

INTERPRETER

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A JOURNAL OF LATTER-DAY SAINT
FAITH AND SCHOLARSHIP

Volume 32 · 2019 · Pages 277 - 286

**“Yes, It’s True, But I Don’t Think They Like
to Hear it Quite That Way”:
What Spencer W. Kimball
Told Elaine Cannon**

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Offprint Series

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ISSN 2372-1227 (print)
ISSN 2372-126X (online)

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**“YES, IT’S TRUE, BUT I DON’T THINK THEY
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TOLD ELAINE CANNON**

Duane Boyce

Abstract: *Elaine Cannon, who was general president of the Young Women some four decades ago, had an interesting conversation with President Spencer W. Kimball in 1978. According to Sister Cannon’s firsthand account, President Kimball revealed important insight into how he thought about himself as the prophet as well as how he thought leaders should talk to the general membership about that topic. Sister Cannon’s report is thus a valuable part of the historical record regarding both Spencer W. Kimball and prophets generally.*

Elaine Cannon was the general president of the Young Women from 1978 to 1984.¹ The Church’s attitude toward abortion and its opposition to the Equal Rights Amendment were unpopular in many circles at the time. One personal manifestation of this for Sister Cannon occurred in 1977. An international women’s conference was held that

1. Sister Cannon’s public record shows her to have been a person of great sensitivity, depth, and talent — and, above all, a person of deep devotion to the Lord and his kingdom. But, if anything, her impressive character is even more evident in her personal letters, diaries, and notes, all of which display a spiritual energy and a goodness of heart that are quite breathtaking. A huge number of artifacts of Sister Cannon’s life — both personal and ecclesiastical — are housed in the Elaine A. Cannon Collection in the L. Tom Perry Special Collections Department of the Harold B. Lee Library at Brigham Young University, call number MSS 8195. This collection is restricted, but members of the public can access it with permission from the Special Collections department and the Cannon family. A memoir of Sister Cannon, written by her daughter, gives an important look into her character and life. See Holly C. Metcalf, *Love’s Banner: Memories of the Life of Elaine Cannon* (Kenmore, WA: Lamb and Lion, 2011).

year, and Sister Cannon (prior to becoming YW general president) attended the conference with the general presidents of the Relief Society, Young Women, and Primary. When the conference voted on the Equal Rights Amendment, these sisters were faced with a loud crowd hissing and booing them when they voted against it.²

Back Story: “The Debate is Over”

After this experience and against this cultural backdrop Sister Cannon spoke at a women’s fireside in 1978.³ She articulated an inspired defense of the family and of motherhood and expressed her devotion to the Brethren and to President Spencer W. Kimball specifically, who was president of the Church at the time. Along the way she said, “He is our leader, in all the world of would-be leaders, who can guide us back to the presence of God.” Then, “Personal opinions may vary. Eternal principles never do. When the prophet speaks, sisters, the debate is over.... I urge us all to provide powerful unity for those things we *can* agree upon — family, chastity, accountability to the Lord, sharing the gospel.”⁴

The biography of Sister Cannon, written by her daughter, includes an account of this experience.⁵ It reports that President Kimball spoke to Sister Cannon in the aftermath of this talk about her “the debate is over” remark and asked her not to repeat that way of speaking. According to Sister Cannon, he wanted to make sure members felt free to decide for themselves about prophets’ statements, and he worried that her remark could be misunderstood to imply something different — i.e., that members did not have agency and were coerced into following their leaders.

More to the Story

There is an important addition to this story, however, and it appears in Sister Cannon’s firsthand account of her meeting with President Kimball. This report was not included in the biography of Sister Cannon; it is buried under all the other voluminous artifacts, letters, and documents used in

2. For this description, see the letter from Sister Cannon to her family (“Darlings”), dated November 30, 1977, and found in the Elaine A. Cannon Collection, Box 5.

3. Elaine Cannon, “If We Want to Go Up, We Have to Get On,” *Ensign* 8, no. 11 (November 1978), <https://www.lds.org/ensign/1978/11/if-we-want-to-go-up-we-have-to-get-on>. The transcript for this talk (quite evidently typed by Sister Cannon herself) is found in Box 7 of the Elaine A. Cannon Collection.

4. Cannon, “If We Want to Go Up,” emphasis added.

5. See Metcalf, *Love’s Banner*, 204–6.

writing about her life. This firsthand report is significant, however. In it, Sister Cannon tells us that President Kimball asked to meet with her the morning following her talk and asked if she had said something to the effect that “when I [the prophet] speak, the people must obey.”

I answered, “President Kimball, what I said is that when the prophet speaks, the debate is over.” His next comment took me by surprise. “I don’t think the people like to hear that.” I replied, “But it’s true, isn’t it?” He paused for a moment and answered, “Yes, it’s true, but I don’t think they like to hear it quite that way.”⁶

We learn from this brief episode that President Kimball was confident in his reliability as a spokesman for the Lord — in his knowledge of the Lord’s will and in his ability to represent it accurately and with authority. In talking with Sister Cannon, President Kimball did not try to disavow or distance himself from this thought; he merely wanted to correct her way of saying it. Speaking so directly risked coming across as confrontational — as claiming that members do not have agency to decide on their own how to respond to prophets’ teachings. That was how President Kimball himself heard the statement, after all. As we saw, he thought she had said something like, “when I [the prophet] speak, the people must obey.”⁷

George Albert Smith

This concern about appearing to coerce members is reminiscent of George Albert Smith’s worry in an earlier episode. As I discussed in a previous paper,⁸ President Smith objected to the statement that “when

6. “Spencer W. Kimball: A Tribute,” *This People*, Dec 1985/Jan 1986, vol. 6, no. 8, p. 24, contained in the Elaine A. Cannon Collection, Box 4, Folder 20. *This People* magazine is not currently accessible in digital form. Selected hard-copy issues are available in the Harold B. Lee Library of BYU-Provo; this particular issue is also available in the library’s unrestricted Americana Collection.

7. President Kimball had the same worry about appearing to infringe on members’ agency in regard to Ezra Taft Benson’s BYU address “Fourteen Fundamentals in Following the Prophet.” Not only did he worry about the political dimension of the talk and the misperception it might create, but he also “wanted to discourage an unthinking follow-the-leader mentality.” In a public statement, he and his counselors stressed that Church leaders “exercise no constraint on the freedom of individuals to make their own choices in these matters.” On this incident, see Edward L. Kimball, *Lengthen Your Stride: The Presidency of Spencer W. Kimball* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2005), 160–61.

8. Duane Boyce, “D&C 21, George Albert Smith, and Hugh B. Brown: A Fresh Look at Three Incidents in Church History,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship*, 32 (2019), 229–52.

our leaders speak, the thinking has been done.” In elucidating his reasons for disavowing this statement, President Smith emphasized the agency and personal responsibility of members to gain their own testimonies of what is taught. He disavowed the statement that “the thinking has been done” because it implied that Church leaders don’t follow this principle — that they try to coerce members instead. This was identical to President Kimball’s worry about Elaine Cannon’s statement.

There is an additional similarity between President Kimball’s response and President Smith’s, however. As discussed in the earlier paper regarding President Smith, he nowhere suggests that members must do their own thinking because prophets are *unreliable* in representing the Lord. That was not his reason; indeed, he did not even hint at such a motivation. And we also saw reasons to believe that, in any event, President Smith’s confidence in the Brethren would be high, not low.

We see the same indication in President Kimball’s case, but even more strongly. He did not correct Sister Cannon because she overstated his role and reliability as a prophet. Although he had clear opportunity to do this if he had wanted to, he didn’t. Instead he did the exact opposite and affirmed her statement. President Kimball corrected Sister Cannon only because of the *way* she expressed confidence in him. Her expression could be taken to mean that members are coerced into following what he said when they aren’t. “What he was teaching me,” Sister Cannon said, “was that there was a gentler way of getting the point across.”⁹

N. Eldon Tanner

An example of perhaps “a gentler way of getting the point across” is seen in the actions of President N. Eldon Tanner, President Kimball’s first counselor at the time. President Tanner later published a First Presidency message in the *Ensign* endorsing and praising Sister Cannon’s statement — indeed, he titled his article “The Debate is Over.” However, President Tanner made two points in his message that Sister Cannon had not made in hers. First, he assured members that prophets’ messages have the concurrence of the other prophets, seers, and revelators (indeed, of all the general authorities), and second, that members can receive their own assurance from the Lord that the Brethren’s decisions are approved by him. Both assurances remove any misunderstanding about “coercion.” President Tanner said:

9. “Spencer W. Kimball: A Tribute,” *This People*, 24.

[Members of the Church] know that the messages of the prophet have come from the Lord and have the concurrence of all the General Authorities, who are men of vision and integrity, and who themselves try to keep in tune with deity. They [the members] are not, as some would suggest, following blindly and acting without their own agency to speak and think for themselves. Through prayer to our Heavenly Father each of us can have the assurance that the course we choose has his divine approval.¹⁰

So we learn two things from this episode with President Kimball: (1) he was confident in his ability as prophet to know the Lord's will and to represent him accurately and (2) he felt it was important, nevertheless, for leaders to exercise care in how they spoke about this. Since members are free to decide for themselves what to do with prophets' teachings, it is important to avoid language that might suggest they do not have such freedom.¹¹

A Thread in President Kimball's Ministry

President Kimball's affirmation to Sister Cannon is not surprising, of course. When we look back on his ministry, we see multiple declarations from him that prophets receive the Lord's will.

10. N. Eldon Tanner, "The Debate is Over," *Ensign* 9, no. 8 (August 1979), <http://www.lds.org/ensign/1979/08/the-debate-is-over>. President Ezra Taft Benson and Elders Gordon B. Hinckley, Bruce R. McConkie, and James E. Faust also highly praised Sister Cannon's talk. Like President Tanner, none of them shared any hesitation about her remarks. See Metcalf, *Love's Banner*, 206.

11. Neither President Kimball nor Sister Cannon is available for follow-up questioning about Sister Cannon's report, of course, but far from unique, that is the norm in handling historical sources, and the report seems reliable for several reasons. First, it is an account written by Sister Cannon firsthand; it is not an off-the-cuff remark or a second-hand report by someone who overheard it. Second, it is an account Sister Cannon wrote specifically for the public record — a report she intended to be read by others. Third, the account appeared during her lifetime — shortly after President Kimball's passing and long before her own. Fourth, the account is consistent with President Kimball's multiple remarks about prophetic revelation. (See the section of this paper entitled "A Thread in President Kimball's Ministry.") And fifth, the report is consistent with President Kimball's concern about appearing to constrict members' agency — a concern he expressed regarding Ezra Taft Benson's "Fourteen Fundamentals" address, for example (see n 7). Both public in its intent and consistent with features of President Kimball's ministry, Sister Cannon's report is a valuable part of the historical record regarding Spencer W. Kimball.

During the presidency of David O. McKay, for instance, Elder Kimball said of him:

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.¹²

In an early address as president of the Church he referred to some who had spoken publicly about seeing the Lord and said, "Brethren and sisters, I want to add to these testimonies of these prophets my testimony that I know that He lives. And I know that we may see him, and that we may be with him."¹³ He said in another early talk as president:

I know that the Lord has contact with his prophets, and that He reveals the truth today to His servants as He did in the days of Adam and Abraham and Moses and Peter and Joseph and the numerous others throughout time. God's messages of light and truth are as surely given to man today as in any other dispensation.¹⁴

A short while later President Kimball devoted a whole talk to prophetic revelation. He said:

There are those who would assume that with the printing and binding of these sacred records, that would be the "end of the prophets." But again we testify to the world that revelation continues and that the vaults and files of the Church contain these revelations which come month to month and day to day I know

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

13. Spencer W. Kimball, "The Cause is Just and Worthy," *Ensign* 4, no. 5 (April 1974), <https://www.lds.org/study/ensign/1974/05/the-cause-is-just-and-worthy?lang=eng>.

14. Spencer W. Kimball, "A Program for Man," *Ensign* 6, no. 11 (October 1976), <https://www.lds.org/study/ensign/1976/11/a-program-for-man?lang=eng>.

the Lord lives and I know that he is revealing his mind and will to us daily, so that we can be inspired as to the direction to go.¹⁵

And:

Since that momentous day in 1820, additional scripture has continued to come, including the numerous and vital revelations flowing in a never-ending stream from God to his prophets on the earth.¹⁶

He added:

I say, in the deepest of 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. For nearly a century and a half there has been no interruption.¹⁷

In a 1980 First Presidency message he said simply:

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.¹⁸

These statements by President Kimball constitute an important thread in his ministry as president. They are also consistent with the message he gave Sister Cannon: namely, that although it is important to make the point without creating misunderstanding, it is true that he knew the Lord's will and could represent it accurately.

15. Spencer W. Kimball, "Revelation: The Word of the Lord to His Prophets," *Ensign* 7, no. 5 (April 1977), <https://www.lds.org/study/ensign/1977/05/revelation-the-word-of-the-lord-to-his-prophets?lang=eng>.

16. Kimball, "Revelation."

17. Kimball, "Revelation." He used the same language seventeen years earlier, during the presidency of David O. McKay, in an article entitled "To His Servants the Prophets." See Edward L. Kimball, *Teachings of Spencer W. Kimball*, 431.

18. Spencer W. Kimball, "Give the Lord Your Loyalty," *Ensign* 10, no. 3 (March 1980), <https://www.lds.org/ensign/1980/03/give-the-lord-your-loyalty>.

Conclusion

President Spencer W. Kimball corrected Sister Cannon for her public statement that “when the prophet speaks, the debate is over.” He worried that her expression risked suggesting that members do not have agency — that they are not free to decide on their own how to respond to prophets’ teachings. He didn’t want his status as prophet to suggest that members can’t question, explore, and find out for themselves. Of course they can — and should.

At the same time, however, President Kimball affirmed Sister Cannon’s actual meaning. “Yes, it’s true,” he said. While he wished for a better way of making the point, he affirmed that the point itself was accurate: he knew the Lord’s will and was reliable in speaking for him.

The relationship between prophets and the members they lead is a broad, multidimensional topic, of course. I have not tried to address that here.¹⁹ All I have done is draw attention to a little-known incident that must be considered in any effort to think about prophets and their representation of the Lord. Many voices are heard on this matter, and (to say the least of it) President Kimball’s should be one of them.

[Author’s Note: I express appreciation to Kimberly White for her expert editorial assistance in writing this paper. I also express appreciation to the family of Elaine Cannon for graciously granting permission to access the Elaine A. Cannon Collection in the Harold B. Lee Library at Brigham Young University.]

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19. I have said more about this topic elsewhere. See particularly “Sustaining the Brethren,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture*, 14 (2015), vii–xxxii, <https://www.mormoninterpreter.com/sustaining-the-brethren/>, but also: “A Lengthening Shadow: Is Quality of Thought Deteriorating in LDS Scholarly Discourse Regarding Prophets and Revelation?” Part One, *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture*, 26 (2017), 4–28, <http://www.mormoninterpreter.com/a-lengthening-shadow-is-quality-of-thought-deteriorating-in-lds-scholarly-discourse-regarding-prophets-and-revelation-part-one/>; Part Three of the same article, 102–10, <https://www.mormoninterpreter.com/a-lengthening-shadow-is-quality-of-thought-deteriorating-in-lds-scholarly-discourse-regarding-prophets-and-revelation-part-three/>; and “D&C 21, George Albert Smith, and Hugh B. Brown: A Fresh Look at Three Incidents in Church History,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship*, 32 (2019), 229–52.

University and conducted his postdoctoral study in developmental psychology at Harvard University. He was a member of the Moral Studies Group at BYU and served on the faculty there. He is a founding partner of the Arbinger Institute, a worldwide management consulting and educational firm, and is the author or coauthor of five books. He has published academic essays on scriptural topics in BYU Studies, The FARMS Review, Religious Educator, Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship, and the Journal of the Book of Mormon and Other Restoration Scripture. He is author of the book Even unto Bloodshed: An LDS Perspective on War (Kofford, 2015). Among other callings, he has served as a bishop and a stake president.

