

JOSEPH SMITH, THE EDUCATOR

by

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Joseph Smith taught that a true educational program should have a divine purpose with a two-fold objective: First, it should teach man now to commune with God so that he can receive truth by revelation from the Supreme Intelligence. Second, it should teach man the law of God as it applies to all phases of life—spiritual, social, economic, political, etc. Only in this way can the kingdom of God be fully established on earth. A Third purpose in the Prophet's philosophy of education was to teach the Saints the things of this world so they could reason with unregenerated men on their plane of life and elevate them to the higher programs of Zion.

Joseph Smith held that man can obtain truth through spiritual and intellectual processes. He should utilize both methods in his quest for understanding. In evaluating the two methods, he said: "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 teachings." ¹

From this source the Prophet acquired the great truths which he bequeathed to the Church in this dispensation. In the First Vision he learned the true character of God and "many other things" which he did not write in his account of the great theophany. ² He was later "shown" the aboriginal inhabitants of America ³, and by spiritual as well as intellectual processes he translated a record of those ancient people. In an extended vision which lasted for possibly two hours, Joseph Smith and Sidney Ridgon saw the future destiny of the human race in eternity. ⁴ They then recorded merely one-hundredth part of that which they had seen. ⁵ In vision, the Prophet also saw the true pattern of Church organization, and he then set about to organize the Saints "according to the heavenly vision and the pattern shown" to him. ⁶ Of the way he studied the Bible, the latter-day Seer reported: "After I got through translating the Book of Mormon, I took up the Bible and read with the Urim and Thummim. I read the first chapter of Genesis and I saw the things as they were done. I turned over the next and the next, and the whole passed before me like a grand panorama and so on chapter after chapter until I read the whole of it. I saw it all. Then I think of the sectarian priests boasting of what they know. Why I have forgotten a thousand times more than ever they knew." ⁷

Joseph Smith often referred to the divine principles by which man can acquire truth. "A person may profit by noticing the first intimation of the spirit of revelation," he

said, "for instance, when you feel pure intelligence flowing into you, it may give you sudden strokes of ideas." It is in this way that man must acquire salvation.

"Thus by learning the Spirit of God and understanding it," the Prophet concluded, "you may grow into the principle of revelation until you become perfect in Christ Jesus." ⁸ Speaking of the way to salvation he said: "We consider that God has created man with a mind capable of instruction, and a faculty which may be enlarged in proportion to the heed and diligence given to the light communicated from heaven to the intellect; and that the nearer man approaches perfection, the clearer are his views, and the greater his enjoyment, till he has overcome the evils of his life and lost every desire for sin; and like the ancients, arrives at that point of faith where he is wrapped in the power and glory of his Maker and is caught up to dwell with Him."⁹

A revelation referring specifically to this method of acquiring truth states: "He that keepeth his [God's] commandments receiveth truth and light, until he is glorified in truth and knoweth all things." ¹⁰ Obedience to God brings the Spirit of revelation into man's life, and through a process of spiritual maturation, men can eventually be glorified and knoweth all things.

The Lord revealed that, "The glory of God is intelligence, or, in other words, light and truth." He then added, "I have commanded you to bring up your children in light and truth." ¹¹ The Prophet spoke of acquiring divine truth by revelation when he declared that "the principle of knowledge is the principle of salvation." He added, "Then knowledge through our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ is the grand key that unlocks the glories and mysteries of the kingdom of heaven." ¹²

Joseph Smith stressed the reality of this method of acquiring truth: "I assure the Saints that truth, in reference to these matters (i.e., eternal principles) can and may be known through the revelations of God in the way of His ordinances (which are legal channels of revelation), and in answer to prayer." It is possible to acquire a phenomenal degree of truth by applying the high principles of revelation. The latter-day Seer said: "Could you gaze into heaven five minutes, you would know more than you would by reading all that ever was written on the subject." ¹³

The Prophet also advocated other methods of acquiring truth. He wrote by revelation that the Saints were to "seek learning ... by study and also by faith." ¹⁴ But acquisition of truth by study was a means they were to employ because they lacked the ability to learn by faith. The full statement reads: "And as all have not faith, seek ye diligently and teach one another words of wisdom; seek learning, even by study and also by faith." ¹⁵ By study man develops faith; by application of faith comes the revelation of the Spirit and a knowledge of the truth.

Here is a principle that man must learn and apply if he is to realize his full potential on earth and in eternity. Joseph Smith observed that Enoch, Abraham, Moses, Paul, and many others in ancient times acquired great knowledge through faith. ¹⁶ This method requires man to use his full intellectual powers, but, in addition, man must

reach up to God with desire and hope so that the Holy Spirit can become a principle of revelation within him. By cultivating this principle, man can obtain divine truth until he has power to return to the presence of God.¹⁷ The Prophet declared that every man remaining on the earth after the millennial kingdom is established must eventually come to know the Lord through the principle of revelation.¹⁸

The Saints were also encouraged to obtain a knowledge of the things of the world. A revelation states: "Study and learn and become acquainted with all good books, and with languages, tongues, and people."¹⁹ The Lord instructed the Prophet "to obtain a knowledge of history, and of countries, and of kingdoms, of laws of God and man."²⁰ The Elders were also commanded to acquire an understanding "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; things which are at home, things which are abroad; the wars and the perplexities of the nations, and the judgments which are on the land; and a knowledge also of countries and of kingdoms."²¹

But aside from its general intrinsic value, the Saints were to acquire secular knowledge as a means of building up the kingdom of God. Having given the Elders the instructions in the last statement above, the revelation added: "That ye may be prepared in all things when I shall send you again to magnify the calling whereunto I have called you, and the mission with which I have commissioned you."²² The Saints were to obtain secular knowledge "for the salvation of Zion."²³ Zion was to be built as an ensign to the world, to which people would come to learn of God's ways. That they might be able to converse intelligently with others on their level of life and bring them up to the higher plane which the gospel made possible, the Saints were to acquire knowledge of secular things.

As a new social order, the society of Zion was to be built on the spiritual foundation of the gospel which, when applied properly and fully, will prepare every faithful person to receive the blessings of the Second Comforter and to have personal communion with those who dwell in glory beyond the veil.

On this spiritual foundation new and more meaningful social, economic and political revelations ... regenerated family unit was to be the basis of the social system of Zion. A divine economic program, known as the United Order, was to be implemented. And a new educational system, known as the school of the Prophets, was established for those men who had made their calling and election sure to celestial glory, with the object of teaching principles relevant to those on that plane of spiritual truth and power.

The Saints were expected to use divine methods in acquiring eternal truth, and they were also called to apply those principles in building the society of Zion on the foundation of revealed gospel teachings. Thus education by study and by revelation would be one of the significant features of the great millennial kingdom which the Saints are to build in preparation for the coming of Christ.

Endnotes

1. *History of The Church (HC)* 4:425
2. *HC* 1:6
3. *HC* 4:537
4. Andrus, *Joseph Smith the Man and the Seer*, p. 111
5. *HC* 5:402.
6. *Millennial Star*, V (March, 1845), p. 151
7. Joseph Smith Papers, Church Historian's Library.
8. *HC* 3:381. Cf. D&C 50:23, 24; 88:66-68.
9. *HC* 2:8
10. D&C 93:28
11. D&C 93:28, 36,
12. *HC* 5:387-389
13. *HC* 6:50, 51
14. D&C 88:118
15. D&C 88:118
16. *HC* 1:282-284; also in *Lectures on Faith*
17. D&C 67:10; 88:66-68; 93:1
18. *HC* 3:380
19. D&C 90:15
20. D&C 93:53
21. D&C 88:79
22. D&C 88:80
23. D&C 93:53