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Sustaining the Brethren

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SUSTAINING THE BRETHREN

Duane Boyce

Abstract: Believing Latter-day Saints hold different views about what it means to sustain the presiding Brethren of the Church. In this article, I outline some considerations that might be kept in mind as members of the Church evaluate their views on this vital topic and the Lord's admonition to sustain the Brethren by their faith, prayers, and actions.

As part of their sacred covenants, Latter-day Saints embrace the principle of sustaining those called as prophets, seers, and revelators. They also accept the authority of the Brethren to lead the Church and to declare its position on various matters. Of course, the nature of mortal experience guarantees that the wisdom of their decisions will not always be obvious to everyone. How should members respond in situations where they do not understand or agree with the actions of the presiding councils of the Church?

President Henry B. Eyring taught the following:

By our sustaining vote, we make solemn promises. We promise to pray for the Lord's servants and that He will lead and strengthen them (see D&C 93:51). We pledge that we will look for and expect to feel inspiration from God in their counsel and whenever they act in their calling (see D&C 1:38).

That promise will need to be renewed in our hearts frequently. Your Sunday School teacher will try to teach by the Spirit, but just as you might do, your teacher may make mistakes in front of the class. You, however, can decide to listen and watch for the moments when you can feel inspiration come. In time you will notice fewer mistakes and more frequent evidence that God is sustaining that teacher.

As we raise a hand to sustain a person, we commit to work for whatever purpose of the Lord that person is called to accomplish.¹

If we accept President Eyring's counsel to "look for and expect to feel inspiration from God in their counsel and whenever they act in their calling" with respect to a Sunday School teacher, we would naturally apply this counsel with no less seriousness in our attitudes toward the callings of those who preside in the highest councils of the Church. Though the statements of individual prophets and apostles are not inerrant, it is inconsistent with such counsel "to look for and expect" mistakes in the decisions made by the highest councils, even if we commend ourselves for great patience in our expectation that they or their successors will be forced to correct their supposed errors in time. It is, of course, even less consistent with the principle of sustaining the Brethren if we complain publicly about the decision or practice in question and actively lobby for change. That said, there are members of the Church who may not find President Eyring's stance satisfying. In this article, I outline some considerations that might be kept in mind as members of the Church consider their views on this vital topic.

"If God Lived on Earth People Would Break His Windows"

There is a vast difference that exists between our perspectives and those of God (Isaiah 55:8–9; 1 Corinthians 1:25–29). God perceives not only every thought and intent of every person's heart but also foresees the eternal consequences of every person's choices — and not only the consequences of such choices for themselves but also for all others who are affected by them (2 Nephi 9:20).² He is also a being of perfect holiness (Moses 6:57; 7:35). He has no moral flaws, no selfish motivations (3 Ne. 12:48; 1 John 1:5). He wants only what is right and pure (Alma 7:20), and His love for us is perfect and unending (1 John 4:8). Not incidentally, His divine purpose is to help each of us become as He is (Moses 1:39).

It is hard to imagine how mortals could be less like God in these respects (Moses 1:10). Our natural condition limits our perspectives, subjects us to a constant battle with our selfish impulses, taints our love,

1 Henry B. Eyring, "Called by God and Sustained by the People," *Ensign*, June 2012, 4.

2 Neal A. Maxwell, *All These Things Shall Give Thee Experience* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1979), 6–27.

and bends our purposes toward destructive ends (Mosiah 3:19). We are perfect at nothing (Matthew 19:17).

Because of these vast differences, it seems reasonable to *expect* God to behave and think differently about various matters than we do, and His ways will routinely make little sense to us. As President Spencer W. Kimball reported:

I have learned that where there is a prayerful heart, a hungering after righteousness, a forsaking of sins, and obedience to the commandments of God, the Lord pours out more and more light until there is finally power to pierce the heavenly veil and to know more than man knows.³

“To know more than man knows.” Precisely. We know immeasurably less than we imagine, and for one who has pierced the veil nothing could be more evident.

Examples from Scripture

Many of the teachings of the Church regarding God are difficult for nonmembers to understand and appreciate. For example, some who believe in God but who do not accept Joseph Smith as a prophet find it laughable to think that God has a physical body, that He would appear in modern times, and that He would require His prophet to use stone interpreters to translate gold plates. Some who do not embrace Christianity find absurdity in the idea of a God with a literal “Son” and the belief that His greatest act of love would be to require the suffering and death of that Son to pay the debt of human sin. Some would find the affirmations of believers that Jesus healed the sick, raised the dead, fed five thousand, walked on water, and rose from the grave to be childish and naïve. Moreover, some might declare that Jesus was racist in His refusal to allow the Apostles to minister to the Gentiles or Samaritans (Matthew 10:4–5), insensitive in His remarks to the Canaanite woman (Matthew 15:22–28), and sexist in calling only men as Apostles (Matthew 10:2–4). Yet that is what He did.

What the Test of a Prophet Is Not

All this helps us see why we cannot suppose that the test of authenticity for a prophetic teaching is whether or not it “makes sense.” Scripture and the history of the Church are replete with lessons teaching that we

3 Spencer W. Kimball, “Give the Lord Your Loyalty,” *Ensign*, March 1980, 4.

should *expect* to hear things from prophets that seem utter foolishness (1 Corinthians 1:18–31).⁴ Such things naturally invite both ridicule and offense from those who reject the things of God (1 Corinthians 2:4–16). None of this should surprise us.

Nor should it be a surprise when prophetic announcements make the Saints' lives harder. When Moses approached Pharaoh, the short-term result was a steep decline in the quality of life for the children of Israel; Pharaoh punished them by making their hard labors even more demanding (Exodus 5:1–23). Similarly, life became more difficult for Joseph Smith once he began to share his First Vision (Joseph Smith–History 1:22–24), and for all the Saints thereafter.

A Yiddish proverb comments on the stubborn recalcitrance of humankind: “If God lived on earth people would break His windows.” Because it is our *general tendency* to reject God's counsels and doings, our decision to accept or reject them ought not to be determined by a majority vote. Prophetic pronouncements are no more likely to be crowd-pleasers in the twenty-first century than they were in the first.

The Things of God Are Known Only Through the Spirit of God

Paul taught that “the things of God knoweth no man, but the Spirit of God” and therefore that such matters can only be “spiritually discerned” (1 Corinthians 2:11, 14). If Paul is right, we must expect that the convincing testimony that the Brethren are being led by God will come only by personal revelation. President Harold B. Lee said it this way: “The measure of your true conversion ... is whether or not you are so living that you see the power of God resting upon the leaders of this Church and that testimony goes down into your heart like fire.”⁵ This suggests that if we *don't* see the power of God resting upon the Brethren, no amount of argument can serve as a substitute. Of course, this does not mean that reason is irrelevant to such conversion, but only that it is insufficient of its own accord. It is futile to look *there* for convincing power.

4 What truths we do possess in the gospel hardly make us omniscient, nor do they endow us with the moral perfection needed to “see clearly” (Matthew 7:5) from an eternal perspective. King Benjamin's declaration that “man doth not comprehend all the things which the Lord can comprehend” (Mosiah 4:9) was surely an understatement; those who suppose “they know of themselves” (2 Nephi 9:28) are deluded.

5 Harold B. Lee, “Be Loyal to the Royal Within You,” *BYU Speeches*, September 11, 1973, <http://speeches.byu.edu/?act=viewitem&id=400> (accessed 7 January 2015).

The Lord Is the One Who Calls His Leaders

To be able to adequately sustain the Brethren, we must have a witness that the Lord called them. President George Q. Cannon said this of Lorenzo Snow:

As I have said, God has chosen him to stand where he does — not you or me; and He knows every secret thought of men's hearts. His all-piercing eye has penetrated the innermost recesses of his heart, and He has seen all there is about him, inside and out. He knows him thoroughly, because He created him. He knew his past history ... And knowing this He has chosen him.⁶

President Gordon B. Hinckley, in speaking of the calling of Elders Russell M. Nelson and Dallin H. Oaks to the Twelve, said: "I want to give you my testimony that they were chosen and called by the spirit of prophecy and revelation." He added:

Some will ask, why has the Church taken such competent men out of public service in their professions when they are doing so much good where they now are? I do not know. The Church has not done it. Rather, the Lord has made clear that these are they who should serve as His witnesses.⁷

When Elder Robert D. Hales was named to the Twelve, President Hinckley said: "I give you my testimony, my brethren, that the impression to call Brother Hales to this high and sacred office came by the Holy Spirit, by the spirit of prophecy and revelation. Brother Hales did not suggest his own name. His name was suggested by the Spirit."⁸

Having called those who serve Him, it is not surprising that the Lord would say of them that "he that receiveth whomsoever I send receiveth me; and he that receiveth me receiveth him that sent me" (John 13:20).

The Brethren Possess a Special Witness

In response to the criticisms Aaron and Miriam levied against Moses, the Lord rehearsed His intimate relationship with that great prophet and then asked: "Wherefore then were ye not afraid to speak against my

6 *Gospel Truth: Discourses and Writings of President George Q. Cannon*, ed. Jerreld L. Newquist, 2 vols. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1974), 1:296.

7 Gordon B. Hinckley, "Special Witnesses for Christ," *Ensign*, May 1984, 49.

8 Gordon B. Hinckley, "God Is at the Helm," *Ensign*, May 1994, 54.

servant Moses?” (Numbers 12:8). God backs up His prophets because they speak from a personal knowledge of Him. President Ezra Taft Benson once shared his testimony in these words:

And so on the third day following His burial, He came forth from the tomb alive and showed Himself to many. There were witnesses then who saw Him. There have been many in this dispensation who have seen Him. As one of those special witnesses ... I testify to you that He lives. He lives with a resurrected body.⁹

One member of the Twelve remarked: “I know that God lives; I know that the Lord lives. And more than that, I know the Lord.”¹⁰ Another said: “I bear solemn witness that He lives. I know He lives because I know Him.”¹¹ And still another said: “The spiritual gifts described in the Book of Mormon are present in the church today — promptings, impressions, revelations, dreams, visions, visitations, miracles. You can be sure that the Lord can, and at times does, manifest Himself with power and great glory.”¹² President Harold B. Lee maintained that in God’s relationship to the leaders of the Church, “He is closer to us than you have any idea.”¹³

Although similar declarations are not hard to find, in general the Brethren are careful in speaking of such matters in detail. Elder Boyd K. Packer, for example, said that “we do not talk of those sacred interviews that qualify the servants of the Lord to bear a special witness of Him, for we have been commanded not to do so. But we are free, indeed, we are obliged, to bear that special witness.”¹⁴ And Elder Marion G. Romney said:

9 Ezra Taft Benson, “Jesus Christ: Our Savior, Our God,” *Ensign*, April 1991, 4; citing a talk given in San Diego, California, on 21 December 1979.

10 Quoted by Boyd K. Packer in “The Spirit Beareth Record,” general conference, April 1971, <https://www.lds.org/general-conference/1971/04/the-spirit-beareth-record?lang=eng> (accessed 9 January 2015).

11 Richard G. Scott, “Sisters in Councils,” Worldwide Leadership Training Meeting, February 2011, <http://lds.org/broadcasts/article/print/worldwide-leadership-training/2011/02/sisters-in-councils/?lang=eng> (accessed 9 January 2015).

12 Boyd K. Packer, “The Book of Mormon: Another Testament of Jesus Christ — Plain and Precious Things,” *Ensign*, May 2005, 8.

13 Harold B. Lee, “Admonitions for the Priesthood of God,” *Ensign*, January 1973, 108.

14 Boyd K. Packer, “A Tribute to the Rank and File of the Church,” *Ensign*, May 1980, 65.

I don't know just how to answer people when they ask the question, "Have you seen the Lord?" I think that the witness that I have and the witness that each [of the apostles] has, and the details of how it came, are too sacred to tell. I have never told anybody some of the experiences I have had, not even my wife. I know that God lives. I not only know that He lives, but I know Him.¹⁵

In this connection it is interesting to note the experience of President George Albert Smith. The venerable patriarch Zebedee Coltrin told him at a young age that he would "become a mighty prophet in the midst of the sons of Zion," that "the angels of the Lord" would administer to him, that he would be "wrapped in the visions of the heavens," and that he would become "a mighty man of faith before the Lord, even like unto the brother of Jared"¹⁶ — and yet one searches in vain for any mention of experiences even approaching this sort in the sermons of George Albert Smith himself. A similar example is Jacob, brother of Nephi. Although Nephi tells us that Jacob saw the Lord (2 Nephi 11:3), when Jacob later listed his spiritual credentials in explaining why he could not be shaken by Sherem, he avoided explicit mention of his experience (Jacob 7:5).

The Lord has instructed that sacred things are not to be spoken "before the world" (D&C 84:73). Likewise, the Book of Mormon declares: "It is given unto many to know the mysteries of God; nevertheless they are laid under a strict command that they shall not impart only according to the portion of his word which he doth grant unto the children of men, according to the heed and diligence which they give unto him" (Alma 12:9). Nevertheless, the presiding Brethren have made it clear that they possess a special witness of the Lord.¹⁷

15 F. Burton Howard, *Marion G. Romney: His Life and Faith* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1988), 222.

16 Robert and Susan McIntosh, eds., *The Teachings of George Albert Smith* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1996), xix.

17 This is not to say that such experience is universal among the apostles. However, Elder Bruce R. McConkie held the view that modern apostles "are expected, like their counterparts of old, to see and hear and touch and converse with the Heavenly Person, as did those of old." He said that members of the Twelve have the obligation "to see the face of Him whose witnesses they are" and that "the Lord's apostolic witnesses are entitled and expected to see his face, and that each one individually is obligated to 'call upon him in faith in mighty prayer' until he prevails." See Bruce R. McConkie, *The Promised Messiah* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1978), 592–94.

The Brethren Receive Revelation from the Lord

The presiding Brethren receive revelation from the Lord continually. For instance, Elder Spencer W. Kimball, speaking of President David O. McKay, said:

He is a prophet. He does not just occupy a prophet's chair; he does not just have a title of prophet, he is a real prophet and he is responsible for ... more revelations in his fifteen years of leadership than are in all the Doctrine and Covenants. ... I could take time to tell you of these revelations — temples that have been appointed, people who have been called, apostles who have been chosen, great new movements that have been established, great new eras, great new challenges. ... They came by revelation. I want you to know he is a prophet. Don't you question it. I do not know who will be his successor, but whoever it is will be a great prophet, and you need not ever worry.¹⁸

Speaking of the spirit of revelation in the Church, President James E. Faust said: "I can testify that the process of continuous revelation comes to the Church very frequently. It comes daily."¹⁹ And Elder Dallin H. Oaks remarked: "Visions do happen. Voices are heard from beyond the veil. I know this." He explained that recipients of such experiences "rarely speak of them publicly because we are instructed not to do so." He further explained that most revelation is not so dramatic but comes through the still, small voice, and added: "I testify to the reality of that kind of revelation, which I have come to know as a familiar, even daily, experience to guide me in the work of the Lord."²⁰

President Gordon B. Hinckley reported:

There has been in the life of every [prophet and apostle I have known] an overpowering manifestation of the inspiration of God. Those who have been Presidents have been prophets

18 *The Teachings of Spencer W. Kimball*, ed. Edward L. Kimball (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1982), 447.

19 James E. Faust, "Come Out of the Darkness into the Light," CES Fireside for Young Adults (8 September 2002), The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints Media Library, <https://www.lds.org/media-library/video/2002-09-05-come-out-of-the-darkness-into-the-light?lang=eng> (accessed 9 January 2015).

20 Dallin H. Oaks, "Teaching and Learning by the Spirit," *Ensign*, March 1997, 14.

in a very real way. I have intimately witnessed the spirit of revelation upon them. ... Each Thursday, when we are at home, the First Presidency and the Twelve meet in the temple, in those sacred hallowed precincts, and we pray together and discuss certain matters together, and the spirit of revelation comes upon those present. I know. I have seen it.²¹

President Spencer W. Kimball remarked, regarding his own experience as the prophet:

I say, in the deepest humility, but also by the power and force of a burning testimony in my soul, that from the prophet of the Restoration to the prophet of our own year, the communication line is unbroken, the authority is continuous, and light, brilliant and penetrating, continues to shine. The sound of the voice of the Lord is a continuous melody and a thunderous appeal ... the Lord definitely calls prophets today and reveals His secrets unto them as He did yesterday, He does today, and will do tomorrow: that is the way it is.²²

Similarly, President Harold B. Lee said, speaking as President of the Church: "I bear you my solemn witness that it is true, that the Lord is in His heavens. ... You ask when the Lord gave the last revelation to this church. The Lord is giving revelations day by day, and you will witness and look back on this period and see some of the mighty revelations the Lord has given in your day and time."²³

Boyd K. Packer summarizes: "Revelation continues with us today. The promptings of the Spirit, the dreams, and the visions and the visitations, and the ministering of angels all are with us now. And the still small voice of the Holy Ghost 'is a lamp unto [our] feet, and a light unto [our] path'" (Psalms 119:105).²⁴

21 Gordon B. Hinckley, *The Teachings of Gordon B. Hinckley* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1997), 71, 555.

22 Spencer W. Kimball, "Revelation: The Word of the Lord to His Prophets," April 1977, <https://www.lds.org/general-conference/1977/04/revelation-the-word-of-the-lord-to-his-prophets?lang=eng> (accessed 2 January 2015).

23 Lee, "Admonitions for the Priesthood of God," 108.

24 Boyd K. Packer, "Revelation in a Changing World," *Ensign*, November 1989, 16. In this connection Elder Russell M. Nelson shares this interesting experience: "On the morning of the [Washington D.C.] temple dedication, President [Hugh B. Brown] greeted me with the news that he had been visited during the night by President Harold B. Lee (who had died the year before). Elder Brown described it

The First Presidency Is the Highest Authority in the Church

The Standard Works constitute the doctrinal foundation of the Church.²⁵ Others in general leadership, of course, make declarations routinely. That is the nature of their ministry, and such declarations come in various ways.

The statements and guidance carrying the highest authority are those issued by the First Presidency, including those in which they are joined by the Twelve. Joseph Smith said:

The Presidents or Presidency are over the Church; and revelations of the mind and will of God to the Church, are to come through the Presidency. This is the order of heaven, and the power and privilege of this Priesthood.²⁶

In the same spirit, President Joseph Fielding Smith taught:

An individual may fall by the wayside, or have views, or give counsel which falls short of what the Lord intends. But the

as a glorious visit that meant much to him, for President Lee had been aware of some of the difficulties encountered by President Brown in the decisions that led to the construction of the temple in Washington, D.C. Later that morning, as we took President Brown to breakfast, Sister Harold B. (Freda Joan) Lee approached us. As we exchanged greetings, President Brown said to her, 'I had a glorious visit with Harold last night. He is just fine. It was so good to visit with him.'" Russell M. Nelson, *The Gateway We Call Death* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1995), 100–101.

25 In addition, the teachings of Joseph Smith are of central importance. Elder Bruce R. McConkie explained: "The answers to nearly all important doctrinal questions are found in the standard works or in the sermons and writings of the Prophet Joseph Smith. If they are not found in these sources, they probably are not essential to salvation." Mark L. McConkie, ed., *Doctrines of the Restoration* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1989), 229. He also said: "The Lord said to Joseph Smith: 'This generation shall have my word through you' (D&C 5:10). What this means is that if we are going to receive the knowledge of God, the knowledge of truth, the knowledge of salvation, and know the things that we must do to work out our salvation with fear and trembling before the Lord, this must come in and through Joseph Smith and in no other way. He is the agent, the representative, the instrumentality that the Lord has appointed to give the truth about Himself and his laws to all men in all the world in this age." *Ibid.*, 19.

26 *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, comp. Joseph Fielding Smith (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1837), 111. In another place, the Prophet taught: "Look to the Presidency and receive instruction." *Ibid.*, 161. Cf. *The Words of Joseph Smith*, eds. Andrew F. Ehat and Lyndon W. Cook (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1980), 11 (Before 8 August 1839).

voice of the First Presidency and the united voice of those others who hold with them the keys of the kingdom shall always guide the Saints and the world in those paths where the Lord wants them to be.²⁷

It is customary to speak of “following the prophet,” but this is verbal shorthand. To be precise, the highest authority is the full First Presidency. In the Doctrine and Covenants we are told explicitly that “every decision made by [any of the presiding quorums, including the First Presidency] must be by the unanimous voice of the same; that is, every member ... must be agreed to its decisions. ... Unless this is the case, their decisions are not entitled to the same blessings which the decisions of a quorum of three presidents were anciently” (D&C 107:27, 29).

This passage was emphasized by Elder Boyd K. Packer, specifically in contrasting a statement made by the prophet, acting alone, with statements by the full First Presidency on the same subject.²⁸ The same principle applies in President Dieter F. Uchtdorf’s observation that “there have been times when members or leaders in the Church have simply made mistakes. There may have been things said or done that were not in harmony with our values, principles, or doctrine.”²⁹ On one occasion Elder Packer explained in some detail how the First Presidency and Twelve

27 Joseph Fielding Smith, “Eternal Keys and the Right to Preside,” *Ensign*, July 1972, 88.

28 The subject was evolution and Elder Packer was speaking of a statement in a personal letter by President David O. McKay to a member of the Church. In Elder Packer’s view, President McKay’s statement was “in conflict with the two official declarations, each signed by all members of the First Presidency.” He then referred to the passage in D&C 107. See Boyd K. Packer, “The Law and the Light,” in *Jacob through Words of Mormon: to Learn with Joy: papers from the Fourth Annual Book of Mormon Symposium*, eds. Monte S. Nyman and Charles D. Tate (Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University; Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1990), <http://rsc.byu.edu/archived/book-mormon-jacob-through-words-mormon-learn-joy/law-and-light> (accessed 3 January 2015), 22–23.

29 Dieter F. Uchtdorf, “Come, Join with Us,” The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, <https://www.lds.org/general-conference/2013/10/come-join-with-us?lang=eng>. President Uchtdorf’s observation regarding “members or leaders” is broad enough that it could apply to practically anyone, from an elders quorum president or bishop to the president of the Church. Certainly it applies to the Mountain Meadows Massacre, which was perpetrated by members of the Church, including a stake president. See Ronald W. Walker, Richard E. Turley Jr, and Glen M. Leonard, *Massacre at Mountain Meadows* (New York: Oxford, 2008). It also applies to the explanations of Brigham Young and others about the former restrictions on the priesthood, since these explanations have now been explicitly

work together and said: “That is how we work — in council assembled. ... I have a deep, even a sacred, regard for councils; inspiration is evident in them. If ever another course has been followed, trouble has followed as surely as night follows day.”³⁰ He also said in General Conference that, despite individual weaknesses, they are counterbalanced by “councils and counselors and quorums.”³¹

Speaking of his own experience in the First Presidency, President Gordon B. Hinckley said: “Even the President of the Church, who is Prophet, Seer, and Revelator, and whose right and responsibility it is to make judgments and direct the course of the Church, invariably consults with his counselors to determine their feelings. If there is a lack of unity, there follows an absence of action.”³² And in emphasizing that it is not

disavowed by the Church. See “Race and the Priesthood,” <https://www.lds.org/topics/race-and-the-priesthood?lang=eng> (accessed 15 March 2015).

30 Boyd K. Packer, “I Say Unto You, Be One,” *BYU Devotional* (12 February 1991), reproduced in *BYU Devotional and Fireside Speeches, 1990–1991* (Provo, Utah: University Publications, 1991), 83–84. A particularly tragic example of Elder Packer’s observation is the Mountain Meadows Massacre, mentioned above. The decision of a local council of Church and community leaders was to let the emigrants pass without interference or harm. It was individuals meeting after the council who embarked on a different path, leading to the ensuing massacre. See Ronald W. Walker, Richard E. Turley Jr, and Glen M. Leonard, *Massacre at Mountain Meadows* (New York: Oxford, 2008), 155–57; see also 178.

31 Packer, “Revelation in a Changing World,” 16. A friendly disagreement between Elder David B. Haight of the Twelve and President Gordon B. Hinckley provides a humorous insight into the character of the highest councils of the Church. In the course of their disagreement, Elder Haight, 96, turned to President Hinckley, 93, and remarked: “That’s OK, Gordon. I used to think like that when I was your age.” Lawrence Flake, reported in Tad Walch, “Tales of LDS Leaders’ Wit a Big Draw at Ed Week,” *Deseret Morning News*, 21 August 2003, <http://www.mission.net/missouri/independence/Photo006Flake03.htm> (accessed 28 February 2015). It is hard to imagine that a conversation of this sort would occur in a system that consisted of a single leader simply giving instructions to subordinates.

32 Gordon B. Hinckley, “In ... Counsellors There is Safety,” *Ensign*, November 1990, 50. Here is his full statement: “No president in any organization in the Church is likely to go ahead without the assurance that his counselors feel good about the proposed program. A man or woman thinking alone, working alone, arriving at his or her own conclusions, can take action which might prove to be wrong. But when three kneel together in prayer, discuss every aspect of the problem which is before them, and under the impressions of the Spirit reach a united conclusion, then we may have the assurance that the decision is in harmony with the will of the Lord. I can assure all members of this church that in the First Presidency we follow such a procedure. Even the President of the Church, who is Prophet, Seer, and Revelator, and whose right and responsibility it is to make judgment and direct the course of

one particular “Brother” in Church leadership that we follow, but the *Brethren*, Elder Packer said: “There is only one ‘Brother’ to follow, and that is our Prophet President. But even he does not act alone, for he has counselors.”³³

In short, while it is common to speak of “following the prophet,” it is actually the First Presidency that we follow.³⁴ That quorum is the highest mortal authority in the Church. It is not the general membership that possesses authority to guide the Church. Nor does any particular individual — whatever his authority — act alone. Instead, it is the council of the First Presidency that governs the Church. The President of the Church is the highest authority in terms of possessing keys, but in terms of guiding the Church, the full First Presidency possesses the highest authority on earth. Significantly, the Lord said of them that “whosoever receiveth me, receiveth those, the First Presidency, whom I have sent” (D&C 112:20).

Teachings of Individuals Are Not Binding

President J. Reuben Clark explained the endowment that attends the teachings of those who hold the Apostleship:

the Church, invariably consults with his counselors to determine their feelings. If there is a lack of unity, there follows an absence of action. Two counselors, working with a president, preserve a wonderful system of checks and balances. They become a safeguard that is seldom, if ever, in error and affords great strength of leadership.”

33 Packer, “I Say Unto You, Be One,” 84.

34 Thus, while President Ezra Taft Benson spoke of fourteen fundamentals in following the prophet, he emphasized that it is the First Presidency — “the living prophet and the First Presidency” — that we follow. Ezra Taft Benson, “Fourteen Fundamentals in Following the Prophet,” address to Brigham Young University, 26 February 1980; reproduced in *Liahona*, June 1981, <https://www.lds.org/liahona/1981/06/fourteen-fundamentals-in-following-the-prophet?lang=eng>. Similarly, Joseph Fielding Smith begins his statement on following the Brethren by saying, “neither the President of the Church, nor the First Presidency, nor the united voice of the First Presidency and the Twelve will ever lead the Saints astray or send forth counsel to the world that is contrary to the mind and will of the Lord,” but in his next expression, he emphasizes not the President of the Church, but the full First Presidency: “An individual may fall by the wayside, or have views, or give counsel which falls short of what the Lord intends. But the voice of *the First Presidency* and *the united voice of those others who hold with them the keys of the kingdom* shall always guide the Saints and the world in those paths where the Lord wants them to be.” Joseph Fielding Smith, *Ensign*, July 1972, 88; emphasis added.

Some of the General Authorities have had assigned to them a special calling; they possess a special gift; they are sustained as prophets, seers, and revelators, which gives them a special spiritual endowment in connection with their teaching of this people. They have the right, the power, and the authority to declare the mind and will of God to His people, subject to the overall power and authority of the President of the Church. Others of the General Authorities are not given this special spiritual endowment.

He specified that this limitation “applies to every other officer and member of the Church, for none of them is spiritually endowed as a prophet, seer, and revelator.”³⁵

However, despite the significance of apostolic statements in general, individual statements by those who are sustained as prophets, seers, and revelators are not binding on the Church. For instance, the First Presidency formally issued statements condemning and correcting teachings by Elder Orson Pratt, and Elder Pratt expressly disavowed his authority to contradict or go beyond the teachings of those who held the keys.³⁶ Similarly, Elder Boyd K. Packer once said that he knew by personal revelation that man did not evolve from animals,³⁷ but qualified his remarks by placing the following caveat at the beginning of the printed version:

Only the Standard Works and statements written under assignment of the First Presidency and the Council of the Twelve Apostles are considered official declarations by The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. The talk which follows was given without such assignment and no such approval has been sought or given. The author alone is responsible for the views set forth therein. They do not necessarily represent the Church.³⁸

35 Cited by Boyd K. Packer, “The Twelve Apostles,” *Ensign*, November 1996, 6.

36 See, for example, James R. Clark, comp., *Messages of the First Presidency*, 6 vols. (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1965–1975), 2:229–35.

37 Packer, “The Law and the Light,” 25–26. He commented: “I said I would give six reasons for my conviction [i.e., that ‘the theory that God used an evolutionary process to prepare a physical body for the spirit of man ... is false’], and I have listed only five. The sixth is *personal revelation*” (emphasis in original).

38 Packer, “The Law and the Light,” 1.

His announcement that he knew this matter by revelation still did not make it official or binding on the Church.

And, of course, an announcement this declarative is rare in any event. It is not unusual for different leaders to see matters in different ways with different conclusions. We see this on topics ranging from evolution to Book of Mormon geography to the date of Christ's birth.³⁹ Nevertheless, from the fact that individual apostolic statements are not binding, it does not follow that no such statements are true. It is customary for the Lord to speak so that only those with ears to hear will actually receive the intended message,⁴⁰ and on this basis one can imagine that individual statements sometimes play the role of saying to the Saints something that is true but that would not be wise for the First Presidency itself to say. To each hearer is left the burden to listen and carefully consider the merits of such statements on their own.

The Lord Gives More Instructions Than Explanations

A curious fact about revelation is that the Lord rarely reveals the reasons behind it. For example, President Gordon B. Hinckley, recalling the

39 For a range of statements on evolution, a good starting place is FairMormon Answers Wiki, "Statements Made by Church Leaders Regarding Evolution," http://en.fairmormon.org/Primary_sources/Evolution (accessed 6 January 2015); on Book of Mormon Geography; see Matthew Roper, "Limited Geography and the Book of Mormon: Historical Antecedents and Early Interpretations," *FARMS Review* 16/2 (2004): 225–76; and "Joseph Smith, Revelation, and Book of Mormon Geography," *FARMS Review* 22/2 (2010): 15–85; on the date of Christ's birth, see Jeffrey R. Chadwick, "Dating the Birth of Jesus Christ," *BYU Studies* 49/4 (2010): 5–38. On evolution in particular, it can be difficult to categorize different leaders' views because the term itself is often used ambiguously. In avowing "evolution" one can mean any number of things — for example, that: (1) all forms of life developed by evolutionary mechanisms through blind chance, without divine guidance; (2) all forms of life developed by evolutionary mechanisms through blind chance, without divine guidance, except for humans whose evolution was guided; (3) all forms of life developed by evolutionary mechanisms, but this process was not blind, but divinely guided for them all; (4) all forms of life developed by evolutionary mechanisms through blind chance, except for humans, who were created apart, in a special creation; or (5) all forms of life developed by guided evolutionary mechanisms, except for humans, who were created apart, in a special creation. If speakers don't say much about what they mean by "evolution," it is impossible to be certain what they mean when they avow or disavow it. For this reason, readers need to be careful when comparing leaders' views on the subject.

40 See, for example, Matthew 11:7–15; 13:3–9, 23–43; Mark 4:3–9, 13–23; 7:14–16; Luke 14:34–35.

period during which he was both a counselor in the First Presidency and its sole healthy member, spoke of wrestling with a matter that seemed very serious and that seemed to require action on his part. Yet as he went to his knees in prayer, wanting to follow the proper course, there came into his mind a feeling of peace and the words of the Lord, with the simple message: “Be still and know that I am God.” Apparently what seemed urgent to him did not seem so urgent to the Lord — and yet President Hinckley received no explanation to help him understand why. The Lord told him to relax, but gave no insight into *why* he should relax.

Out of this experience President Hinckley bore this witness: “God is weaving His tapestry according to His own grand design. All flesh is in His hands. It is not our prerogative to counsel Him. It is our responsibility and our opportunity to be at peace in our minds and in our hearts, and to know that He is God, that this is His work, and that He will not permit it to fail. We have no need to fear. We have no need to worry.”⁴¹

This sounds similar to the report regarding President David O. McKay who, according to one account, said that he had “inquired of the Lord repeatedly” regarding the restriction on blacks holding the priesthood. In his latest inquiry, he “was told, with no discussion, not to bring the subject up with the Lord again; that time will come, but it will not be in my time, and to leave the subject alone.”⁴² This is reminiscent of the Prophet Joseph’s experience of being told, after praying earnestly to know when the Second Coming would occur:

Joseph, my son, if thou livest until thou art eighty-five years old, thou shalt see the face of the Son of Man; therefore let this suffice, and trouble me no more on this matter. I was left thus, without being able to decide whether this coming referred to the beginning of the millennium or to some previous appearing, or whether I should die and thus see his face. (D&C 130:15–16)

President George Q. Cannon once said of the First Presidency:

We can see a certain distance in the light of the Spirit of God as it reveals to us His mind and His will, and we can take these steps with perfect security, knowing that they are the right steps to be taken. But as to what the result will be, that

41 Gordon B. Hinckley, “He Slumbers Not, Nor Sleeps,” *Ensign*, May 1983, 6.

42 In Gregory A. Prince and William Robert Wright, *David O. McKay and the Rise of Modern Mormonism* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2005), 104.

is for the God of Israel to control. That is the way in which the Church of God has always been led, and it will always be led in that way until He comes who is our King, our Lawgiver and our President, even Jesus Christ.⁴³

Speaking of their own lack of complete knowledge of the Lord's designs in the instructions He gives, President Cannon said: "It is just as necessary that the Presidency and the Apostles should be tried as it is that you should be tried. It is as necessary that our faith should be called into exercise as that your faith should be called into exercise."⁴⁴

The Brethren can thus be in the position of knowing what is right and yet not being able to say fully *why* it is right. In the words of Elder Neal A. Maxwell: "I have found that the Lord gives more instructions than explanations."⁴⁵ In the same spirit Elder Dallin H. Oaks said:

If you read the scriptures with this question in mind, "Why did the Lord command this or why did He command that," you find that in less than one in a hundred commands was any reason given. It's not the pattern of the Lord to give reasons. We [mortals] can put reasons to revelation. We can put reasons to commandments. When we do, we're on our own.⁴⁶

At times the Lord helps His leaders and the Saints understand the reasons for one decision or another — as he did in the case of the Manifesto, for instance⁴⁷ — but this appears to be far from universal.

43 Cannon, *Gospel Truth*, 1:346.

44 Ibid.

45 Bruce C. Hafen, *A Disciple's Life: The Biography of Neal A. Maxwell* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2002), 413.

46 Elder Oaks is speaking here specifically regarding the former restriction on blacks holding the priesthood, explaining why he was able to accept the restriction itself and yet not accept the various explanations that had been given for it. He goes on to say: "Some people put reasons to the one we're talking about here [restrictions on the priesthood], and they turned out to be spectacularly wrong. There is a lesson in that. ... I decided a long time ago that I had faith in the command and I had no faith in the reasons that had been suggested for it." Dallin H. Oaks *Life's Lessons Learned: Personal Reflections* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book), 68–69. In short, the explanations offered for the restriction reflected people's thinking (Brigham Young's, primarily, it would seem) but were not themselves part of the official action.

47 See, e.g., "Excerpts from Three Addresses by President Wilford Woodruff Regarding the Manifesto," following "Official Declaration–1" in the current edition of the Doctrine and Covenants.

While Mormon, for example, was instructed to include the small plates of Nephi in his record, he was not told why he was commanded to do so, and the reason did not become clear until centuries later. This is reminiscent (among many scriptural incidents) of Abraham, who was told to sacrifice Isaac but not why he should do so, and of Lehi, who was told to leave Jerusalem but not where his journey would lead or when it would end. Precedents like these should lead us to expect that the reasons for the Lord's decisions will not always be immediately evident, and may not be evident even in our lifetimes. The Lord's pattern is to require his children to live and act in response to the Spirit without complete information because the very purpose of life is to *grow* in the Spirit.⁴⁸

The Brethren Cannot Say Everything They Might Like to Say

Just as the Lord doesn't normally reveal all that He could, neither does the First Presidency speak authoritatively about all that it might. As President George Q. Cannon explained:

There are many things that the leading men of this Church can see and understand that they cannot impart to the people nor ask the people to do. Why? Because they know that the people would not come up to the requirement and that therefore they would be disobedient. Better to give them line upon line, precept upon precept, here a little and there a little than to give them something that they could not receive and that they would rebel against. That is the manner in which the Lord deals with His children, and it is the manner in which wise men inspired of the Lord deal with their fellow men.

48 Elder Charles W. Penrose explained that to see a glorified man, as our Heavenly Father is, is to see someone who is "quickened by [the] spirit in its fullness." Charles W. Penrose, in *Journal of Discourses*, 26:21, http://en.fairmormon.org/Journal_of_Discourses/26/3#21 (accessed 28 February 2015). One way to think of the plan of salvation, then, is to see it as the path by which we develop this same fullness of the Spirit. We grow in Christ until we are eventually glorified in Him as He is glorified in the Father, and we receive of the Father's fullness (D&C 93:13–20; 76:50–59, 92–95). Thus, we are told that "light is Spirit" (D&C 84:45) and that "he that receiveth light, and continueth in God, receiveth more light; and that light growth brighter and brighter until the perfect day" (D&C 50:24).

He added: “Speaking as a First Presidency, if we could have our way, there are many changes that we would make; but you know how difficult it is to have people see alike upon many points.”⁴⁹

The Prophet Joseph Smith once reflected on the difficulties he had in preparing the Saints to receive his teachings:

There has been a great difficulty in getting anything into the heads of this generation. It has been like splitting hemlock knots with a corn-dodger [a piece of corn bread] for a wedge, and a pumpkin for a beetle [a wooden mallet]. Even the Saints are slow to understand.

I have tried for a number of years to get the minds of the Saints prepared to receive the things of God; but we frequently see some of them, after suffering all they have for the work of God, will fly to pieces like glass as soon as anything comes that is contrary to their traditions: they cannot stand the fire at all.⁵⁰

For this reason, the Lord and His servants must exercise patience with the Church and with us as individuals, not being “able to bear” all things at present (1 Corinthians 3:2); having “need of milk, and not of strong meat” (Hebrews 5:12) that we “may grow thereby” (1 Peter 2:2).

We Have Prophetic Testimony That the Presiding Brethren Won’t Lead the Church Astray

After Wilford Woodruff published the results of his revelation on plural marriage in the Manifesto, many Saints were shaken. In response, President Woodruff testified: “The Lord will never permit me or any other man who stands as President of this Church to lead you astray. It is not in the programme. It is not in the mind of God. If I were to attempt that, the Lord would remove me out of my place.”⁵¹ Likewise, nearly a century later, President Gordon B. Hinckley affirmed: “It is the Lord who is directing this Church. You don’t need to worry very much

49 Cannon, *Gospel Truth*, 1:331.

50 *History of the Church*, 6:184–85; from a discourse given by Joseph Smith on Jan. 21, 1844, in Nauvoo, Illinois; reported by Wilford Woodruff.

51 Official Declaration–1. On another occasion he said: “I know what the will of God is concerning this people, and if they will take the counsel we give them, all will be well with them.” *Discourses of Wilford Woodruff*, in *Teachings of the Latter-day Prophets*, 16 vols. (Salt Lake city: Bookcraft, 1998), 4:55.

about Gordon Hinckley. The Lord is directing this work, and He won't let me or anyone else lead it astray."⁵² Elsewhere he said:

I want to make you a promise. I know it's true. The Lord will never let the General Authorities of this Church lead it astray. It won't happen. ... We have a presidency of three. We have a Council of Twelve Apostles. We meet together in the temple every Thursday. We pray together, we discuss together, we seek the inspiration of the Almighty, and it's my testimony that it comes.⁵³

Many others have spoken similarly. For example, President Dieter F. Uchtdorf declared: "God will not allow His Church to drift from its appointed course."⁵⁴ As mentioned previously, President Joseph Fielding Smith explained that while "an individual may fall by the wayside, or have views, or give counsel which falls short of what the Lord intends," nevertheless "the voice of the First Presidency and the united voice of those others who hold with them the keys of the kingdom shall always guide the Saints and the world in those paths where the Lord wants them to be."⁵⁵ Elder Marion G. Romney stated that "today the Lord is revealing His will to all the inhabitants of the earth, and to members of the Church in particular, on the issues of this our day through the living prophets, with the First Presidency at the head." The counsel they give, Elder Romney said, is the direction the Lord Himself would give "if He were here."⁵⁶ Elder Romney added that for those who "criticize what the Presidency say on these burning issues of our times, it would be well to remember that these prophets are but declaring to us the will of the Father."⁵⁷

President N. Eldon Tanner, a counselor in four First Presidencies, said: "Wherever I go, my message to the people is: Follow the prophet." He added:

52 Gordon B. Hinckley, "Excerpts from Recent Addresses of President Gordon B. Hinckley," *Ensign*, July 1996, 73.

53 Gordon B. Hinckley, *Church News*, 30 March 1996, 3.

54 Dieter F. Uchtdorf, "Come, Join with Us," *Ensign*, November 2013, <https://www.lds.org/general-conference/2013/10/come-join-with-us?lang=eng> (accessed 11 January 2015).

55 Smith, "Eternal Keys and the Right to Preside," 73.

56 Marion G. Romney, *Conference Reports of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, April 1954, 90, <https://archive.org/stream/conferencereport1945a#page/n89/mode/2up>, 90 (accessed 12 January 2015).

57 Ibid., 91.

Today there are many issues under debate as controversies rage all around us. It should be evident to all that we need divine direction, as men and women who argue their causes seem to be unable to come to workable or peaceable solutions. It is sad indeed that the world does not know or accept the fact that in our midst is a prophet through whom God can direct the solution of world problems. True Latter-day Saints have no such dilemma. They know that the messages of the prophet have come from the Lord.

...⁵⁸

Elder Boyd K. Packer, echoing this thought, said simply: “When the First Presidency speaks, we can safely accept their word.”⁵⁹

First Presidency Decisions Vary in Importance

Elder Dallin H. Oaks identified an important principle of personal revelation. He explained:

Revelations from God ... are not constant. We believe in continuing revelation, not continuous revelation. We are often left to work out problems without the dictation or specific direction of the Spirit. That is part of the experience we must have in mortality. Fortunately, we are never out of our Savior’s sight, and if our judgment leads us into actions beyond the limits of what is permissible and if we are listening ... the Lord will restrain us by the promptings of His Spirit.⁶⁰

The same principle no doubt applies to the decisions made by Church leadership. The First Presidency is involved in countless matters and decisions, but they are not all of equal importance. To pick a simple example: decisions about the specific decor of a temple are generally of less importance than the decision about when and where to build the temple itself. And when and where to build a particular temple is of less importance than the project of temple-building in general. Thus, the Lord may require personal initiative and leave more room for delegation to Church staff on the first kinds of decisions, while exercising much greater influence on the second kind and strict influence on the third. The Lord seems to exercise control of a lesser or greater nature, depending on the importance of the issue.

58 N. Eldon Tanner, “The Debate is Over,” *Ensign*, August 1979, <http://www.lds.org/ensign/1979/08/the-debate-is-over?lang=eng&query=%22the+debate+is+over%22> (accessed 12 January 2015).

59 Boyd K. Packer, “The Law and the Light,” 22.

60 Oaks, “Teaching and Learning by the Spirit,” 14.

Given the wide range and the multiple layers of their work, it is unavoidable that, at times, errors in judgment may be discovered — and corrected — retrospectively. Elder Boyd K. Packer explained that, while under the plan of councils “men of very ordinary capacity may be guided through counsel and inspiration to accomplish extraordinary things,” nevertheless, “even with the best of intentions, it does not always work the way it should. Human nature may express itself on occasion, *but not to the permanent injury of the work.*”⁶¹

When we understand this principle, it is obvious why President J. Reuben Clark’s remark that “we are not infallible in our judgment, and we err”⁶² does not contradict President Gordon B. Hinckley’s statement that “the Lord is directing this work, and He won’t let me or anyone else lead it astray.”⁶³ The difference in such statements stems from a difference in the issues that are involved and their importance. Though devoted and spiritually refined, mortal men work as mortal men across the extensive range and multiple dimensions of their work, and various weaknesses and errors manifest themselves.⁶⁴ But as a council the Brethren cannot go where the Spirit forbids; on matters of importance they will not do anything that would cause permanent injury to the work of the Lord.

Change is Not Equivalent to Correction

When significant changes are announced, it is often easy to jump to the conclusion that a correction is being made. But there is actually significant reason not to assume this. For example, all of the following represent significant modifications in practice: expelling Adam and Eve

61 Boyd K. Packer, “I Say Unto You, Be One,” 84 (emphasis added).

62 Cited in D. Michael Quinn, *The Mormon Hierarchy: Extensions of Power* (Salt Lake City: Signature, 1997), 7, 368.

63 Hinckley, “Excerpts,” 73.

64 Thus, President Harold B. Lee could say: “Never in the world would anybody in his right mind ever desire to be the prophet of God. This is a responsibility that is fraught with some of the most serious and terrifying responsibilities that can be given to man. One in this position can be a target for evil. He is watched to see if he is going to make a mistake. A dear little seven-year-old girl said in a prayer, ‘Heavenly Father, bless the new President so that he will make only a few mistakes at first, and afterwards not any.’ And I felt like saying, ‘You dear little soul, that’s what I’ve been praying all the time.’ The Lord knows that in my heart I don’t want to make any mistakes, but I’m human. I’m not an object of worship. Our Lord and Master, Jesus Christ, is at the head of this church. He’s the one we should worship.” *The Teachings of Harold B. Lee*, ed. Clyde J. Williams (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1996), 528.

from the garden of Eden;⁶⁵ moving from a system of presiding patriarchs to a system of apostolic councils in guiding the Lord's work;⁶⁶ taking the gospel first to the Jews and then to the Gentiles, and then taking it first to the Gentiles and then to the Jews;⁶⁷ moving from a patriarchal society in Nephite civilization to a combination of patriarchal presidency *and* Church presidency;⁶⁸ first identifying the Salt Lake Valley as the place for Saints to gather to Zion and later identifying their own geographies as the place for Saints to gather to Zion;⁶⁹ and so forth.

Each of these constitutes a significant change in direction, but it is difficult to see how any of them could be dismissed as a simple change of mind, or as a correction of previous practice. From the fact that Adam and Eve were expelled from the garden, it hardly follows that it was wrong for them to have been there in the first place. Nor does the Lord's establishment of apostolic councils to lead His work — beginning in the meridian of time and continuing to today — suggest that it was wrong to follow a patriarchal pattern in the early ages of the world. And the fact that Norwegians now gather to Norway does not imply that it was wrong for them to gather to the Salt Lake Valley in earlier generations.

God responds to the current circumstances of His children and operates in accordance with a divine sequence and timing in fulfilling His grand design. Thus, in Moses' day the priesthood was restricted to the Levites (and the office of high priest in that priesthood to Aaron and His descendants), and in His own earthly ministry the Lord restricted His teaching to the Jews alone.⁷⁰ We might glimpse only a fraction of all the ways in which sequence and timing play a role in God's actions, and nothing at all of the "whys," but because it is certain that they do so, it would seem important not to suppose that all change is attributable to mortal caprice — much less to mortal error or to either divine or mortal correction of *past* errors.⁷¹

65 Genesis 3; Moses 4; 2 Nephi 2:19, 22; D&C 29:41.

66 Abraham 1:1–4; D&C 107:41–53; Luke 6:12–16; Ephesians 2:19–20.

67 Acts 10, 11; 1 Nephi 13:42; 3 Nephi 16:1–12; D&C 107:33.

68 2 Nephi 5:18; Jacob 1:9; Mosiah 6:3–6; 25:1–19; 26:8.

69 Harold B. Lee, "Strengthen the Stakes of Zion," General Conference, April 6, 1973, <https://www.lds.org/general-conference/1973/04/strengthen-the-stakes-of-zion?lang=eng> (accessed 11 January 2015).

70 The notable exception being his experience with the Canaanite woman in Matthew 15:21–28.

71 While it is possible to see the 1978 revelation on the priesthood as a correction of a past mistake, explanations by those who wrestled with the matter have consistently framed it as a matter of divine timing (see, e.g., President McKay's

The Saints Can Know They are Being Led Correctly

Naturally the Saints want to do more than accept, with a lazy and complacent spirit, whatever direction comes from those who hold the keys of the priesthood. The scriptures teach that the Lord, too, wants more than that. We have an obligation to study and pray, so that we may come to know that we are being led correctly.

This may require considerable effort on our part. Elder Marion G. Romney said that “those ... who will through mighty prayer and earnest study inform themselves as to what these living prophets say, and act upon it, will be visited by the spirit of the Lord and know by the spirit of revelation that they speak the mind and will of the Father.”⁷² The Saints are *expected* to receive revelation on these matters. Having faith in the Lord’s overall program, we will not find ourselves praying to find out *if* the Brethren have taken the right course, but rather to know for ourselves *that* the Brethren have taken the right course — and to understand what we must do personally in order to sustain their actions.

reported revelation discussed in note 42 above and related text) and the fulfillment of past promises (see, e.g., Official Declaration—2: “the long-promised day has come”). President Gordon B. Hinckley flatly stated: “I don’t think it was wrong ... [V]arious things happened in different periods. There’s a reason for them” (Gordon B. Hinckley, “We Stand for Something: President Gordon B. Hinckley,” On the Record, *Sunstone* 21/4 (December 1998): 71; cited in http://en.fairmormon.org/Mormonism_and_racial_issues/Blacks_and_the_priesthood/Repudiated_ideas). Moreover, it has been reported that in the meeting that resulted in the revelation, President Kimball referred to the policy of restriction as something the Lord had “theretofore directed.” See Bruce R. McConkie’s report in *Doctrines of the Restoration: Sermons and Writings of Bruce R. McConkie*, ed. Mark L. McConkie (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1989), 160. While Church leaders have repudiated erroneous ideas relating to the reasons for the previous restriction (see, e.g., http://en.fairmormon.org/Mormonism_and_racial_issues/Blacks_and_the_priesthood/Repudiated_ideas), no public statements by those who were present at the time of the revelation described the matter in terms of correction. See Gordon B. Hinckley, “We Stand for Something,” cited above; Boyd K. Packer, “Lessons from Gospel Experiences,” new mission presidents’ seminar, 25 June 2008, disc 4, track 12, 0:00–0:54 (cited in Gregory L. Smith, “Shattered Glass: The Traditions of Mormon Same-Sex Marriage Advocates Encounter Boyd K. Packer,” <http://publications.maxwellinstitute.byu.edu/fullscreen/?pub=1462&index=6> (accessed February 17, 2015); Mark L. McConkie, *Doctrines of the Restoration: Sermons and Writings of Bruce R. McConkie* (Salt Lake City, Utah: Bookcraft, 1989), 159–71; and David B. Haight, “This Work is True,” *Ensign*, May 1996, 22, <https://www.lds.org/ensign/1996/05/this-work-is-true?lang=mon&clang=eng> (accessed March 25, 2015).

⁷² Romney, *Conference Reports*, 90.

A Modern Example of Thoughtful Discipleship

An inspiring example of this is found in the life of Elder Dallin H. Oaks.⁷³ Decades ago, when the U.S. Supreme Court first ruled against prayer in the public schools, President David O. McKay publicly criticized the ruling; he considered it to be leading the country “down the road to atheism.”⁷⁴ Dallin Oaks, on the other hand, who was a law professor at the time, saw good reason for the Court’s decision in the case before it and worried that criticism might be based on incomplete information about the full rationale and intent of the ruling. Brother Oaks began organizing his thoughts on paper — reviewing the Court’s reasoning and showing its application to secular influences in the public schools as well as to religious ones. Soon after completing his document, he met President Henry D. Moyle of the First Presidency at a Church function in Chicago. When President Moyle asked him about his work, Brother Oaks gave him a copy of this writing. President Moyle took an interest in it, and, upon returning to Salt Lake City, shared it with President McKay. Interestingly, after reading Brother Oaks’ thoughtful treatment, President McKay directed that it be published in the *Improvement Era*.

Thus, Brother Oaks did not give up his “right to think.” He felt dissonance between his own judgment and the public expressions of the prophet. He wondered about the issue and prayerfully brought to bear his own best thinking on the relevant questions. Significantly, however, he did not publish a critical article or give a disapproving speech. Instead, he expressed his feelings respectfully and privately (remember that it was President McKay who directed that it be published), with no motivation other than to help and in the spirit of true discipleship.

The outcome of this story is also instructive. Some thirty years later, and now one of the Twelve himself, Elder Oaks wrote an article for the *Wall Street Journal* on the subject of school prayer. He said: “When the Supreme Court decided the original school prayer case in 1962 ... I thought the case was correctly decided. What I did not foresee, but what was sensed by people whose vision was far greater than mine, was that this decision would set in motion a chain of legal and public and educational actions that would bring us to the current circumstances

73 I take this account from my paper, “The Brethren and the Lord: A Letter to My Children,” *This People*, Fall 1995, 34–46. Elder Oaks has recently written of it in his *Life’s Lessons Learned*, 64–67.

74 *Church News*, 22 June 1963; cited in Jerreld L. Newquist, *Prophets, Principles and National Survival* (Salt Lake City: Publishers Press, 1964), 187–88.

in which we must reaffirm and even contend for religious liberty.”⁷⁵ While the Court’s decision was probably the correct one on the matter before it at the time, the way the majority opinion was *written* set in motion the chain of events that President McKay had originally feared. In recognition of the prophetic nature of President McKay’s warning, Elder Oaks wrote: “My worldly wisdom in writing approvingly of the school prayer case on the *facts* of the decision was just a small footnote to history compared with the vision of a prophet who saw and described the pernicious *effects* of that decision in the years to come.” It was, he says, “a powerful learning experience on the folly of trying to understand prophetic vision in terms of worldly wisdom.”⁷⁶

Conclusion

It was the Lord Himself who stated that “whosoever receiveth me, receiveth those, the First Presidency, whom I have sent” (D&C 112:20). Since receiving the Lord is here made equivalent to receiving His servants, this matter cannot be taken lightly. It is my hope that as each of us considers the perspectives raised in this article, we will be guided in our spiritual inquiry as we seek to uphold the Brethren with our faith, prayers, and actions.

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75 Dallin H. Oaks, “When ‘Freedom’ Becomes Religious Censorship,” from *Wall Street Journal*, 23 May 1990, Congressional Record, 1989–1990, <http://thomas.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/z?r101:S23MY0-271> (accessed 12 January 2015).

76 Oaks, *Life’s Lessons Learned*, 67.

