

# *An Obligation to the World*

KEVIN J WORTHEN

What a wonderful sight it is to see us gathered together again on this campus. Like any culture, academia has its own distinct idiosyncrasies that seem natural to its members but that might strike an outsider as a bit odd. For example, at this and at many universities, we annually celebrate the start of a new year in August, even though there are more than four months left on our calendars. And while January is still nearly half a year away, we look, in Janus-like fashion, to both the past and the future. To us, it just seems normal to pause in August to celebrate our successes, move on from our failures, and renew our commitment to the causes in which we are engaged.

It has been, to say the least, a most unusual academic year, and unfortunately the ongoing effects of the pandemic continue to affect our planning and efforts. We are pleased that due to the vaccination efforts of those in our university community, we can offer more of the blessings of a

traditional BYU experience than we did last year. Yet that optimism is still tempered by the continuing presence and vagaries of the coronavirus, so we must remain vigilant and flexible.

The good news is that during the past year we showed that we can not only survive but also thrive in an uncertain and quickly changing environment. From academic awards in many departments to athletic successes in numerous sports and from remarkable students serving one another to extraordinary efforts of academic support units both in altering their services and in accelerating the completion of numerous projects, this campus community has shown this last year that it can flourish in the midst of adversity.

I am also pleased with how thoroughly and thoughtfully all parts of the university have focused on and incorporated into their plans the university five-year strategic plan. The alignment that is occurring was very clear during our recent round of strategic resource planning.

---

*Kevin J Worthen, president of Brigham Young University, delivered this university conference address on August 23, 2021.*

That alignment will be a great benefit to us in this coming year as we anticipate a site visit from the Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities in April—something you will all be invited to participate in next semester.

### **A Daunting yet Exciting Challenge**

Reflecting our Janus-like midyear pause, I want to frame my vision for the future year by turning to the past, focusing initially on the events of one particular day at BYU: October 10, 1975—a day that forever changed the trajectory of my life and career. The occasion was the Founders Day convocation celebrating the centennial anniversary of the founding of BYU. President Spencer W. Kimball was on campus to dedicate the Carillon Tower and Bells, which had been constructed to commemorate the centennial. It was a memorable day for all involved.

However, at the time I didn't know that any of this was happening. I was not in Provo on October 10, 1975. Nor was I a BYU student at the time. I had attended another college the year before and was, on that day, in Monclova, Coahuila, Mexico, serving in the first area of my mission. Yet even though I was completely unaware of—and frankly uninterested in—what was happening in Provo at the time, what happened here that day greatly shaped my future.

The connecting link came almost three and a half years later, in the spring of 1979. I had finished my mission, transferred to BYU, and was about to graduate. I knew I wanted to go to law school, but I was not sure which law school I should attend. BYU was on my list, but I was still undecided when I walked into the Harold B. Lee Library on that spring day.

As I was wandering in what was then the periodicals section of the library, I came across a copy of the speech that President Kimball gave at the centennial celebration on October 10, 1975.<sup>1</sup> It is now known as the second-century address because it outlines President Kimball's prophetic vision of what could happen at BYU in its second century.

President Kimball described his vision that BYU would become an "educational Everest,"<sup>2</sup> a place where things would be done in a way and at

a level unlike anywhere else in the world, a place that would provide an "education for eternity,"<sup>3</sup> and a place where faculty and students would help roll "back the frontiers of knowledge" while still being grounded in "the vital and revealed truths that have been sent to us from heaven."<sup>4</sup>

President Kimball repeatedly emphasized that this higher view would require that we deviate from established norms or patterns in some respects. But he also made it clear that this did not give us an excuse for being mediocre or second-rate. Instead, this higher view required that we do more than others. President Kimball put it this way:

*Your light must have a special glow, for while you will do many things in the programs of this university that are done elsewhere, these same things can and must be done better here than others do them. You will also do some special things here that are left undone by other institutions.*<sup>5</sup>

His was not a call to flee the world but to engage it on our own terms, with the goal of improving the world.

As I read the talk, I experienced what I now call "revelation in the Lee Library." I wanted to be part of what President Kimball described, and I knew for that reason that this was where I should go to law school. I wanted to go to a place where a commitment to excellence is expected and where we could do some traditional things as well as and even better than others while also attending to even more important matters. I did not envision at the time that that decision would lead me back to BYU as a faculty member eight years later or to my current position as president, but it did.

Over the years, the impact from reading that speech and my appreciation for the motivating power of President Kimball's vision have only increased. I find myself going back to it—and the mission statement that largely grew out of it—over and over again, discovering that, like scripture, it contains new insights with each reading, despite my previous familiarity with it.

My most recent experience in that regard was prompted by an address given by Elder David A. Bednar at the President's Leadership Summit this past April here at BYU.<sup>6</sup> As part of those remarks,

Elder Bednar shared his memory of hearing President Kimball's address. Unlike me, Elder Bednar was actually present at the devotional that day as a recently married senior student at BYU. Elder Bednar described President Kimball's talk as "inspiring, edifying, and prophetic."<sup>7</sup> He then noted that "we are approaching the halfway mark of the second century of BYU," stating that this would be a good "time to consider where we are and what may be coming next."<sup>8</sup>

Rather than elaborating on one particular theme, Elder Bednar read six different statements from President Kimball's second-century address, providing no commentary to those quotations but inviting those present "to consider how these [statements] apply to both individuals and the institution."<sup>9</sup>

While consideration of each of these statements is worthwhile, I was struck by one in particular—the last of the six that Elder Bednar shared. In that quotation, President Kimball stated:

*Gospel methodology, concepts, and insights can help us to do what the world cannot do in its own frame of reference.*

*In some ways the Church Educational System, in order to be unique in the years that lie ahead, may have to break with certain patterns of the educational establishment. When the world has lost its way on matters of principle, we have **an obligation** to point the way.<sup>10</sup>*

Two things from this quotation struck me in particular. First, we have "an obligation" to share our own unique insights with the world, because we have something unique to offer the world. Second, we can best meet that obligation by introducing "gospel methodology, concepts, and insights" into the frame of reference. That is a daunting yet exciting challenge.

### **Striving to Create a Community of Belonging**

Let me provide some thoughts about what this might look like, using as an example the challenges BYU and the rest of the United States are facing with respect to racism and other forms of bigotry in our society. As you know, in response to the joint call of President Russell M. Nelson and leaders of the NAACP for "educational leaders

. . . to review processes . . . and organizational attitudes regarding racism and root them out once and for all,"<sup>11</sup> we appointed a committee, which after extensive work produced a report and recommendations of steps to be taken. I am extremely grateful to the members of the Committee on Race, Equity, and Belonging who have given so much of their time, their talents, and their hearts in that effort.

As the President's Council carefully and thoroughly considered the committee's report and recommendations, we determined that a necessary first step was to establish a framework within which and by which we would evaluate the various recommendations. The framework would not only provide guiding principles for evaluating the recommendations and for measuring our progress but would also set forth a vision of our end goal—what we hoped our campus community would become as a result of this effort.

The resulting statement describing this framework is in substance, source, and tone different from the typical kinds of diversity statements one might find on most campuses. It is infused, to use President Kimball's terms, in "gospel methodology, concepts, and insights."

The statement begins: "We are united by our common primary identity as children of God . . . and our commitment to the truths of the restored gospel of Jesus Christ."<sup>12</sup> Notice that the statement begins with what unites us, not what divides us. More important, note that it begins with a fundamental gospel truth—maybe the core gospel truth—about our identity. In a world of identity politics, we cannot lose sight of who we really are.<sup>13</sup> And knowing who we really are—and who everyone else is—changes the frame of reference for addressing this important issue. Note also the scriptural references for that and for many of the other statements in the document. Reliance on the eternal, unchanging truths found in these scriptures will ensure both that the principles will remain relevant and that we do not unwittingly drift away from those truths as circumstances change. And note finally that we are united not only by our common eternal identity but also by our covenant commitment to the truths of the restored gospel of Jesus Christ.

With these key gospel truths as a foundation, “we strive to create a community of belonging composed of students, faculty, and staff whose hearts are knit together in love.”<sup>14</sup> This is an effort to build a particular kind of community, a community of belonging involving everyone: students, faculty, and staff. It is a relationship-based community defined by how we view and interact with others—one so infused with love and concern for others that it feels as though our hearts are knit together. Note again the scriptural grounding of this principle.

As a result of having our hearts knit together, the community is one in which “all relationships”—not just the relationships with those with whom we agree but all relationships—“reflect devout love of God and a loving, genuine concern for the welfare of our neighbor.”<sup>15</sup> It is a community in which we strive to live the two great commandments.

“We value and embrace”—not just tolerate but value and embrace—“the variety of individual characteristics, life experiences and circumstances, perspectives, talents, and gifts of each member of the community and the richness and strength they bring to our community.”<sup>16</sup>

The scripture reference here is of particular significance. In teaching this concept to the ancient Corinthians, Paul likened those in the community to different parts of the body. Each is distinct from the others, each has a role to play, and each role is significant. But all are part of “the body of Christ,”<sup>17</sup> united by Him in such a way that when one suffers, all suffer, and when one is honored, all rejoice.<sup>18</sup>

In the community we are striving to establish, “our interactions create and support an environment of belonging,”<sup>19</sup> one in which, as the scripture reference makes clear, there “are no more strangers and foreigners, but fellowcitizens with the saints.”<sup>20</sup> Finally, there is a reminder that the core focus and central purpose for this effort and the reason for our existence as a university is, as our mission statement makes clear, “the full realization of each student’s divine potential.”<sup>21</sup>

In short, our end goal in this effort is to create “a community of belonging” and “an environment of belonging” in which each member is valued

and all realize their divine potential as children of God.

This statement on belonging will provide the constitution, if you will, for our efforts in this regard. It is derived from and grounded in gospel concepts and insights, including fundamental scriptural truths. As I noted, it will provide guiding principles for evaluating and implementing the recommendations provided by the Committee on Race, Equity, and Belonging. But it will also be the guide for addressing the needs of all marginalized individuals on campus.

In that regard, I am pleased to announce the forthcoming creation of a new Office of Belonging on campus. The office will focus on helping campus members achieve the community of belonging outlined in the BYU Statement on Belonging, using the guiding principles it sets forth. The office will not only be core to our efforts to root out racism but will also help us combat “prejudice of *any* kind,” including that “based on race, ethnicity, nationality, tribe, gender, age, disability, socioeconomic status, religious belief . . . , and sexual orientation.”<sup>22</sup>

The office will focus primarily on coordinating and enhancing belonging services and efforts on campus, including through providing subject matter expertise and ideas. It will be headed by a vice-president-level official who will be a member of the President’s Council. Details about the new office and further responses to the other recommendations will be announced in the future.

### **Counseling with Councils**

This unique approach to addressing one of the most pressing issues facing all universities is, for me, an example—and possible fulfillment—of President Kimball’s prophetic declaration that “gospel methodology, concepts, and insights can help us to do what the world cannot do in its own frame of reference.”

An equally powerful though much less visible fulfillment of that declaration is found in the process by which this statement on belonging was created. This statement is the result of extensive discussion and counseling by the President’s Council at BYU. That council in turn also counseled with other “councils,” including not only the

Committee on Race, Equity, and Belonging but also leadership councils of the university and even of the Church. In short, it is a product of counseling with councils.

Early on in my BYU career, a member of an external evaluation team observed that BYU was big on councils. He was right. We don't have a faculty senate; we have a faculty advisory council. We don't have a student union; we have a student advisory council. We have an administrative advisory council, a dean's council, an athletic advisory council, and on and on and on. Over time it has dawned on me that this distinctive feature reflects not just a unique nomenclature but a vastly underrated and underutilized gospel principle about how key decisions can be made in ways that produce both sound conclusions and individual growth.

A recent series of articles and podcasts in the *Church News* highlighted that, as President M. Russell Ballard noted, counseling with councils "is 'critical' to the Church's organization at every level"<sup>23</sup> and is *the way God has done His work from the very beginning*. The use of councils is not just a good management practice; it is a heaven-utilized eternal process.<sup>24</sup> Successful councils increase the sources of input needed to make sound decisions.<sup>25</sup> They also produce more buy-in, thereby increasing the enthusiasm and support for the decision and for subsequent implementation. At the same time, individual members of the council develop a greater understanding of their own potential and worth and a better comprehension of their stewardship.

President Dallin H. Oaks has observed that the key factor to realizing these and other benefits of councils is the inspired revelation that comes from the proper use of councils. He stated, "Revelation is the ultimate objective of the council—either revelation in the council, revelation to participants, or revelation to presiding officers."<sup>26</sup> As Young Women general president Bonnie H. Cordon observed, "As we seek to know [God's] will, as men and women come together, listening to each other and listening to the Spirit, revelation flows."<sup>27</sup>

Let me testify that I have felt that spirit of revelation as I have participated in councils concerning our efforts to increase belonging on this

campus. I have felt that same spirit of revelation and comfort as we have counseled and continue to counsel about the ongoing pandemic. That is not to suggest that the BYU Statement on Belonging is destined to become canonized scripture or that every decision we have made or will make to address the ongoing twists and turns of the COVID-19 pandemic are divinely inspired. But I have seen and felt enough of those feelings in both of those settings that I cannot deny that God is interested and involved in the work of this university and that His influence can be enhanced by the proper use of councils.

With that in mind, let me suggest that we could all benefit—individually and institutionally—by viewing and operating our "committee" work as councils, whose primary purpose is, as President Oaks observed, to produce revelation—revelation to the council, to the individual participants, and to the presiding authority. If we were to view every committee assignment—from more foundational hiring committees to ad hoc party planning committees—as a revelation-inviting counseling opportunity, it would change the tenor of the decisions and might change mundane meetings into sublime, uplifting spiritual-growth opportunities.<sup>28</sup>

### **Contention Is Incompatible with Belonging**

Now, underlying both the substance of the BYU Statement on Belonging and the power of the counseling process that produced it is one other key gospel concept that often is overlooked by the world, especially today—the revealed, eternal principle taught directly by the Savior Himself that contention is of the devil and must be avoided.<sup>29</sup>

Contention will undermine *any* effort to create a belonging community in which our hearts are knit together. It is significant that the Book of Mormon passage in which Alma exhorted his people to "hav[e] their hearts knit together" begins by noting that Alma "commanded them that there should be no contention one with another."<sup>30</sup> Contention is simply incompatible with belonging.

Similarly, contention will destroy any effort to invite or produce revelation in any council setting. Contention is simply incompatible with the presence of the Spirit. As Jesus taught, "He that hath

the spirit of contention is not of me, but is of the devil, who is the father of contention.”<sup>31</sup>

It does not matter what or how important the subject is—whether it is race relations, mask or vaccine protocols, or which football team is the best—contention is still soul destroying, for it is Satan who “stirreth up the hearts of men to contend with anger, one with another.”<sup>32</sup> The topic may involve something as essential as the proper mode of baptism—which was the subject that prompted the contention that Jesus rebuked in 3 Nephi 11—but contention is still not justified, and Jesus still commands “that such things should be done away.”<sup>33</sup>

Now, I am *not* saying that we can’t address, vigorously discuss, or fundamentally disagree with each other on important topics. Eliminating such discussions would undermine both the purpose of having a university and the power of councils. But I *am* saying that even in those settings, we cannot afford to contend in anger one with another.<sup>34</sup>

I realize that we cannot control how contentious other people are. But we must avoid it ourselves. As Elder Dieter F. Uchtdorf taught us so powerfully last week, “Conflict is inevitable and contention is a choice.”<sup>35</sup> When we find ourselves becoming contentious, we should stop—and, if necessary, disengage. No matter what the topic or how strongly we believe it to be essential, contention will destroy any community in which it flourishes and injure the eternal spirit and progress of any individual who engages in it. I am now ashamed to admit that it took more than one Bible-bashing experience as a young missionary for me to realize that no matter how much I was right and no matter how important the topic, the Spirit of the Lord flees when we become contentious. I have discovered that for me, an indicator that I am becoming contentious is when I find myself more interested in *who* is right than *what* is right. When my primary goal is to vindicate my own position or prove another wrong rather than to find the truth from whatever source it may come, I know the spirit of contention is soon to follow. If we truly want to be a Zion-like belonging community in which councils facilitate revelation, we must avoid contention.

That can be a daunting challenge in the highly polarized environment in which we find ourselves, but, as with all gospel commandments, the challenge comes accompanied by an unfailing promise of divine help necessary for the moment if our hearts are open.<sup>36</sup>

### **Prophetic Expectations**

Now, even though I was not present when President Kimball gave that stirring address nearly fifty years ago, technology as well as the Spirit allow me to have a sense of what it was like to be there hearing his voice and, moreover, to consider some ways in which his vision has been and is being fulfilled around us every day. So, as I conclude, join me in a bit of reflection on the words of President Kimball and the way in which his vision is being realized all around us. As you do so, pay particular attention to his final words about his expectations:

*Your light must have a special glow, for while you will do many things in the programs of this university that are done elsewhere, these same things can and must be done better here than others do them. You will also do some special things here that are left undone by other institutions.*

*First among these unique features is the fact that education on this campus deliberately and persistently concerns itself with “education for eternity,” not just for time. . . .*

*Your double heritage and dual concerns with the secular and the spiritual require you to be “bilingual.” . . .*

*. . . Quality teaching is a tradition never to be abandoned. . . .*

*. . . BYU . . . must concern itself . . . with the preparation of its students to take their place in society as thinking, thoughtful, and sensitive individuals who, in paraphrasing the motto of your centennial, come here dedicated to love of God, pursuit of truth, and service to mankind. . . .*

*. . . Gospel methodology, concepts, and insights can help us to do what the world cannot do in its own frame of reference. . . .*

*. . . We understand, as few people do, that education is a part of being about our Father’s business. . . .*

*As previous First Presidencies have said, and we say again to you, we expect (we do not simply hope) that Brigham Young University will “become a leader among the great universities of the world.” To that expectation I would add, “Become a unique university in all of the world!”<sup>37</sup>*

Those stirring concluding words about prophetic expectations have become emblazoned on my soul these past few years. President Kimball used almost those same words five years later at the inauguration of Elder Jeffrey R. Holland as president of this university. However, in that setting, President Kimball changed one word and added one significant sentence. He said:

*As previous First Presidencies have said, we say again to you: “We expect—we do not merely hope—that Brigham Young University will become a leader among the great universities of the world.” To that expectation I would add, “**Remain** a unique university in all the world!” **Then, in the process of time, this truly will become the fully recognized university of the Lord about which so much has been spoken in the past.**<sup>38</sup>*

I do not know what happened in the five-year interval between his second-century address and President Holland’s inauguration that led President Kimball to change the focus of his charge from “becoming” to “remaining” a unique university. But I am certain that he saw that remaining a unique university would be the key to realizing our ultimate destiny as “the fully recognized university of the Lord about which so much has been spoken.”

That is our prophetically declared future. I love you and I bear my witness that that future is possible—indeed, inevitable. May we all be blessed to be a part of that soul-stretching, soul-stirring endeavor is my prayer, in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

## Notes

1. See Spencer W. Kimball, “The Second Century of Brigham Young University,” BYU devotional address, 10 October 1975.

2. Kimball, “Second Century.”

3. Spencer W. Kimball, “Education for Eternity,” pre-school address to BYU faculty and staff, 12 September 1967, 1; quoted in Kimball, “Second Century.”

4. Kimball, “Second Century.”

5. Kimball, “Second Century.”

6. See David A. Bednar, “Look unto Me in Every Thought; Doubt Not, Fear Not,” BYU leadership meeting address, 16 April 2021.

7. Bednar, “Look unto Me.”

8. Bednar, “Look unto Me.”

9. Bednar, “Look unto Me.”

10. Kimball, “Second Century”; emphasis added; quoted in Bednar, “Look unto Me.”

11. Russell M. Nelson, Derrick Johnson, Leon Russell, and Amos C. Brown, “Locking Arms for Racial Harmony in America: What the NAACP and The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints Are Doing Together,” Church of Jesus Christ, Medium.com, 8 June 2020, medium.com/@Ch\_JesusChrist/locking-arms-for-racial-harmony-in-america-2f62180abf37.

12. BYU Statement on Belonging (23 August 2021); in “BYU Announces the Formation of a New Office of Belonging,” Announcements, BYU News, 23 August 2021, news.byu.edu/announcements/byu-forms-new-office-of-belonging; see Acts 17:29 and Psalm 82:6; see also Mission of Brigham Young University (4 November 1981).

13. At the recent funeral of a dear friend of this university, I learned that when asked the common introductory question “Where are you from?” this friend’s answer was often “Heaven.” Even though he had entered this mortal existence in Logan, Utah, and had come to wonderful earthly parents, he wanted people to know of his true identity and origin.

14. BYU Statement on Belonging; see Mosiah 18:21.

15. BYU Statement on Belonging; see Mission of BYU.

16. BYU Statement on Belonging; see 1 Corinthians 12:12–27.

17. 1 Corinthians 12:27.

18. See 1 Corinthians 12:26.

19. BYU Statement on Belonging; see Ephesians 2:19.

20. Ephesians 2:19.

21. BYU Statement on Belonging; see Mission of BYU.

22. “Prejudice,” *General Handbook: Serving in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, March 2021 (Salt Lake City: Church of Jesus Christ, 2021), 38.6.14 (p. 401), churchofjesuschrist.org; emphasis added.

23. M. Russell Ballard, quoted in Sydney Walker and Sarah Jane Weaver, “Inside Church Headquarters Photo Gallery: 17 Things We’ve Learned About Councils,” *Leaders and Ministry, Church News*, 5 August 2021, thechurchnews.com/leaders-and-ministry/2021-08-05/inside-church-headquarters-photo-gallery-summary-points-220912.

24. See, e.g., Abraham 4:26; 5:2–3.

25. See Sydney Walker, “Inside Church Headquarters: What President Oaks and President Eyring Have Learned About Revelation in Councils,” *Leaders and Ministry, Church News*, 8 July 2021, thechurchnews.com/leaders-and-ministry/2021-07-08/church-councils-president-oaks-eyring-first-presidency-218412.

26. Dallin H. Oaks, quoted in Walker and Weaver, “17 Things We’ve Learned.”

27. Bonnie H. Cordon, quoted in Walker and Weaver, “17 Things We’ve Learned.”

28. Application of the eight principles of councils outlined in the *Church News* would facilitate that transition (in Walker and Weaver, “17 Things We’ve Learned”):

- “Understand stewardship.”
- “Know your purpose.”
- “Invite the Spirit by preparing.”
- “Seek the Lord’s will, not your own.”
- “Make sure every voice is heard.”
- “Seek women’s perspectives.”
- “Listen to learn.”
- “Seek consensus through revelation, not compromise.”

29. See 3 Nephi 11:29–30.

30. Mosiah 18:21.

31. 3 Nephi 11:29.

32. 3 Nephi 11:29.

33. 3 Nephi 11:30.

34. Even in an educational setting, the Lord said that contention “was very grievous unto [Him]” (Doctrine and Covenants 95:10).

35. Dieter F. Uchtdorf, “Five Messages That All of God’s Children Need to Hear,” BYU Education Week address, 17 August 2021.

36. See 1 Nephi 3:7.

37. Kimball, “Second Century”; quoting Kimball, “Education for Eternity,” 1; also quoting Harold B. Lee, “Be Loyal to the Royal Within You,” BYU devotional address, 11 September 1973.

38. Spencer W. Kimball, “Installation of and Charge to the President,” *Inaugural Addresses*, 14 November 1980, Brigham Young University, 10; emphasis added.