

Faithful Questions: Seeking for and Being Found by Truth

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Today I want to consider with you how asking questions with faith can improve our learning by helping us not only to find truth, but to be found and changed by truth. I want to begin by showing you some home movies. Let me show you a wonderful little episode in my five-year-old Richard's first experience with the beach and the ocean. We were just north of San Diego and had been playing on the beach for some forty or fifty minutes. I had been taking a video shot of several sailboats and just happened to catch little Richard on *Candid Camera*. He had been watching and trying to follow the example of his older brother A. J., who is eleven and was bodysurfing. Notice the way Richard questions and how he learns from asking and hearing answers to these questions. (A video clip was shown.)

I love the straightforwardness, the honesty, of Richard's questions. It's no wonder that children, at least those who approach their learning so openly, with such direct questions, learn so rapidly. I am also overwhelmed by Richard's faith in my answers. "Will I die?" he asks. All it takes is a simple "no" from me and he is on to the next question. However, it isn't that he takes everything I say without question.

When I start to talk about boogie boards he corrects my misunderstanding quickly and then asks his question again about how A. J. does bodysurfing. Richard, of course, experiments on my words according to his ability, which is not great, but he learns quickly and is filled with joy by his learning.

No wonder children learn so quickly an entire language, sometimes more than one, and a world full of basic information, including how to operate the practical aspects of an entire life. What we learn thereafter is relatively meager in comparison. A major reason, I would argue, has much to do with the openness and faith of the child's search for learning—with the humble willingness to admit ignorance and ask "dumb" questions.

This season of the year—which I love so much, with its time for family, its surprises under the tree, the end of the semester, and (most important) the gift of the Savior—reminds me of two questions from the

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Christmas story. I refer to the questions Zacharias and Mary ask of the angel Gabriel. You will remember that Gabriel appeared to Zacharias in the temple, where he was officiating in the priest's office. Apparently Zacharias and his wife, Elizabeth, had been praying for many years for a child. They were now quite old, but the angel announced that their prayers were heard and that they would have a son and call his name John. Zacharias responded with a question: "Whereby shall I know this? for I am an old man, and my wife well stricken in years" (Luke 1:18). As you will remember, Zacharias was struck dumb because, as the angel said, "thou believest not my words" (Luke 1:20).

Not long thereafter, the same angel Gabriel appeared to Mary, a young virgin espoused to a man whose name was Joseph. The angel announced yet another birth: the birth of the Savior to Mary. She also responded to this miraculous announcement with a question: "How shall this be, seeing I know not a man?" (Luke 1:34). Mary's question was apparently asked with faith, because the angel answered her question and told her that she would become the mother of the Son of God. Mary's response was, "Behold the handmaid of the Lord; be it unto me according to thy word" (Luke 1:38).

I am intrigued by the difference in the response of the angel to these two questions. On the surface, the questions do not look so different. Both Mary and Zacharias ask how the miraculous, promised events will occur. Yet Zacharias' question must have been uttered in a spirit of doubt. In addition, some have argued that Zacharias is asking for a sign when he says "whereby shall I know this?" If that is true, Gabriel probably took that as further evidence of unbelief.

By contrast, Mary's question appears almost paradoxical. It appears to question the announcement and yet believe it simultaneously. Of course, Mary's question isn't

paradoxical at all. She simply is asking for the understanding that she lacks, all the while believing that the event will occur. Her question is, however, remarkable, because it is so fresh and honest. Would *you* dare ask such a question to a shiny angel, probably with a big, deep voice, who just appeared to you out of nowhere and told you something so surprising? I imagine I would lack the presence of mind to form such a question, let alone the honesty and faith to do so the way Mary did. Perhaps that is the reason that the first words of angelic visitors are often "fear not" or "thy sins are forgiven thee." How is it possible to combine such honest inquisitiveness with such great faith? What can we learn from such child-like honesty? (Indeed, many biblical scholars suggest that Mary may have been a girl of fourteen to sixteen when Gabriel visited her.) What happens to us as we grow older? Why do many of us get to be more like Zacharias—more skeptical, jaded, or doubting?

One of my colleagues recently confessed that contrary to many of his peers who preferred to teach specialized, advanced courses, he really enjoyed the introductory classes, because students still asked honest questions and found excitement and challenge in their learning. "By the time they are seniors or graduate students," he said, "we have pretty much beaten the fun out of them."

Another of my colleagues, talking about a different group of seniors and graduate students, lamented that they seemed to have overlearned the importance of questioning. He said they seemed to have taken to heart the imperative of bumper stickers that read "Question Authority!" or, even more basic, "Question Reality!" The students my colleague worried about were skeptical, irreverent, and questioned everyone and everything.

If you will permit me to paint with a broad brush in order to make my point, I would observe that these two groups of students represent two quite false, yet appealing,

perspectives about learning. The first perspective focuses on having the right answers, whereas the second perspective emphasizes having ready questions. I want to consider each perspective briefly.

From the first perspective, whether in the Church or at the university, learning means picking up the right answers to the test, to the gospel doctrine question, or to life. Asking questions makes you look dumb or disloyal. You are dumb if you don't know the answer, or, if your question appears critical of popular views, you look disloyal. In our setting, some returned missionaries get pretty good at implementing this perspective. They have all the answers and often can cite scriptures to justify their views. What is appealing about this perspective is that the gospel does provide answers to life's most important questions. However, the gospel teaches that in this life we walk by faith, and the Lord therefore leaves many things for us to decide and expects not to command in all things but to have us be anxiously engaged in good causes of our own free will (see D&C 58:27). Students who want the answers shun teachers who encourage them to develop and pursue interesting questions of their own and, in this way, to learn how to learn. Such students become robotlike "answer machines" who memorize for the test (and often forget what they learned after the test). They, and the teachers who approach learning from this perspective, have "assassinated wonder" and thus have taken all of the fun out of learning.

The second perspective is a caricature of learning through questions. There are actually many versions of this perspective, but to save time I have chosen to focus on an ever-more popular approach that assumes that reality is not objective but rather consists of whatever society agrees it is. There is no absolute truth that transcends societies, and what is taken for truth is different depending on the society or even on one's place in society. What

becomes accepted as true, from this perspective, is influenced by who has power, so that truth not only varies by society, but it is political. Thus, those in power and the perspectives they enforce must be questioned. Those with such a perspective are critical of the smugness and narrow-mindedness of the first group, who think they have the answers. These are the modern skeptics who don't believe anything except that there are no universally stable answers. And they are therefore closed to truth because they know it doesn't exist. Perhaps this is one of the perspectives Paul had in mind when he said people would be "ever learning, and never able to come to the knowledge of the truth" (2 Timothy 3:7). The most insidious form of this perspective suggests that the Church is just another organization with its own unique, but biased, version of the truth and that prophets are political just like everyone else. Therefore the doctrine and the authorities must be questioned rigorously.

Both perspectives inhibit learning. The focus on answers severely limits learning because it doesn't encourage us to form good questions about what we don't yet know and to see with fresh eyes new problems to solve. The focus on questioning authority and reality denies learning by faith and the confirmation of absolute truth even though we may not fully understand the truth.

Both perspectives are also too self-conscious. Both Richard and Mary have something to teach those with such perspectives. They would teach the answer-oriented folks to feel awe and wonder in the face of a vast world of possible things to learn and would encourage them to overcome their pride and ask honest and unself-conscious questions. They would teach the question-oriented folks to trust in prophets and truth, to have faith in feeling and in faith itself. This will require overcoming their pride, which won't allow anyone to have the truth. No wonder children and humble people learn faster and perform better than

they would otherwise. Although they may lack sophisticated thinking and learning skills, they are willing to admit ignorance freely and ask honest questions that may not be so dumb after all.

Lessons About Learning from Zeezrom

I want to try to flesh out some of the elements of a learning perspective drawn from the scriptures and modern prophets about how to learn with faithful questions. As a way to develop this perspective, let's consider the case of Zeezrom, who, as you will remember, was a learned man who lived in Ammonihah and was a chief antagonist of Alma and Amulek as they sought to teach the gospel to people in his community. Zeezrom was an expert in using questions to confuse or to trick others. For example, he asks Amulek: "Is there more than one God?" When Amulek answers that there is not, he asks: "Who is he that shall come? Is it the Son of God?" Amulek says, "Yea." Zeezrom's next question is: "Shall he save his people in their sins?" Of course Amulek says he won't save people *in* their sins. Then Zeezrom springs the trap. He turns to the people and says: "See that ye remember these things; for he said there is but one God; yet he saith that the Son of God shall come, but he shall not save his people—as though he had authority to command God" (see Alma 11:28–35).

Obviously, Zeezrom isn't seeking the truth through his questions. He thinks he knows the answers already. Nor does he have faith in God. His questions are calculated to trap Amulek, to discredit him, so that he, Zeezrom, can gain notoriety and thus get more business from the people. (Bruce Hafen read an earlier draft of my talk and thanked me for not mentioning that Zeezrom was a lawyer, so I'm not going to say what his business was.)

Now Zeezrom had clearly gone to school and learned how to look smart. The problem is that school can teach us the wrong lessons if

we aren't careful. It can teach us that learning is about excelling—that is, looking better than others so we can get good jobs, make more money, and thus seem more successful than others. But no matter whether we subscribe to an answer-oriented or a question-oriented perspective, if we are motivated by a desire to look better than others, our questions and our answers will be false. Although we may learn some things, and even do very well professionally, as did Zeezrom, we will fail the real tests of life.

Certainly "to be learned is good if they hearken unto the counsels of God," as Jacob taught (2 Nephi 9:29). The increased sophistication that a university education makes possible can develop our ability to think and to understand and help us make wiser choices and have greater ability to carry out these choices. But the most important test in life is not *how much* truth we know but whether we are *true* to the truth we know. Learning that ignores this test leads to failure that is infinitely worse than failing a class.

Now notice what happens to Zeezrom when he begins to open his heart to the light that comes from the Spirit through Alma and Amulek. He first begins to tremble as he feels the truth of what they are saying. He becomes convinced that there are things he does not know, and he is willing to learn these things and change himself accordingly. He then begins "to inquire of them diligently, that he might know more concerning the kingdom of God" (Alma 12:8). As Alma sees that his questions are honest and faithful, he says:

It is given unto many to know the mysteries of God; nevertheless they are laid under a strict command that they shall not impart only according to the portion of his word which he doth grant unto the children of men, according to the heed and diligence which they give unto him.

And therefore, he that will harden his heart, the same receiveth the lesser portion of the word; and

he that will not harden his heart, to him is given the greater portion of the word, until it is given unto him to know the mysteries of God until he know them in full. [Alma 12:9–10]

The change in Zeezrom and Alma's response to him provide some suggestions about the elements of a perspective that encourages faithful questions. First, Zeezrom had to open his heart to the enticings of the Holy Ghost that bore witness to the truth of what Alma and Amulek were teaching. Previously, he had been hardened, past feeling and responding to these impressions. Second, Zeezrom was willing to admit ignorance in front of the very people he had been trying to impress with his intelligence just moments before. I suppose that his questions were now more direct, sincere, and full of interest. Third, Zeezrom was willing to give heed and diligence to what he was taught. As Alma taught him, his now-softened heart and willingness to become true to God's direction would finally lead him to all truth.

As our hearts are thus changed by listening to and following the guidance of the Lord's Spirit and of his servants, I believe we learn something about the attitude we should have as we approach Heavenly Father with questions. I want to add this attitude as a fourth element of a "faithful questions" perspective. The idea is beautifully expressed in the Bible dictionary description of prayer. It says:

Prayer is the act by which the will of the Father and the will of the child are brought into correspondence with each other. The object of prayer is not to change the will of God, but to secure for ourselves and for others blessings that God is already willing to grant, but that are made conditional on our asking for them.

As I have gained more perspective about prayer, it has seemed to me that some of my prayers in the past have been to an extent

misguided. I hear myself praying in the past, pleading with the Lord to move about the world doing good from my perspective, without a clear sense of "thy will be done" in my orientation. I have too often sought to persuade the Lord to adopt my agenda rather than trying to discover his agenda and make it mine. So the fourth element is to ask with a spirit of "thy will be done," trying to learn his will as we ask.

Perhaps my growing realization about a more productive learning relationship with Heavenly Father is what made me so impressed with President Marion G. Romney's biography written by F. Burton Howard. President Romney, who served as a counselor to President Spencer W. Kimball, is a wonderful example of someone who asks faithful questions. I particularly want to share an account of how President Romney responded when his wife, Ida, suffered a stroke in early 1967. She lay in the hospital for weeks, giving no sign that she recognized President Romney when he visited.

During this period, following priesthood blessings, fasting, prayer, and, nevertheless, a continued worsening of Ida's condition, President Romney's response was one of great reticence to counsel the Lord. If his will was to take her, President Romney did not want to pray for something else. And yet he had said on numerous occasions about his wife, "She is the best part of me. I could never carry on alone" (F. Burton Howard, *Marion G. Romney, His Life and Faith* [Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1988], p. 140).

He searched the scriptures and fasted to develop his faith and learn how to demonstrate it to the Lord. He didn't directly ask the Lord to heal his wife, though this was never far from his heart. Rather, he worried whether he had the right to ask for this blessing. He observed that the Lord hadn't healed President McKay, who was very ill. "He hasn't healed others who are in as great a

need as I,” he said. “Who am I to ask for a blessing? Why should the Lord answer my prayers?”

He struggled with this internal conflict for some time, continuing to read, to pray, and to fast. One evening, shortly after returning from a visit to Ida in the hospital, where he had found her unchanged, he went to the Book of Mormon and began to read. He read in the book of Helaman about the prophet Nephi, who had been falsely condemned as he sought to teach the people. A particular passage in this account touched his heart more than he had ever felt before. The scripture read:

Blessed art thou, Nephi, for those things which thou hast done; for I have beheld how thou hast with unweariness declared the word, which I have given unto thee, unto this people. And thou hast not feared them, and hast not sought thine own life, but hast sought my will, and to keep my commandments.

And now, because thou hast done this with such unweariness, behold, I will bless thee forever; and I will make thee mighty in word and in deed, in faith and in works; yea, even that all things shall be done unto thee according to thy word, for thou shalt not ask that which is contrary to my will. [Helaman 10:4–5]

President Romney felt personal confirmation that the Lord accepted him. He

knew that by refusing to ask a special favor without first ascertaining the will of the Lord, he had unknowingly demonstrated the quality of his faith. . . .

With awe, [President Romney] fell to his knees. The scripture was the direct answer to many prayers. More than anything else he wanted to know the Lord’s will for Ida. He was willing to let her go; or, if need be, he would care for her in whatever condition the Lord wanted her to be in. As he concluded his prayer with the phrase “Thy will be done,” he seemed to feel or hear a voice which said,

“It is not contrary to my will that Ida be healed.” [Howard, Romney, pp. 141–142]

Quickly he put on his coat and tie and went to the hospital. Arriving there at 3:00 a.m., he entered her room and placed his hands upon her head. She didn’t move or give any sign of recognition. He then invoked the power of the priesthood and pronounced a simple blessing upon her, uttering the

incredible promise that she would recover her health and mental powers and yet perform a great mission upon the earth.

Even though he did not doubt, [President Romney] was astonished to see Ida’s eyes open as he concluded the blessing. He sat down on the bed and listened to her frail voice ask, “For goodness’ sakes, Marion, what are you doing here?” In total surprise he responded, “Ida, how are you?” With a flash of humor which showed that she was not totally unaware of her circumstances, Ida Romney replied, “Compared to what, Marion? Compared to what?” [p. 142]

Thereafter, Ida recovered fully and miraculously.

I am deeply impressed with the self-restraint and the faith of this humble man. He struggled with his own heart to make sure that his question was a faithful one. Notice the presence of the four elements of faithful questions: First, he fasted and prayed to open his heart to God’s Spirit and yield himself to its enticings. Second, he acknowledged his need to learn from the Lord by searching the scriptures and asking himself whether a petition to restore Ida’s health would be righteous. Third, he gave diligence and heed to the Lord’s word, wondering whether there was anything else he could do to develop his faith and demonstrate it to the Lord. And finally, his entire effort focused on harmonizing his will with the Lord’s rather than trying to persuade the Lord. When we have so schooled our hearts and consulted the scriptures, and then receive

the Lord's Spirit, we ask "according to the will of God; wherefore it is done even as [we] asketh" (D&C 46:30). Such questions can lead to remarkable answers, as President Romney discovered.

Now we may understand better why President Harold B. Lee said, "Learning by faith is no task for a lazy man." Such learning "requires the bending of the whole soul. . . . Then only comes 'knowledge by faith'" (*Ye Are the Light of the World* [Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1974], p. 119). Such a bending of the whole soul prepares us to hear the word of the Lord and helps us to open our hearts to do what might be very difficult. Indeed, this process of learning changes us. We enter into the spirit of faithful questions demonstrated by the childlike approach of Richard and Mary and President Romney. Indeed, as our eye becomes single to the glory of God rather than our own glory, our "whole bodies shall be filled with light, and there shall be no darkness in [us]; and that body which is filled with light comprehendeth all things" (D&C 88:67).

This kind of learning is not often taught in universities. But it is taught at BYU, and it can lead to all truth, both sacred and secular. As I noted earlier, if we are not careful we can learn the wrong things in school. As a matter of fact, getting our hearts right is much more important than getting the questions right. If our hearts are right, the Lord will help us to form the right questions. And even when we can't form the right questions, he will still bless us if we have faith and pure hearts (see Romans 8:26–27 and 3 Nephi 17:2–8). For example, when the Savior appeared to the Nephites, he taught them many things but then said: "I perceive that ye are weak, that ye cannot understand all my words" (3 Nephi 17:2). He told them to ponder and prepare their minds for his teaching on the following day. However, he saw the people in tears and read in their hearts a desire that he would stay longer. He

then invited them to bring forward their sick, lame, blind, and otherwise afflicted members of their group so he could heal them. "For," he said, "I perceive that ye desire that I should show unto you what I have done unto your brethren at Jerusalem, for I see that your faith is sufficient that I should heal you" (3 Nephi 17:8). I believe that in a similar manner the Savior hears and responds to our unspoken, even unformed, questions when our faith and hearts are right. A university education is, in this sense, not critical to our salvation or our eventual eternal education. But a BYU education can help us be educated for eternity if we learn to ask faithful questions.

There is yet something lacking in this perspective on learning through faithful questions. The problem is that the perspective I have been developing focuses on *our* questions of God. However, since his ways and thoughts are higher than our own (see Isaiah 55:8–9), we must learn to hear and respond to his questions of us. Our questions to him are limited by our finite perspective.

I recall an experience I had as I was completing my doctorate that has taught me something about listening to God's questions rather than aggressively pursuing my own, no matter how righteous my questions seem to be. I was just beginning my final year at Stanford, and I was not sure how I would be able to accomplish all that needed to be done.

One day the elders quorum president in the ward engaged me in casual conversation. He said that they were looking for an early-morning seminary teacher to teach the youth in the ward and offhandedly suggested that maybe I should do it. My response was that I didn't see how I could possibly do it during the coming year, given all that I had to do, and the conversation ended harmlessly enough. However, for several weeks I couldn't seem to get the thought out of my mind: "But what if they call you, Alan?" I had never turned down a calling in my life. I had always said to myself that I

would accept callings, but I resisted the thought of this calling.

About three weeks later, as I sat in the temple renewing sacred covenants with the Lord, promising him that I would do whatever he asked, a thought from the Lord came into my mind: “Would you even teach early-morning seminary for me?” Well, there he had me. I realized that I had been asking the wrong question. My question had been, “How can I finish the dissertation and move on to a university assignment?” The Lord was asking me: “Are you interested in doing my will more than your own?” In my heart I responded first with real embarrassment that I had been unrepentant and closed to what I now realized had been his question of me, a question that I thought had come from an unthoughtful and casual elders quorum president. I then promised the Lord that I would do whatever he wanted, even if I never finished the dissertation.

I was called to teach seminary the next Sunday. It was one of the most difficult assignments I have ever had. I struggled to prepare for those early-morning lessons. The students were often not appreciative of the sacrifice that I felt I was making, and the dissertation took an additional semester to finish.

I realize now that this experience led me to remarkable opportunities to serve individuals who needed my particular approach. I also see how the Lord taught me about teaching, about the gospel, and about myself through this experience. As I look back, however, the most important lesson for me from this experience is that if I am not careful I may become so involved in pursuing my own questions that I may miss God’s questions to me. They come in many forms, and I must school my heart to be open to them.

As Dennis Rasmussen of our philosophy faculty has written, if we focus only on our questions and our seeking for information, we will fail to meet our deepest need. “Will man be happy when he has split the last atom and searched all the sands of the sea?” he asks. No,

for “man’s fundamental need is not to ask a question but to respond to one” (Dennis Rasmussen, *The Lord’s Question* [Provo, Utah: Keter Foundation, 1985], p. 4).

The Lord through the ages has asked us questions, not because he needs to know the answer but because we need to question ourselves and learn. The Lord clothed us with a question as he sent us into mortality. It is the first recorded question in the scriptures: “Adam . . . , Where art thou?” (Genesis 3:9). Professor Rasmussen continues:

*Does God not know? On the contrary, only he knows. In my weakness I lose my bearings. Like a child wandering in a forest I follow the whims of the moment and forget the way. I am too caught up by my surroundings to follow the path. Not until a Father’s voice calls do I wonder where I am. How shall I answer? I am here? But where is here? So helpless am I that I cannot say. But deep within I hear his voice and tremble, for finally there are just two places, with him or without him, and just two ways, toward him or not toward him. [Rasmussen, *Lord’s Question*, p. 4]*

Ultimately, learning to ask faithful questions and respond to the Lord’s answers and his questions will save us—that is, to the extent that we see we are not only about gaining information but about gaining salvation and sanctification and we learn that all of our questions have eternal import. This idea is clearly reinforced by the experience that Alma the Elder had as he became head of the Church in the kingdom of King Mosiah. When people who had disobeyed laws of the Church were brought before Alma, he attempted to have King Mosiah judge them, but King Mosiah said they were Alma’s responsibility. From Mosiah we read:

And now the spirit of Alma was again troubled; and he went and inquired of the Lord what he should do concerning this matter, for he feared that he should do wrong in the sight of God.

And it came to pass that after he had poured out his whole soul to God, the voice of the Lord came to him, saying:

Blessed art thou, Alma. . . . Thou art blessed because of thy exceeding faith in the words alone of my servant Abinadi. [Mosiah 26:13–15; emphasis added]

And so, we see Alma, like Marion G. Romney, inquiring of the Lord, asking a question, fearing to do wrong in his sight, wanting to have his heart right, asking that he be informed and blessed with an answer. And now, listen to the Lord's response, which is not an answer to his specific question (that comes later) but rather an answer to the Lord's question of "Adam . . . , Where art thou?" and to Alma's standing before the Lord.

And because thou hast inquired of me concerning the transgressor, thou art blessed.

Thou art my servant; and I covenant with thee that thou shalt have eternal life; and thou shalt serve me and go forth in my name, and shalt gather together my sheep. [Mosiah 26:19–20]

And thus we see that servants of the Lord who seek to do his will, who inquire with faith, and who open themselves to the Lord's inquiries and allow him to change them and bless them can finally receive the ultimate blessing.

May we, too, learn to ask faithful questions, and may we become true as we seek truth is my prayer, in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.