they *did*, not something I *said*. Or, if it is something I said, it may have been a sidebar comment I made about the gospel that made a difference in a later major life decision. Or it may simply be my passion and enthusiasm for my subject they remember most. I encourage you to seek out feedback from your students well after they have studied with you and ask what was most important to them.

I predict that you will often find that, along with personal interactions with you, it will be the general skills and knowledge your students learned that have benefited them most. A serious commitment to lifelong learning turns traditional educational hierarchies on their heads. Let me explain. I routinely told every new faculty I hired in English that I expected every class to be a course in writing and thinking, no matter what the subject matter. These skills, however, come at the bottom of the hierarchy among the intellectual goals set forth in the Aims of a BYU Education. But this is not because they are unimportant. Rather, it is because they are foundational. In my current assignment as academic vice president, I rely much more heavily on my general skills in writing, thinking, evaluating evidence, etc., than on my technical knowledge as a Miltonist. And I suspect that the same holds true for the doctor, nurse, computer scientist, botanist, psychologist, musician, and engineer with whom I work. Now, to be sure, higher-order thinking skills are often best developed in advanced courses. Still, we need to remember that the most enduring and valuable learning produced in even advanced classes will be the general—and thus transferable—learning skills developed.

A serious commitment to lifelong learning also requires us to concern ourselves with

student motivation. As the Aims of a BYU Education explains, students who pursue lifelong learning need both the ability and the desire or motivation to continue to learn. It follows that we should worry if our students leave our classes burned out rather than burning with passion and enthusiasm to continue to explore the realms of knowledge we have introduced them to.

A community with a serious commitment to lifelong learning invites us to consider the pedagogical power of requiring learners to teach. The early Saints were told that they were to “teach one another.”<sup>39</sup> This principle was practiced in the School of the Prophets, where student became teacher and teacher student. In my own experience I’ve seen this particular strategy fall on its face when teachers are inept in how they invite students to take a role in teaching. I’ve also seen it become a powerful way to bring about deep learning.

Finally, of course, a serious commitment to lifelong learning at BYU also requires attention to helping students learn both by study and also by faith. It requires us to take both elements seriously, as did the Prophet Joseph.

These are but a few of the implications to consider as we determine to embrace more fully the gospel imperative to “seek learning, even by study and also by faith”<sup>40</sup> at BYU. As we do so, we shall prove ourselves faithful to the legacy left us by our beloved Prophet Joseph, who yearned to build a university that would become “one of the great lights of the world.” May we resolve to honor the Prophet and his living successor by striving to become such a learning community.

## Notes

1. A. Bartlett Giamatti, “Ruminations on University Presidency,” *A Free and Ordered Space: The Real World of the University* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1988), 18.

2. *TGBH*, 374.

3. *HC* 4:269.

4. *D&C* 88:118.

5. John Churchill, “Is Postmodern Community Possible?” *Liberal Education* 83, no. 1 (winter 1997): 27.

6. Dallin H. Oaks, “A House of Faith,” BYU Annual University Conference address, 31 August 1977, 1; see also John W. Welch and Don E. Norton, eds., *Educating Zion* (Provo: BYU Studies, 1996), 115.

7. *D&C* 88:118.

8. *D&C* 109:7, 14.

9. George Q. Cannon, *Life of Joseph Smith the Prophet* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1964), 365.

10. See Milton V. Backman, Jr., *The Heavens Resound: A History of the Latter-day Saints in Ohio, 1830–1838* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1983), 262–75.

11. First Presidency message, “To the Saints Abroad,” *Elders’ Journal* 1, no. 4 (August 1838): 53; quoted in Backman, *Heavens*, 263.

12. *D&C* 88:119.

13. Sidney Rigdon, *Oration, Delivered by Mr. S. Rigdon, on the 4th of July, 1838, at Far West, Caldwell County, Missouri*, pamphlet, 8.

14. *D&C* 55:4.

15. Joseph Smith, letter to Emma, 4 April 1839, in *The Personal Writings of Joseph Smith*, ed. Dean C. Jessee (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1984), 426; text modernized.

16. See Backman, *Heavens*, 269.

17. John Corrill, *A Brief History of the Church of Christ of Latter Day Saints (Commonly Called Mormons;) Including an Account of Their Doctrine and Discipline; with the Reasons of the Author for Leaving the Church* (St. Louis: John Corrill, 1839), 23; quoted in Terry L. Givens, *The Latter-day Saint Experience in America* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 2004), 225; see William Mulder and A. Russell Mortensen, eds., *Among the Mormons: Historic Accounts by Contemporary Observers* (New York: Knopf, 1958), 87.

18. See D. Kelly Ogden, “The Kirtland Hebrew School (1835–36),” in Milton V.

Backman, Jr., ed., *Regional Studies in Latter-day Saint Church History: Ohio* (Provo: BYU Department of Church History and Doctrine, 1990), 76–77.

19. James H. Eells to Br. Leavitt, Kirtland, Ohio, 1 April 1836; quoted in Terryl Givens, *LDS Experience*, 225; see Mulder and Mortensen, *Among the Mormons*, 88.

20. See Ogden, “Kirtland,” 68.

21. *HC* 2:396; quoted in Ogden, “Kirtland,” 64–65.

22. Terryl Givens, *LDS Experience*, 223.

23. Harold B. Lee, “Installation of and Charge to the President,” inauguration of Dallin H. Oaks as BYU president, 12 November 1971, 15; see also Welch and Norton, *Educating Zion*, 99.

24. D&C 88:138.

25. D&C 88:121.

26. D&C 88:63, 67.

27. D&C 88:68.

28. D&C 9:8; 88:118; 109:7, 14.

29. *JD* 11:213; quoted in Terryl Givens, *LDS Experience*, 223.

30. D&C 88:79–80.

31. D&C 88:80.

32. George W. Givens, *In Old Nauvoo: Everyday Life in the City of Joseph* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1990), 257.

33. George Givens, *In Old Nauvoo*, 261.

34. George Givens, *In Old Nauvoo*, 261.

35. *HC* 4:269.

36. D&C 93:36.

37. First Presidency message, “To the Saints Abroad,” 53; quoted in Terryl Givens, *LDS Experience*, 222.

38. Bruce R. McConkie, *CR*, April 1953, 75; quoted in Terryl Givens, *LDS Experience*, 223.

39. D&C 88:77.

40. D&C 88:118.