

In the gospel, faith must come first

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We know that faith is the first principle of the gospel ([Articles of Faith 4](#)). However, in our world saturated with “evidence first,” the call to act in faith first seems difficult, if not outright outlandish.

When I was completing a graduate degree in biblical studies at Yale University, I gave an invited presentation to fellow students on Mormonism. I explained the origins of the Book of Mormon and shared highlights from its timeless message.

At the end of the presentation, one thoughtful student raised his hand with a question. Before I share the interchange that occurred, I’ll provide some context.

As students in an academic biblical studies program, we had spent months poring over ancient biblical manuscripts to identify the most authentic readings and the best translations. We had at our disposal thousands of ancient biblical manuscripts to guide these efforts. Without tangible, ancient biblical documents to guide our work, making decisions about what was accurate and valid in the Bible was nearly impossible. With that background, this was the exchange I had with a fellow student.

Yale student: Where is the original Book of Mormon today? Where are the gold plates?

Taylor: They are gone.

Yale student: What do you mean that the original plates are gone?

Taylor: When Joseph Smith completed the translation of the gold plates into the Book of Mormon, he returned the plates to the angel Moroni. So we no longer have access to them. All that remains is Joseph Smith’s translation of the plates.

Yale student: I mean no disrespect, but this sounds both incredible and convenient for the story of the Book of Mormon. (Remember that the word “incredible” means unbelievable.) We have no way of source checking Joseph Smith’s story because the plates he claims to have worked with are no longer available. How can anyone even believe Joseph Smith or the Book of Mormon?

Taylor: Great questions. I have several questions for you.

Yale student: Sure.

Taylor: Are you a Christian?

Yale student: Yes.

Taylor: Do you believe in the bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ?

Yale student: Of course. That is the fundamental foundation of Christianity! Without the belief in the bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ there is nothing for Christianity.

Taylor: OK, then show me Jesus’ body.

Yale student: (Pausing to think with dawning comprehension) Oh, I see.

Taylor: What is more implausible: That someone claims to have translated a book and now the original book is missing, or that a physically dead body is now alive again? Just as Christians throughout the centuries have *exercised faith* in the claim that Jesus Christ died and rose again, so too members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints exercise faith in that original claim as well as in the claim that God has brought forth additional scriptural witnesses, such as the Book of Mormon, for the life and mission of Jesus Christ.

That was a learning moment for all of us in that presentation.

The restored gospel requires actions of faith. God never says, “Wait until you have perfect knowledge in all things and *then* act.” Rather, and this is quite challenging, God calls to us, “Believe in me. Trust my word. And as you do, your knowledge will grow brighter and brighter until the perfect day.”

Perfect knowledge cannot be obtained unless we experience the crisis of having to act on faith. If we could gain perfect knowledge without faith, effort or sacrifice, we could never fully appreciate the knowledge or have a context for why that knowledge matters. Perfect knowledge is inseparable from the process of faith.

For example, some want final, indisputable evidence of the reality of the authenticity of the Book of Mormon before they are willing to believe its words and message. Yet, without faith our agency may be compromised.

As we act in faith, evidence accumulates relative to the truth of our beliefs and actions.

Finally, the word “evidence” is based on the Greek word for “video,” to see. Humans have long prized visual evidence for decision-making and action. And so we should. Sometimes, though, we have to make decisions and take actions with faith, without fully seeing everything. As we act in faith, our knowledge increases and our views enlarge. Our faith is confirmed as we draw closer to a perfect knowledge of things.

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