The study of faith

As a recent Associated Press story noted, nearly every venerable and great institution of higher learning once embraced religious training as an essential part of a well-rounded education. For instance, the Congregationalists who founded Harvard in 1636 had, as one of their objectives, that “Everyone shall consider the main end of his life and studies to know God and Jesus Christ, which is eternal life.”

An educated person had to understand his or her purpose on earth through revealed truths, as well as obtain an understanding of more secular subjects. In fact, the two were not seen as separate at all.

Today, higher education, generally speaking (and with the notable exceptions of many fine religious colleges), takes a much different view of religion and learning. At many schools, religion is marginalized. While religious studies are offered, true belief and devotion are considered anti-academic.

And yet it remains an unalterable truth that the “knowledge of divine and spiritual things is absolutely essential for one’s salvation” (1979 LDS edition King James Bible, Dictionary, p. 721). It is also true that all truth comes from God.

Brigham Young once observed: “All true wisdom that mankind have they have received from God, whether they know it or not. There is no ingenious mind that has ever invented anything beneficial to the human family but what he obtained it from that One Source. There is only one source from whence men obtain wisdom, and that is God, the fountain of all wisdom; and though men may claim to make their discoveries by their own wisdom, by meditation and reflection, they are indebted to our Father in Heaven for all” (Journal of Discourses, 13:148).

Viewed from the perspective of the restored gospel, education could not possibly be complete without religious study and faith.

This is the time of year in some parts of the world in which students begin final preparations for returning to school, whether for compulsory elementary education or to institutions of higher learning. It should also be a time for all Latter-day Saints to renew themselves to the need for gospel study, which remains a constant throughout life.

College students should not neglect to make daily scripture study and prayer, together with more formal learning at Church institutes of religion, a part of their academic plan. Church members who are not in a formal school setting should likewise make earnest gospel study a subject of intense study. This should involve more than simply skimming or quickly reading a few scriptures.

President Joseph F. Smith said: “(The) knowledge of truth, combined with proper regard for it, and its faithful observance, constitutes true education. The mere stuffing of the mind with a knowledge of facts is not education” (Gospel Doctrine, Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1939, p. 269).

In fact, gospel study requires a great deal of effort as the student struggles to open portals of communication through the gift of the Holy Ghost.

President Harold B. Lee said, “Let no one think that ‘learning by faith’ contemplates an easy or lazy way to gain knowledge and ripen it into wisdom.

“From heavenly instructions and added to which are the experiences of almost anyone who has sought diligently for heavenly guidance, one may readily understand that learning by faith requires the bending of the whole soul through worthy living to become attuned to the Holy Spirit of the Lord, the calling up from the depths of one’s own mental searching, and the linking of our own efforts to receive the true witness of the Spirit” (Harold B. Lee, “The Iron Rod,” Ensign, June 1971).

We live in an age when the Lord has poured out knowledge upon the earth through His prophets. It is a time in which spiritual study can be more richly rewarding than at any time in the earth’s history.

To avoid being among those the Apostle Paul described as “Ever learning, and never able to come to the knowledge of the truth” (2 Timothy 3:7), it is important to remember the age-old wisdom that a person with a truly well-rounded education must be a person devoted to the study of faith.