

THE QUEST

FOR SPIRITUAL KNOWLEDGE



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Of the Seventy

We can establish for ourselves an unshakable intellectual and spiritual foundation that will transform our very lives.

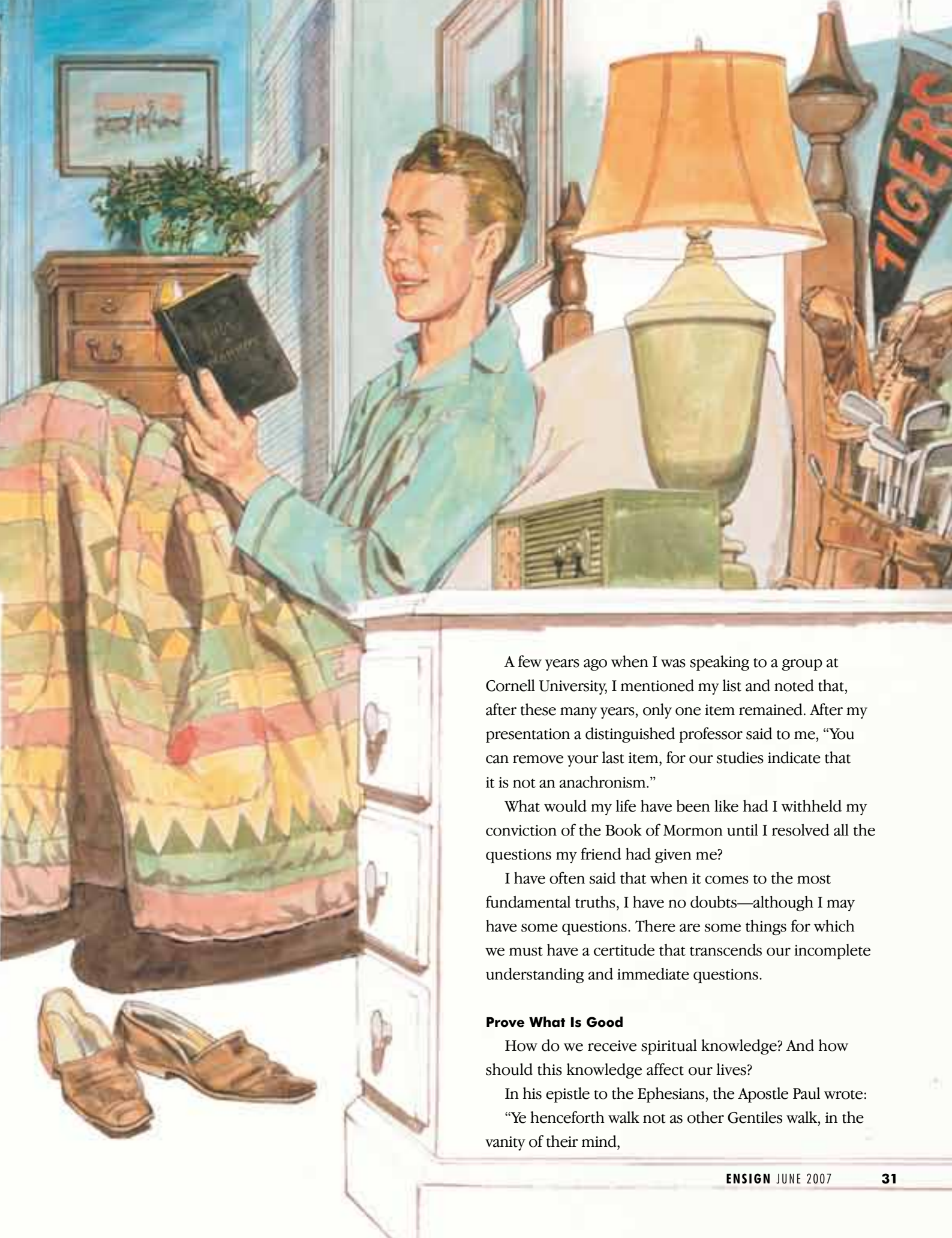
I remember returning home from a social activity one Friday evening when I was 16 years old, very much awake and not ready to go to bed. Lying on my nightstand was a copy of the Book of Mormon that my mother always placed there in the hope that I would read it. I had read from the Book of Mormon but had not *really* read it. Indeed, the only phrase I remembered was “I, Nephi, having been born of goodly parents.” That evening, thinking I had nothing better to do, I began to read.

The next morning at 11:00 a.m., my parents thought I was sleeping in, since I did not have to be at work until that afternoon. However, I was very much awake. I was reading the concluding words of Moroni. I then knelt by my bed and put to the test the promise he had made: “And when ye shall receive these things, I would exhort you that ye would ask God, the Eternal Father, in the name of Christ, if these things are not true; and if ye shall ask with a sincere heart, with

real intent, having faith in Christ, he will manifest the truth of it unto you, by the power of the Holy Ghost” (Moroni 10:4).

That Saturday morning I received a witness of the Holy Ghost more clearly and powerfully than any other knowledge I had ever received. It became the foundation from which my most important convictions arose.

At school the following Monday, I spoke with a good friend, not a member of the Church. He said he had a list of 50 anachronisms in the Book of Mormon that demonstrated the book was a nineteenth-century invention. An anachronism refers to something that is chronologically out of place, a bit like saying Julius Caesar drove his SUV into Rome. Well, I told my friend that he was too late, for I had received a witness of the truth of the Book of Mormon. But I said to him, “Give me your list, and I will keep it.” I did keep that list, and over the years, as more research was done by various academics, one item after another dropped off the list.



A few years ago when I was speaking to a group at Cornell University, I mentioned my list and noted that, after these many years, only one item remained. After my presentation a distinguished professor said to me, “You can remove your last item, for our studies indicate that it is not an anachronism.”

What would my life have been like had I withheld my conviction of the Book of Mormon until I resolved all the questions my friend had given me?

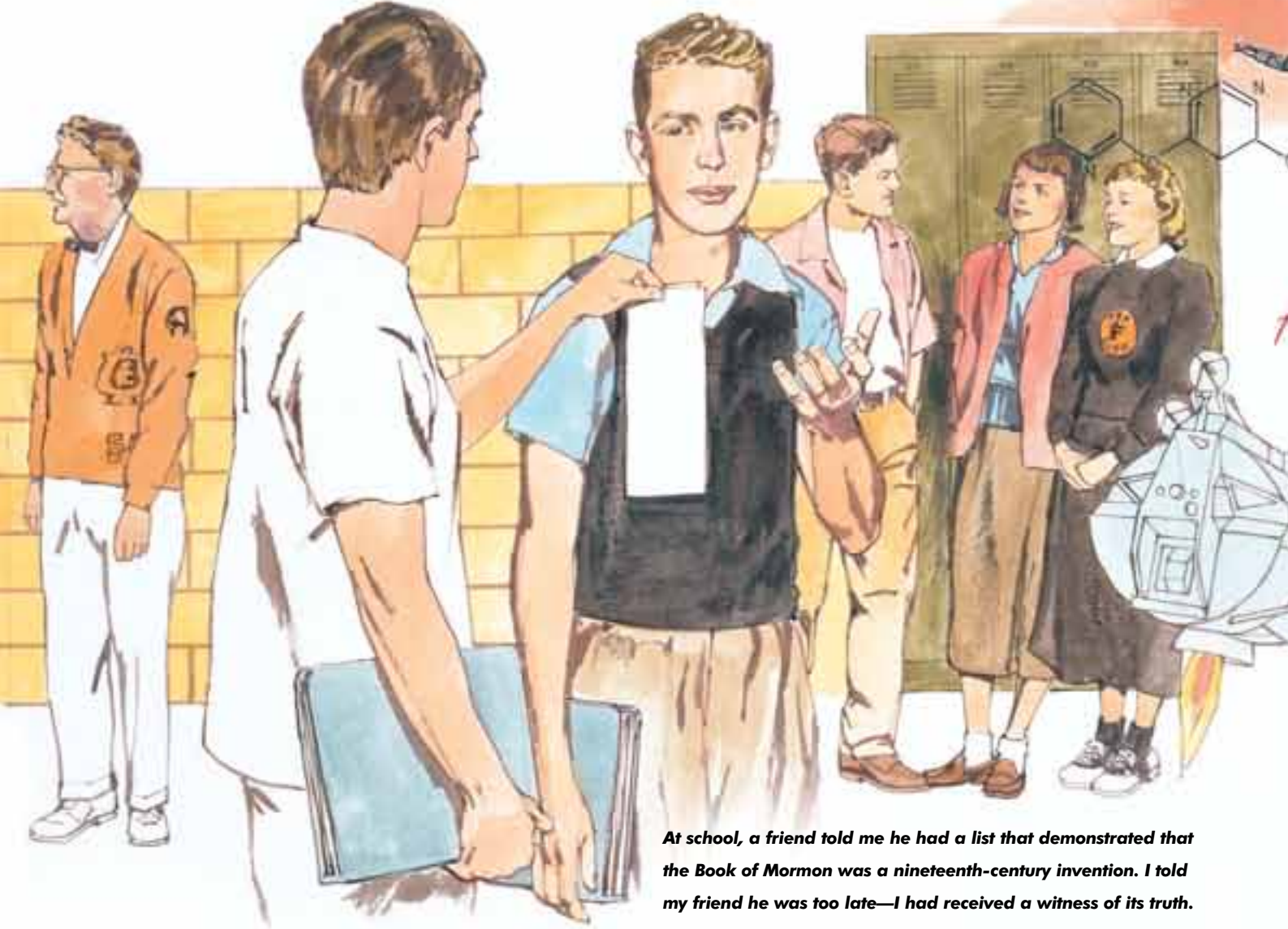
I have often said that when it comes to the most fundamental truths, I have no doubts—although I may have some questions. There are some things for which we must have a certitude that transcends our incomplete understanding and immediate questions.

Prove What Is Good

How do we receive spiritual knowledge? And how should this knowledge affect our lives?

In his epistle to the Ephesians, the Apostle Paul wrote:

“Ye henceforth walk not as other Gentiles walk, in the vanity of their mind,



At school, a friend told me he had a list that demonstrated that the Book of Mormon was a nineteenth-century invention. I told my friend he was too late—I had received a witness of its truth.

“Having the understanding darkened, being alienated from the life of God through the ignorance that is in them, because of the blindness of their heart. . . .

“Be renewed in the spirit of your mind” (Ephesians 4:17–18, 23).

He also wrote to the Romans:

“Be not conformed to this world: but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind, that ye may prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect, will of God” (Romans 12:2).

Paul distinguishes between a human nature distorted by disobedience and false beliefs and one subject to God and renewed by the Holy Spirit. Only when this renewal begins to take place do we even know what the right questions are and for what we should pray. As the Spirit works in us, we have a readiness of mind prepared to discern truth.

Alma states that as we submit our will to the Father through faith in Christ, our understanding “doth begin to be enlightened, and [our] mind doth begin to expand” (Alma 32:34).

From Information to Knowledge

Because of computers, the Internet, television, and so on, we are said to be in the midst of an information revolution. But though we are inundated with information, many are drowning in ignorance.

Paul spoke of those who are “ever learning, and never able to come to the knowledge of the truth” (2 Timothy 3:7).

The Lord has commanded that we serve Him with all our minds (see D&C 4:2) and that we seek learning by study and by faith (see D&C 88:118). He has promised that as we do so, we will be enlightened by the Spirit (see D&C 11:13). We “shall know the truth, and the truth shall make [us] free” (John 8:32). Free of what? Free of ignorance, sin, and the pangs of death. The Lord states further, “If thou shalt ask, thou shalt receive revelation upon revelation, knowledge upon knowledge, that thou mayest know the mysteries and peaceable things—that which bringeth joy, that which bringeth life eternal” (D&C 42:61).



The Character of Spiritual Knowledge

In every field of intelligence, almost every proposition can be subjected to the question *why*. Every parent understands this. But after a lengthy series of *whys*, you reach a point where the only answer is “Well, that’s just the way it is.” In effect, we are saying that it is just the way the world is put together. But we also know that at times even some “basic truths” are overthrown by additional evidence. Such are the revolutions in the history of science.

Is there nothing that cannot be finally established without awaiting further experience? Yes. In this life there are certain truths so fundamental that they can be established firmly in our minds and hearts and no further proof is required. To meet the tests of mortality, Heavenly Father has provided a certain witness of those crucial understandings within which we can fit the additional light and knowledge we may later receive. We may not know all the answers; indeed, we may not comprehend all the questions—but we will have established in our lives a certain framework of understanding that not only will provide an unshakable intellectual and spiritual foundation but will transform our very lives.

What is the witness that gives us knowledge that transcends the understanding of the senses? The witness of the Holy Ghost. The understanding received from the Holy Ghost has three key aspects: first, it concerns the most critical and transcendent truths; second, it is definitive in its certainty; and third, it changes behavior.

The Most Critical Truths

Three certitudes have been identified as necessary for us to endure the trials of life in faith: a knowledge that God exists; an understanding of His nature, attributes, and perfections; and a conviction that the course of life we are pursuing is in accordance with His will.¹

As a college student, I learned that the original premise of a syllogism, or logic train, is critical. Sophisticated lines of reasoning may seem compelling at each step in the logic, but if the original premises are faulty or incomplete, the whole line of reasoning will be flawed.

For instance, if we begin with the premise that life arose by chance and that its development is largely random, we will interpret physical, biological, and social information in

a certain way—a way that will distort our understanding. Such thoughts will have consequences for how our society operates and how we act individually. If, on the other hand, we begin with the premise that mortal life arose according to a plan and will develop according to eternal law, we will understand the bits and pieces of information in a different way. We will see the interconnectedness and wholeness of life. We will see patterns and purpose where others see disorder and chance.

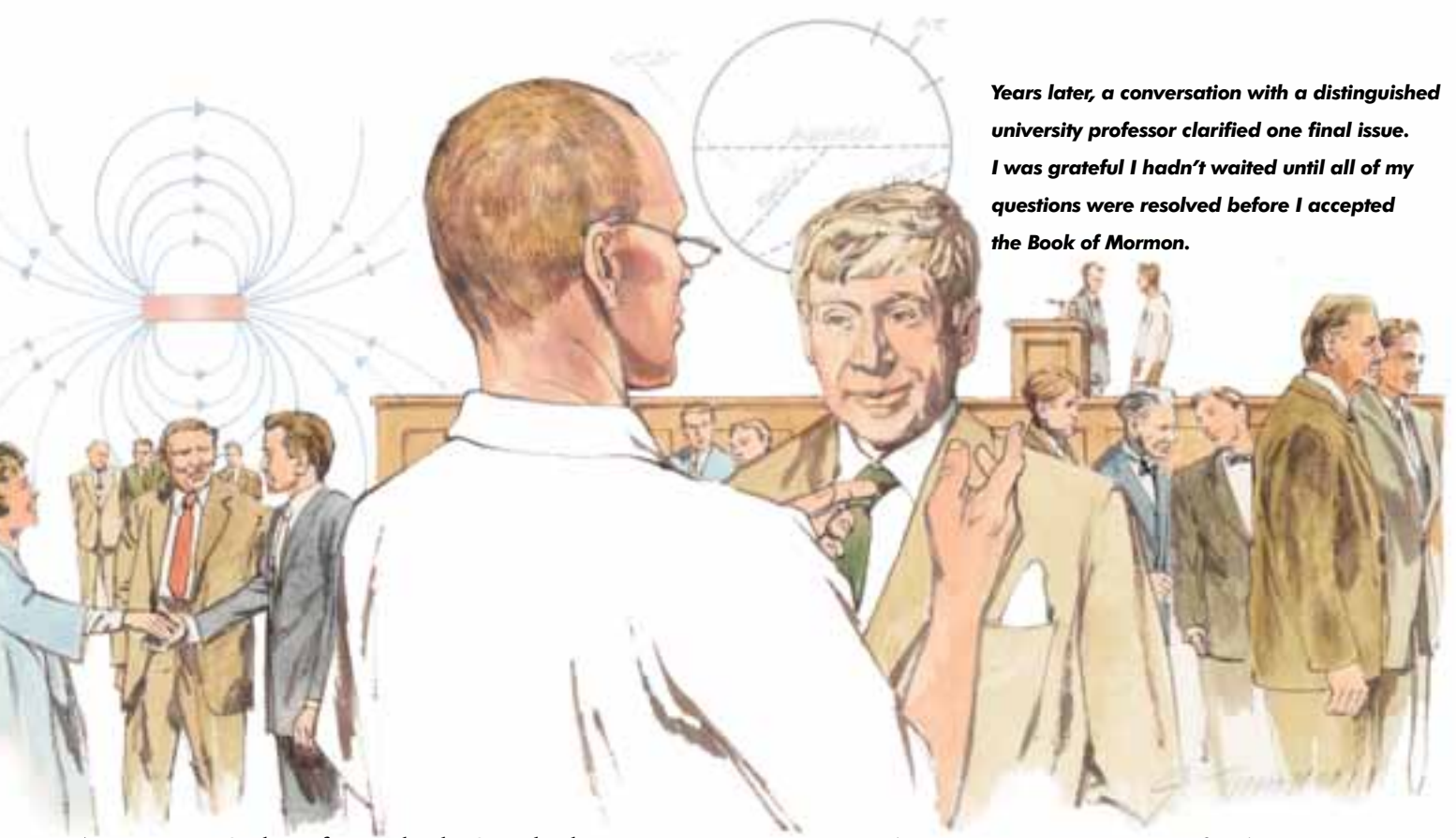
When people preach for established truth the transitory doctrines of men, they risk seeing, as Paul expressed it, only puzzling expressions in a mirror. But we are summoned by our Heavenly Father to see Him “face to face.” Then, our knowledge will be whole, like God’s knowledge of us (see 1 Corinthians 13:12).

For these reasons, the prophets have counseled us to plumb the depths of the scriptures and the words of the living prophets in faith and prayer. The scriptures constitute the true guide to the perplexed.

As already stated, spiritual knowledge is definitive. Our experiences may lead us to certain conclusions, but they cannot lead to the conviction that dispels doubt and motivates endurance—not the way that knowledge received through the Spirit does. As Paul wrote, “No man can say that Jesus is the Lord, but by the Holy Ghost” (1 Corinthians 12:3).

Can you see why it is a fearful thing to deny the witness of the Holy Ghost? Unlike other evidence, this witness ends

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Years later, a conversation with a distinguished university professor clarified one final issue. I was grateful I hadn't waited until all of my questions were resolved before I accepted the Book of Mormon.

argument. Such verification by the Spirit leads to a certainty unknown in any other area of thought.

Once a person has sought and received the witness of the Holy Ghost, he or she assumes a life-changing obligation. This understanding of the Spirit changes behavior. Paul wrote that he and the Saints had “the mind of Christ” (1 Corinthians 2:16). The people of King Benjamin declared that they had “no more disposition to do evil, but to do good continually” (Mosiah 5:2). Having received the witness of the Spirit, they were called by and responded to the Spirit. Knowing Christ through the Spirit, we love Him and keep His commandments—and we are further comforted and taught by the Spirit, until, as Mormon declared, “when he shall appear we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is; that we may have this hope; that we may be purified even as he is pure” (Moroni 7:48; see also 1 John 3:1–3).

Obtaining Spiritual Knowledge

How do we obtain such comprehensive, definitive, and transforming knowledge? Let us consider four requirements: (1) an urgent search for the truth, (2) a willingness to obey the truth we discover, (3) a disposition to bear witness to the truth in all places and at all times, and (4) a motivation to serve others in truth.

To meet these requirements, we must first be open to teaching and be diligent in our pursuit of the learning of the Spirit. Such a pursuit requires more than a casual interest in the answers we seek. The Lord has declared that those who hunger and thirst after righteousness shall be filled with the Holy Ghost (see Matthew 5:6; 3 Nephi 12:6).

The opposite of this hungering and thirsting is what the prophets call “hardness of heart,” an inability to see what really is, to hear what is truly being said, and to feel with an openness of heart. C. S. Lewis, in his final volume of the Narnia tales, recounts how, after the forces of the White Witch have been defeated by Aslan the lion (a representation of Christ) and his followers, the prisons and chains with which she had bound so many disappeared. Within a prison stable, a group of dwarfs had been chained in a circle. Suddenly the stable and their chains disappeared and they were free. But they refused to believe their own liberation and stayed within their closed circle, not feeling the fresh air, seeing the sun, or smelling the flowers. Even as Aslan growled in their ears to arouse them, they mistook the growl for a machine or a trick.² On another occasion Aslan observed, “Oh Adam’s sons, how cleverly you defend yourselves against all that might do you good!”³

As Nephi so plaintively wrote, “And now I, Nephi, . . . am left to mourn because of the unbelief, and the wickedness, and the ignorance, and the stiffneckedness of men; for they will not search knowledge, nor understand great knowledge, when it is given unto them in plainness, even as plain as word can be” (2 Nephi 32:7).

Many cannot hear the whisperings of the Spirit or find the truth, because their explaining of apparently miraculous events becomes explaining away. Some studies of Christ seek to explain His mission and influence by explaining away His divine Sonship, and others seek to explain the Prophet Joseph Smith by explaining away his prophetic calling. As Jacob so wisely observed:

“O that cunning plan of the evil one! O the vainness, and the frailties, and the foolishness of men! When they are learned they think they are wise, and they hearken not unto the counsel of God, for they set it aside, supposing they know of themselves, wherefore, their wisdom is foolishness and it profiteth them not. And they shall perish.

“But to be learned is good if they hearken unto the counsels of God” (2 Nephi 9:28–29).

To be taught wisdom by the Spirit, we must be prepared to invest everything we are in its pursuit, a study accelerated by much prayer and fasting.

Obedience

Alma speaks of awakening and arousing our faculties—that is, our heart and mind—so as to experiment upon the word (see Alma 32:27). This refers not to passive learning but to active doing. The Apostle John decried those who say they know Christ but fail to follow His counsel: “He that saith, I know him, and keepeth not his commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him” (1 John 2:4).

DETAIL FROM CHRIST WITH BOY BY CARL HEINRICH BLOCH



Sanctified by the things we know, we attain the certitude that banishes doubt and fear. And we shall know that nothing “shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

Such seeking and obedient following may also require patient waiting upon the Lord. As He declared to the Nephites: “When they shall have received this, which is expedient that they have first, to try their faith, and if it shall be so that they shall believe these things then shall the greater things be made manifest unto them. . . . I will try the faith of my people” (3 Nephi 26:9, 11).

This diligent seeking, learning, and following, accompanied by patient waiting, was well expressed in the words of John Henry Newman: “I do not ask to see the distant scene—one step enough for me.”⁴

Witnessing and Serving

When we discover truth in Christ, we must be willing “to stand as [a witness] of God at all times and in all things, and in all places” (Mosiah 18:9). Additionally, we must be willing to serve and to bear one another’s burdens. The integrity demonstrated in such a life of truth speaking and well doing opens ever wider the horizons of truth. The promise of the Lord is then fulfilled in our lives:

“Then shall thy confidence wax strong in the presence of God; and the doctrine of the priesthood shall distil upon thy soul as the dews from heaven.

“The Holy Ghost shall be thy constant companion” (D&C 121:45–46).

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NOTES

1. See *Lectures on Faith* (1985), 38.
2. *The Last Battle* (1956, 1984), 156–70.
3. *The Magician’s Nephew* (1955, 1983), 185.
4. “Lead, Kindly Light,” *Hymns*, no. 97.