

Openness to the true, the beautiful,

EMBRACING TH

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Davis Bitton

As a child I learned the Articles of Faith and even then found particularly appealing the thirteenth. I probably didn't understand it very deeply; in fact, even now there are certain phrases in it whose meaning is not entirely clear to me. Some of its words trip rather easily over the tongue and probably deserve much more attention than we usually give them. What does it mean, for example, to be "honest?" And "benevolent"—isn't that a concept that should be worked into our character much more than it usually is? But I think I did understand that this article of faith meant a general attitude of openness, a receptivity to anything good and true and beautiful. Not until much later did I discover that Joseph Smith (or Orson Pratt) derived much of this phraseology from Paul's epistle to the Philippians. "Finally, brethren," Paul wrote, "whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things are honest, whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things are lovely, whatsoever things are of good report; if there be any virtue, and if there be any praise, think on these things." This was the same Paul who earlier in the same epistle prayed that the Philippian Saints would "approve things that are excellent." And elsewhere, as you know, he urged his readers to "prove all things"—meaning test all things—"and hold fast to that which is good." This openness to the good, the true, the beautiful, and all things excellent I take to be the spirit of our thirteenth article of faith.

Consistent with this basic attitude, both Joseph Smith and Brigham Young expressed the idea that Mormonism encompassed all truth. The *Journal of Discourses* contains at least a dozen such statements from Brigham Young. Here is an example:

"Mormonism," or, in other words, the Gospel of salvation, embraces the whole. It incorporates every true principle there is in heaven and on earth. If a person learns a truth, he learns so much of the Gospel of salvation. [7:239]

There are similar statements from George Q. Cannon, John Taylor, and other leaders, who obviously were not lacking in confidence.

Henry Eyring, our eminent Mormon scientist, tells the story of his departure for college. His father gave him the following words of advice: "Just remember this, son, the Lord doesn't expect you to believe anything that isn't so." Dr. Eyring has said that that advice served him very well over the years. It means, I take it, that anything untrue does not have to be accepted as part of the gospel. And perhaps implicit in the fatherly advice is the idea

that anything that is true can and should be accepted as part of the gospel.

When I was a young student at Brigham Young University, I had the good fortune to be taught by teachers whose Christian character I could admire and who seemed to have reconciled commitment to the gospel with professional competence and a receptivity to truth and beauty on all sides. One of these teachers, a somewhat gruff but beloved character, was Parley A. Christensen, usually known affectionately as P.A. It was P.A. who taught me Milton and Matthew Arnold. As a student I picked up some of his attitude toward life and education. Later he applied Matthew Arnold's terminology to the Latter-day Saints in an essay written for the *Millennial Star* entitled "We Seek After These Things":

As "the glory of God is intelligence" so men can be saved only as they use their intelligence in gaining knowledge. To a people inspired by conceptions like these, religion is infinitely more than a legacy to be preserved; it is a marvelous destiny to be realized. It is not a look backward, but a look forward—Godward.

Latter-day Saints have in their religion then food for a divine discontent, and, in general, they have partaken of it. . . . Some perhaps lack that resiliency of mind and ardency of quest which spell eternal progress. In a few there sometimes appears that old, creeping rigidity of thought and feeling, that eagerness for certainties and finalities which would close doors against freely inquiring minds. But the majority of "saints" at home and abroad remain, in spirit, seekers for "whatever is virtuous or lovely or of good report or praiseworthy." Mormonism to them, like Arnold's culture, is "not a having and a resting but a growing and a becoming." It too, would possess the best that is known and thought and felt in the world, and it too would have that best prevail in the minds and hearts of men everywhere.

The spirit of openness represented in the thirteenth Article of Faith was still alive and well in P.A. Christensen.

What, then, is the problem? For we do in fact have a problem in translating lofty statements of principle into our individual and group lives. It is much easier to proclaim a willingness to accept truth from all sources than it is to make this willingness manifest in specific instances. The problems are manifold and require thorough discussion. There are things we can learn from the confrontation of religions and philosophies in several different historical contexts. One of the most illuminating for our purposes was the rites controversy, which occurred when Jesuit missionaries in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries attempted to accommodate their

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message to the language and culture of the Chinese. How do you communicate with people of other cultures, or your own culture? How do you show a willingness to transpose your truths into their keys without losing the harmonies and overtones that make up the genius of the message you proclaim? Similarly, how do you take in something good and true from another setting when it doesn't fit readily into the whole, the *Gestalt*, of your own truth-system; the particular place in which that tile might be placed may already be filled. It is, after all, not really a question of sorting potatoes by throwing out the bad ones and keeping the good ones. We have to do with systems, cultures, whole complexes, the parts of which are interrelated. This is not the kind of challenge to be solved by uttering truisms.

One of B.H. Roberts' favorite statements was the following: "Unity in essentials; liberty in non-essentials; charity in all." I like that too. It is in essentials that we should agree. Since first coming across that statement in the writings of B.H. Roberts many years ago, I have learned more about it. As a student of the Reformation, I have learned that it was apparently written in the sixteenth century, when it tellingly expressed the point of view of various moderates and irenicists, the Erasmians, who were trying to avoid religious war and further schism by relegating some questions to the area of *adiaphora* (meaning things indifferent, or non-essentials) on which believing Christians could safely disagree without danger to their fundamental unity. Although these heroic peacemakers enjoyed some small successes, sooner or later they came to grief on the rocks of an uncomfortable discovery: people could not agree on what was essential and what was non-essential. In case you consider this as something remote from us, may I remind you that B.H. Roberts himself came to discover on more than one occasion that something he considered non-essential was not so considered by others. Yet how can such a distinction be avoided if we are to relate to other cultures, to new truths that appear on the horizon, indeed to our brothers and sisters within the fold? We should not consign one another to outer darkness over such questions as how many candle-power or kilowatts of glory are generated in the different levels of the terrestrial kingdom.

It is time to return to the Apostle Paul. In the same epistle to the Philippians containing the passage that inspired the thirteenth Article of Faith, we are reminded of another set of values in counterbalance, if not in tension, with those of openness to anything excellent and praiseworthy. For Paul, let us remember, did have con-

victions. He preached Christ boldly, without apology. He was not a sponge soaking up anything that happened to be in the environment. He was proclaiming the good news he had discovered and wanted the Saints at Philippi and elsewhere to do the same. And he wanted them to be unified: "Fulfil ye my joy, that ye be likeminded, having the same love, being of one accord, of one mind." Now it might be argued that these dual objectives—unity within the fold and a confident proclamation to those on the outside—are inconsistent with any real generosity, tolerance, or receptiveness to the perspectives and insights of those coming from other settings. I would be the first to recognize that narrowness and self-satisfaction might be among the perils of any believing people, former-day or latter-day. But I am comforted to discover that Paul, at least, could urge his followers to hold fast to the truth while at the same time testing "all things" and approving "things that are excellent." We must be able to attain some kind of salutary balance that will enable us to be neither obnoxious dogmatists, sure that we have all the answers, nor spineless blobs of protoplasm, giving in to anything, always agreeing with what anyone says. Paul is not a bad model.

This is what we need—models. Our young people, all of us, need more leaders who exemplify breadth of interest, competence, and the capacity to make all-important distinctions, to separate the wheat from the chaff. We need minds and spirits that do not claim to have arrived but instead are engaged in an eternal quest, a dynamic, never-ending process of growth and expanding horizons. We can be grateful for a founding prophet who proclaimed a willingness to accept all that God has revealed, all that he does now reveal, and all that he will yet reveal. We can be grateful for those Latter-day Saints (and there are some) who even now show by their lives what it means to be humane and benevolent and growing in a knowledge and appreciation. And perhaps it is not inappropriate to express special thanks for B.H. Roberts, that valiant soul who for the seventy years of his own allotted span exemplified courage and commitment and a willingness to reassess, to push back his own frontiers, and to incorporate into his understanding the true and beautiful wherever he found them.



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