

# *A Gospel Ground for Education: An Academic Credo*

Preface to *Envisioning BYU, Volume I*

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The purpose of this preface is to explain the primary scriptural injunctions for education. It thus provides an introduction to this first volume of *Envisioning BYU*. It is also a personal credo, outlining views that have animated me over the years. This preface was originally delivered as a talk, titled “A Gospel Ground for Education: An Academic Credo,” to BYU graduate students at the Faith and Scholarship Symposium on February 16, 2005.

I am honored to speak about the relationship between faith and scholarship, knowing that so many of you embody a seamless unity of these values in your own lives. When hearing of this topic, you likely envision a talk on the *horizontal* relationship between faith and scholarship: that is, how they complement or conflict with one another. However, I want to take a different tack. I want to address the *vertical* relationship between faith and scholarship: specifically, how faith—or, more broadly, religious belief—undergirds and grounds education. I have called my remarks “A Gospel Ground for Education.”

By “gospel ground for education,” I mean the theological basis for education. I recognize that this is an inherently abstract topic—about as appetizing as dry toast without butter. So I shall try to make my views more palatable by focusing on two familiar foundational instances in the scriptures: the two great commandments in the New Testament<sup>1</sup> and the Olive Leaf revelation in the Doctrine and Covenants.<sup>2</sup> The first allows me to comment on the broad Christian underpinning for education; the second allows me to consider its specifically Latter-day Saint basis.

Both of these scriptural texts contain commandments; they express religious imperatives. This focus is intentional, for I believe that education is a religious duty: God expects us to use our minds to love Him and our neighbor. Since education is based on eternal imperatives, what follows is not just an analysis but also an academic credo of sorts—a statement of what I believe the Lord expects of me as a believer. Hence my subtitle, “An Academic Credo,” in which *credo* means “I believe.”

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### The Two Great Commandments

I believe that the mind is a divine gift and that we are fashioned to love and serve God intelligently—as Thomas More says in Robert Bolt’s play *A Man for All Seasons*:

*God made the **angels** to show him splendour—as he made animals for innocence and plants for their simplicity. But Man he made to serve him wittily, in the tangle of his mind!*<sup>3</sup>

This sentiment is similar to what William Shakespeare’s Hamlet exclaims:

*Sure he that made us with such large discourse,  
Looking before and after, gave us not  
That capability and godlike reason  
To fust [mold] in us unused.*<sup>4</sup>

Likewise, the Lord affirms the mind as a divine gift in His great charter of Christian discipleship—the so-called “great commandments” to love God and neighbor.

The first commandment explicitly sanctions the mind as a means of worship. It is telling that Jesus added *mind* when He reformulated Deuteronomy 6:5 as “the first and great commandment,” saying, “Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind.”<sup>5</sup> *Mind* occurs in all three versions of this commandment in the Gospels.<sup>6</sup> What is more, *mind* also appears in similar formulations found in modern revelation. There are at least ten more such instances in Latter-day Saint scripture containing similar lists that include *mind*.<sup>7</sup>

Let me draw out some implications from this remarkable emphasis on the mind by focusing on several words in the first commandment.

#### *Mind*

First, of course, is *mind*. As I have already stated, I believe that the inclusion of *mind* is both deliberate and deeply significant. The first commandment dignifies the intellect as a vehicle with which to worship God and honor His creations. Some religious traditions disparage the intellect because of its potential for misuse. By contrast, the first commandment recognizes that the mind is

fundamentally holy, on a par with the heart or the soul. To be sure, there are spiritual dangers associated with the intellect, but these are perils from the misuse of a good gift, not from any inherent evil in the gift itself. “To be learned is good,” Jacob affirms, “if they hearken.”<sup>8</sup> This gets it just right. The Lord expects scholars to hearken; scholars are not exempt from obedience or meekness. At the same time, the Lord expects them to use their minds to love Him and to understand His creations.

#### *Love*

We often think of loving God as something we do solely or mainly with our hearts and with our hands in service. The first commandment obligates us to *love* the Lord with our *minds*. What a powerful idea, that the mind can be an instrument of love! I believe that God expects us to love Him thoughtfully, attentively, and studiously. We demonstrate our love for God by learning about Him and His creations. The first commandment reminds us that there is a relationship between learning and loving. To love with the mind describes my deepest experience as a learner, as a student not only of sacred but of secular matters. For me, learning at its best is an intense form of loving, culminating in delight.

#### *All*

We are commanded to love God with *all* our minds. Given this injunction, I believe that it is improper to segment our minds into hermetically sealed spheres, such as “sacred” and “secular,” as if all truth were not ultimately one. To love God with *all* our minds means that our views on the academic disciplines must be informed by our discipleship. The first commandment calls us to intellectual wholeness or integrity.

#### *Heart, Soul, and Strength*

Similarly, the first commandment links the mind with other faculties: *heart*, *soul*, and *strength*. Like the emphasis on *all*, this list suggests an integrated approach to matters of the mind. It implies that the mind ought to be integrated with our other faculties. We are not simply minds in a vat; we are embodied beings who are commanded to love God with the totality of our being.

## God

The first commandment focuses on loving God. What does it mean to bring our minds to the love of God? Does this enjoin us to study only religious subjects? I think not. Rather, I believe that the command to love God with our minds invites us to contemplate not only the Creator but His wondrous creations. To love God with our minds implies understanding His handiwork. In the Doctrine and Covenants we read that anyone who has looked up into the starry sky “hath seen God moving in his majesty and power.”<sup>9</sup> Those in former times spoke of God’s revealing Himself in two books: the book of scripture and the book of nature. I believe that the first commandment invites us to read the testimonies of the Divine inscribed in both books.

## First

In one Gospel, Jesus states that “this is the first commandment.”<sup>10</sup> In another Gospel, He calls it “the first and great commandment.”<sup>11</sup> This priority is crucial. To me, *first* signifies that the love of God must claim precedence as our highest love; properly, the love of God orders and subordinates all other loves. This is to say that the first commandment obligates believers to engage in the academic disciplines as disciples.

## Love of Neighbor

Now let me turn to the second commandment. The second commandment calls us to love our neighbors as ourselves.<sup>12</sup> This, too, has important implications with respect to a gospel ground for education. I believe that the imperative to love our neighbors implies an obligation to *understand* our neighbors—their culture, history, language, science, and so forth. For how can I love someone “as myself” whom I do not understand?

I also believe that the second commandment implies a responsibility to understand and care about our neighborhoods, which shape the soul for good and ill. As Kenneth A. Myers has written:

*Fulfilling the commands to love God and neighbor requires that we pay careful attention to the neighborhood: that is, every sphere of human life where God is either glorified or despised, where neighbors are either*

*edified or undermined. Therefore, living as disciples of Christ pertains not just to prayer, evangelism, and Bible study, but also our enjoyment of literature and music, our use of tools and machines, our eating and drinking, our views on government and economics, and so on.*<sup>13</sup>

Love of neighbor thus requires thoughtful engagement with the world, including serious reflection on the academic disciplines, which serve as repositories of the world’s wisdom.

Together, the two great commandments call us, as disciples, to seek wisdom in light of our discipleship. All of us who embrace these divine injunctions live under a religious imperative to learn—about God and His mighty creations as well as about neighbors and neighborhoods in which Christian love must be practiced.

## The Olive Leaf

I also believe that modern revelation makes our duty to learn, as latter-day Christians, even more explicit and concrete. The revelation given to Joseph Smith known as the Olive Leaf, found in Doctrine and Covenants 88, sets forth an expansive vision of education for Latter-day Saints. According to President Dallin H. Oaks, the Olive Leaf, “which defined the objectives of the School of the Prophets,” still serves as “the basic constitution of Church education.”<sup>14</sup> Let me briefly describe how this constitutional revelation articulates the *how*, *what*, and *why* of a gospel ground for education.

## How

In the Olive Leaf, the Lord enjoins His people to “diligently . . . seek learning, even by study and also by faith.”<sup>15</sup> This counsel, which is repeated three times in the Doctrine and Covenants,<sup>16</sup> describes *how* Latter-day Saints should approach education. The key commandment as to how we should learn is likely familiar to all of you. We should learn by diligent study and by faith. Note that both study *and* faith are divinely sanctioned means of learning. I believe in a holistic pursuit of wisdom, which embraces such dichotomies as intellect and spirit, reason and revelation, and head and heart.

I also believe that we should approach learning “diligently.” Modern revelation frequently uses the adverb *diligently* to describe how the Saints are to seek and search. I find it telling that, at root, *diligent* connotes not only strenuous effort but delight. *Diligence* derives from the Latin *diligere*, meaning to esteem highly, love, choose, and take delight in. *Diligently* thus captures not only the rigor and assiduousness that should attend our study but also the joy and excitement that should characterize gospel-grounded learning.

### What

The Olive Leaf also articulates *what* should be studied. It sets forth a broadly inclusive curriculum. Early Latter-day Saints were to “be instructed more perfectly in theory, in principle, in doctrine.”<sup>17</sup> They were to learn

*of things both in heaven and in the earth, and under the earth; things which have been, things which are, [and] things which must shortly come to pass; things . . . at home . . . [and] abroad; [and] the wars and the perplexities of the nations.*<sup>18</sup>

They were further commanded to seek wisdom “out of the best books”<sup>19</sup> and to “study and learn, and become acquainted with . . . languages, tongues, and people.”<sup>20</sup>

To my knowledge, these injunctions have never been revoked or rescinded. Therefore we, just like the early Saints, ought to understand the broad domains of human knowledge. For me, this is not only a daunting but a thrilling prospect. It invites me to indulge my intellectual curiosity. It is an antidote to intellectual sloth, narrow-mindedness, and self-satisfaction. And it is an injunction to never cease learning and to ever seek to learn from those in every walk of life, not just from those in my narrow area of expertise.

The stunning scope of the Lord’s curriculum in the Olive Leaf lends support to the proposition that the gospel embraces all truth. So wide is the expanse of things the Lord would have His Saints know!

This breadth may also bespeak the fact that ideas have consequences. The Lord knows that

ideas in the academic disciplines can deeply affect discipleship, for good and ill. Hence disciples in every generation must be “wise as serpents.”<sup>21</sup> They must take the measure of the philosophy, science, art, culture, and technology of their age if they are to “be prepared in all things” to proclaim the gospel.<sup>22</sup> What the age *propounds* affects how disciples must *expound* the gospel to their neighbors. Therefore, disciples have a double obligation to the disciplines: disciples have much to learn *from* the disciplines, and disciples bring an important perspective *to* the disciplines.

### Why

Finally, modern revelation describes *why* believers are to seek learning—its *telos* or purpose. Traditionally, two competing reasons are adduced to justify learning: instrumental value and intrinsic value. The Doctrine and Covenants ascribes both *instrumental* and *intrinsic* value to learning.

The early Saints were commanded to seek learning so that they would “be prepared in all things . . . to magnify [their] calling” as witnesses.<sup>23</sup> That is, they were to seek learning for the sake of a world they were called to serve and save. This implies that learning is an *instrumental* good, one that helps disciples act more effectively in the world.

In addition, however, the Saints were to seek intelligence to become more like God. To this end they were taught that “the glory of God is intelligence, or, in other words, light and truth.”<sup>24</sup> This doctrine implies that learning truth is an *intrinsic* good, a good in and of itself, for it is an attribute of the Divine.

I cannot conceive a more powerful argument for the intrinsic value of learning than this, nor a more inspiring incentive to learn all the truth we can—even while in this life. For we have this promise:

*Whatever principle of intelligence we attain unto in this life, it will rise with us in the resurrection.*

*And if a person gains more knowledge and intelligence in this life through his diligence and obedience than another, he will have so much the advantage in the world to come.*<sup>25</sup>

Intelligence makes us more like God. Obviously, intelligence is not coterminous with knowledge of academic subjects, but I suspect there is some overlap, since “truth is knowledge of things as they” were, are, and will be.<sup>26</sup> Further, the habits of truth-seeking by study and faith will also rise with us in the Resurrection and aid us in our quest for perfection and eternal life.

This is, finally, the true goal of education. The ultimate end of true education is to help us become more like God. As John Milton says in *Of Education*:

*The end then of learning is to repair the ruins of our first parents by regaining to know God aright, and out of that knowledge to love him, to imitate him, to be like him.*<sup>27</sup>

### Concluding Thoughts

I have offered an academic credo regarding the gospel ground for learning—a credo founded on the great commandments and on modern revelation. I have focused on our religious obligation to learn. If, however, I were to reduce my academic credo to a sentence, I would state it as follows: *I believe that as disciples we have a religious duty to learn truth, to love truth, and to live truth.*

I have focused almost exclusively on our duty to learn truth. This, however, is only the beginning of a disciple’s duty. It is not enough merely to learn truth; we must love it. And it is not enough only to love truth; we must live it. Loving and living truth constitute higher obligations than learning truth, but to explore them would clearly require another lecture. May you found your scholarship on your faith.

### Notes

1. See Mark 12:29–31.
2. See Doctrine and Covenants 88, section heading.

3. Robert Bolt, *A Man for All Seasons: A Play in Two Acts* (London: Heinemann Educational Books, 1960), act 2, page 74; emphasis in original.

4. William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, act 4, scene 4, lines 36–39.

5. Matthew 22:38 and 37. Deuteronomy 6:5 says, “And thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thine heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy might.” See also 2 Kings 23:25.

6. See Matthew 22:37–39; Mark 12:29–31; Luke 10:27.

7. See 2 Nephi 25:29; Mosiah 2:11; Alma 39:13; Moroni 10:32; Doctrine and Covenants 4:2; 11:20; 20:31; 33:7; 59:5; 98:47.

8. 2 Nephi 9:29.

9. Doctrine and Covenants 88:47.

10. Mark 12:30.

11. Matthew 22:38.

12. See Matthew 22:39; Mark 12:31; Luke 10:27.

13. Kenneth A. Myers, “About Mars Hill Audio,” Mars Hill Audio, accessed December 2004, [marshillaudio.org/about/aboutmha.asp](http://marshillaudio.org/about/aboutmha.asp) (webpage discontinued); also published at “Mars Hill Audio Incorporated: Mission,” GuideStar, Candid, [guidestar.org/profile/54-1525723](http://guidestar.org/profile/54-1525723).

14. Dallin H. Oaks, “A House of Faith,” BYU annual university conference address, 31 August 1977, 8.

15. Doctrine and Covenants 88:118.

16. See Doctrine and Covenants 88:118; 109:7, 14.

17. Doctrine and Covenants 88:78.

18. Doctrine and Covenants 88:79.

19. Doctrine and Covenants 88:118.

20. Doctrine and Covenants 90:15.

21. Matthew 10:16.

22. Doctrine and Covenants 88:80.

23. Doctrine and Covenants 88:80.

24. Doctrine and Covenants 93:36.

25. Doctrine and Covenants 130:18–19.

26. Doctrine and Covenants 93:24.

27. John Milton, *Of Education* (1644).