

LIGHT REFLECTIONS

Justin Collings

June 2025

By the Spirit

It wasn't any easier the second time. On May 21, for the second time in less than two years, a band of grief-stricken siblings shed torrents of tears as they said goodbye to a beloved sister bound for a mission to Germany. Even Baby Miriam tenderly squeezed her big sister's neck with both her tiny arms.

Earlier that morning, we had our lone family scripture study with Elisabeth participating as a set-apart full-time missionary. Our *Come, Follow Me* reading that day was from Section 50 of the Doctrine and Covenants, and we stopped, fittingly, after verses 13 and 14:

Wherefore, I the Lord ask you this question—unto what were ye ordained? To preach my gospel by the Spirit, even the Comforter which was sent forth to teach the truth.

A few verses later, the Lord reiterates the charge to preach “the word of truth by the Comforter, in the Spirit of truth,” warning that “if it be by some other way it is not of God” (D&C 50:17-18).

This warning reminds me of BYU's “prime directive”¹—Brigham Young's charge to Karl G. Maeser not to teach even the alphabet or the multiplication tables without the Spirit of God.² This university is founded on the dual propositions that “the gospel encourages the pursuit of all truth”³ and that all truth is part of the gospel.⁴ We at BYU strive to teach “the word of truth” in all disciplines, and we are under divine and prophetic charge to do so by the Spirit of truth. “And if ye receive not the Spirit ye shall not teach” (D&C 42:14).

Years ago, I experienced a very literal fulfillment of this scripture. While driving to campus one morning I felt impressed to share a personal experience and a related spiritual lesson with my torts students. Alas, I didn't want to share that experience and that lesson that morning. For starters, I usually shared that message later in the semester to encourage students feeling stressed about impending finals. There wasn't any obvious or even plausible reason to share it in the middle of the semester. Even more critically, I just didn't feel very spiritual that morning, and I didn't want to share a very personal experience given the mood I was in. I was tired, grumpy, and out of sorts. As that fellow Hamlet put it, the uses of this world all seemed to me a touch weary, stale, flat, and unprofitable. I didn't *feel* like sharing a spiritual message, I didn't *want* to share a spiritual message, and I decided *not* to share a spiritual message. I would share it another time, later in the semester, when I was feeling better and the students needed it more.

Still, gnawing and resilient, the impression lingered. Hardhearted as usual, I did my best to suppress it. We had an opening prayer, after which I stepped forward in front of the lectern to begin that day's discussion—I forget whether it was about products liability or contributory negligence or something else. I moved to open my mouth and found that I could not speak. My mind was dark; my tongue was immobile. I could neither form ideas nor articulate them. I don't know how long I stood there in that stupor. Probably it was only a few moments. But the interval felt unusually long—timeless and surreal. It ended only when I humbled myself and delivered the spiritual message I hadn't felt like giving.

A student in my class later flagged me down in the parking lot and told me that, whoever else might have needed that message that day, she felt that it was a message just for her. It was just what she needed.

I was grateful for that heavenly reassurance, but even more grateful for the stark heavenly reminder: “And if ye receive not the Spirit ye shall not teach” (D&C 42:14). I had repulsed the Spirit, and I could not teach. The scriptural warning, I submit, is a prophecy as well as an imperative. In the end, teaching on this campus will not happen—and must not happen—except it be “by the Spirit of truth” (D&C 50:17). For “if it be some other way it is not of God” (D&C 50:20).

¹ John S. Tanner, “A House of Dreams” in John S. Tanner (ed), *Envisioning BYU—Volume 1: Foundations and Dreams* (2022) 246.

² “Brigham Young’s 1876 Charge to Karl G. Maeser” in *ibid* 13-14.

³ “The Mission of Brigham Young University” in *ibid* 65.

⁴ “We believe in all good. If you can find a truth, in heaven, earth or hell, it belongs to our doctrine. We believe

When President Young delivered to Brother Maeser our prime directive to teach all subjects by the Spirit of God, he added a three-word addendum that we don’t quote as often: “That is all,” he said.⁵

That simple *all* contains worlds.

May we renew our commitment to our founding charge—our “commitment to seek and be led by the Holy Ghost in all aspects of our university assignments.”⁶

May we receive the Holy Ghost. May we learn and teach in the light that “groweth brighter and brighter until the perfect day” (D&C 50:24).

it; it is ours; we claim it.” Brigham Young, *Journal of Discourses* 13:335.

⁵ “Brigham Young’s 1876 Charge to Karl G. Maeser” in John S. Tanner (ed), *Envisioning BYU—Volume 1: Foundations and Dreams* (2022) 14.

⁶ C. Shane Reese, “On the Uniqueness of BYU” in John S. Tanner (ed), *Envisioning BYU—Volume 2: Learning and Light* (2023) 245.