

A Prophetically Directed University

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Introduction

What a joy it is to be here with you today at this BYU university conference. It has been thrilling to hear of your continued accomplishments. I hope you will allow me to highlight just a few of the recent milestones that have resonated with me as I have reviewed your work with President C. Shane Reese and Elder Clark G. Gilbert. These and other efforts remain central to our efforts at “becoming BYU.”¹

- **College Success Course:** One of the real innovations at BYU is the creation and rollout of University 101, our student-wide Student Success course throughout the university. This effort has the potential to be transformative for our students. Your efforts will help students understand BYU’s mission, acquire resources to persist academically, and create an increased sense of belonging.
- **Supporting At-Risk Students:** The University 101 course highlights our broader focus on student success. From the first-year mentors

to the Academic Student Success Council to the data modeling focused on graduation, you are strengthening efforts to help at-risk students. This is critical for *any* university, but at BYU it highlights our deeper call to a pastoral duty of care.

- **Expanded Impact of Religious Education:** “Spiritually strengthening”² instruction is a BYU hallmark, regardless of your discipline. Of course, “*religious* education holds a unique and cherished place in the mission of . . . [BYU and] stands at the very center of [our university’s] purpose.”³ Our religion faculty develop students’ faith, deepen their discipleship, and build students’ “ability to find answers.”⁴ I also recognize the growing impact of our religious publications organization to help extend these messages and scholarship to audiences far beyond our campus.
- **Inspiring Learning:** I am also inspired by efforts to actively engage our students *outside* of the classroom. From student competitions

Ronald A. Rasband, a member of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, delivered this BYU university conference address on August 26, 2024.

to faculty-mentored research to travel study to the oversight of student projects, faculty are providing inspiring learning opportunities that are both academically and spiritually transformational.

- **Elevated Messaging:** I would like to also recognize the growing efforts to communicate our mission with clarity. The communications team has created the campaign For the Benefit of the World. Athletics and alumni reach out to *opponents* through at-scale service projects. I've attended some of these. BYUtv produces stories that profile the Light of Christ in others. And please note: for BYU to become the "Christ-centered, prophetically directed university of prophecy,"⁵ we will need to continue to strengthen these efforts to tell the story of the university in deliberate and powerful ways.

Now, in highlighting a few of these efforts, I do not mean to minimize the contributions from admissions, our legal team, graduate programs, facilities, technology planning, and so many other activities that make BYU such a special place. Nor do I want to give you a sense by highlighting some of these contributions that we do not see a need to further strengthen BYU.

I hope you observed the earlier caution from President Reese regarding changes to our university's academic classification. I heard a reminder from your president to remember the unique student-focused nature of this university. This is part of what President Spencer W. Kimball meant in his 1975 second-century address when he explained:

This university is not of the world any more than the Church is of the world, and it must not be made over in the image of the world.

*We hope that our friends, and even our critics, will understand why we must [persist and] resist anything that would rob BYU of its basic uniqueness.*⁶

I hope that when we call for ways to strengthen BYU or highlight the importance of our university mission that you will not see that as a failure on your part or some signal of disappointment

from Church leadership. The Church Board of Education is pleased and even inspired by the work you are doing. But we also know that the inspired future of this university can only be achieved as we continually elevate our sights. As my colleague Elder Quentin L. Cook described at this same conference last year:

*My intent in referencing this high standard is not because I have a sense that BYU is falling short. My feelings are quite the opposite. I am exceedingly pleased with what I see transpiring at this great university. I see continuous and significant righteous achievement. But the standard that President Kimball set is a high bar. Our best efforts are expected, and there is yet much to be accomplished.*⁷

I echo Elder Cook's sentiment and hope we will continue to strive to strengthen this university even as we recognize the progress and milestones that are being accomplished along the way.

A Prophetically Directed University

I would now like to turn to the theme of my message, a topic on which I have felt repeated spiritual promptings: a prophetically directed university. Building on previous statements about the future of this university, President Reese has summarized our efforts at becoming BYU as the call to become "the Christ-centered, prophetically directed university of destiny and promise."⁸ What a wonderful mission statement. Being Christ-centered implies that everything we do at this university should help students become covenant disciples of the Lord Jesus Christ. This Christ-centered purpose should shape decisions around curriculum, our mission statement, measuring success, and, of course, our hiring. As President Russell M. Nelson has taught:

*If you and I are to withstand the forthcoming perils and pressures, it is imperative that we each have a **firm** spiritual foundation built upon the rock of our Redeemer, Jesus Christ.*⁹

Thus, the spiritual foundation of BYU should be built on the Savior Jesus Christ. What then does it mean to be prophetically directed in the context of

our Christ-centered mission? First, I note that part of a prophet's calling is to be a special witness of the Savior Jesus Christ. Moreover, as *The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, this is Christ's Church on the earth. As the senior apostle, President Nelson represents the Savior as the head of Christ's Church on the earth. Access to prophetic guidance is at the very design of this university. At President Reese's inauguration, I talked about the role of BYU's prophetic governance:

In the case of Brigham Young University, it is important to recognize that the governance of this institution operates under the guidance of a unique and distinctive board of trustees.

BYU is "founded, supported, and guided by The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints" (The Mission of Brigham Young University [4 November 1981]). The BYU Board of Trustees is led by the First Presidency. . . .

. . . In addition to this installation, President Reese will be given a charge from the BYU Board of Trustees. This charge will outline guidance and prophetic direction the board has for President Reese as he takes the helm of this university.

This prophetic charge and BYU's governance structure create a tremendous advantage for BYU, its president, the work of its faculty and staff, and the spiritual development of these magnificent students. Indeed, it allows—in fact, it compels—you to do things at this university that could be done nowhere else in the world.¹⁰

I hope you will see at least two things in the inspired governance structure of BYU. First, our BYU Board of Trustees is chaired by President Nelson, prophet of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Second, our prophetic governance is more than a boundary constraint that lists things we can and cannot do at Brigham Young University. In fact, when properly understood, our prophetic governance is a strategic asset that should allow us to do things unique in all of higher education.

I would like to have you consider the ways prophetic guidance from President Nelson shapes and strengthens this university. For me, this begins with the prophetic instruction President

Nelson provides, especially as it relates to the young adults of the Church. I would also like to discuss the role of prophetic counsel in shaping the decisions and direction of this university.

Prophetic Teaching to Young Adults

As we reflect on the teachings of President Nelson, the place at which I would like to begin is the place he began. For his first address as the prophet of the Church, President Nelson chose to be broadcast from inside the annex of the Salt Lake Temple. In those opening remarks, President Nelson stated: "As a new [First] Presidency, we want to begin with the end in mind. For this reason, we're speaking to you today from a temple."¹¹ In that address, President Nelson referred to a call to stay on the covenant path. Of course he would later add to this opening message further teachings on covenants, including the call to make the temple covenants our spiritual foundation,¹² teaching about the meaning of covenantal love through the Hebrew word *hesed*,¹³ and, of course, his more recent charge to "think celestial!"¹⁴ President Nelson has also taught us to "let God prevail,"¹⁵ to seek revelation in our callings and in our personal lives,¹⁶ and to be peacemakers in this time of polarization and disagreements.¹⁷

Of course, one of the roles of a prophet is to be a watchman on the tower.¹⁸ This role of a watchman is particularly relevant in the lives of our young adults as they face so many life decisions in a season of growing deception and social unrest. In my devotional to young adults two years ago, I highlighted the prophetic role President Nelson plays as "our watchman on the tower."¹⁹ In that address, my wife, Melanie, and I showed an image of an elevated tower that allowed the watchman of a kingdom to see farther out on the horizon and to warn of oncoming dangers to his people. Brothers and sisters, President Nelson is our watchman on the tower for the entire Church when he speaks at general conference and at all times.

There are times he has spoken specifically to our young adults. One example happened right here on this campus in September 2019. Concerned with the growing confusion around central Church doctrine, our watchman on the tower came to this campus to teach the dual nature of the love

and laws of God.²⁰ If you do not know this talk, consider the significance of a prophet of God—in his one visit to this campus as the prophet—to choose that message for our students.

Of course the other major address from President Nelson to young adults is his 2022 talk “Choices for Eternity.” It was in this message that President Nelson taught the young adults the truth about who they really are:

*There are various labels that may be very important to you, of course. Please do not misunderstand me. I am not saying that other designations and identifiers are not significant. I am simply saying that no identifier should **displace, replace, or take priority over** these three enduring designations: “child of God,” “child of the covenant,” and “disciple of Jesus Christ.”²¹*

The prophetic instruction President Nelson has provided to young adults should invite us to amplify those messages in our own instruction and counseling with our students. He is our watchman on the tower, and that role provides us unique understanding as we in turn minister to and support our students.

Prophetic Counsel to University Leadership

In my remarks at President Reese’s inauguration, I spoke about President Nelson’s role as the chairman of the Board of Trustees of Brigham Young University. When President Nelson previously chaired the executive committee of that board, he made the following remarks to the university’s leadership:

At BYU we must ally ourselves even more closely with the work of our Heavenly Father. . . .

A college education for our people is a sacred responsibility, [but] it is not essential for eternal life.²²

Referencing those words, President Jeffrey R. Holland later remarked:

A statement like that gets my attention, particularly because just a short time later President Nelson started to chair our board of trustees, hold our purse strings, and have the final “yea” or “nay” on every proposal we might make.²³

I should note that President Nelson and the Church Board of Education are extremely generous in their financial support of this university. Frankly, for me, it has been staggering to see firsthand that commitment since my recent assignment to the board. For example, at a time when very few universities are able to support even sustained faculty commitment to the arts and the humanities,²⁴ the BYU Board of Trustees has made *significant* investments in the new music building and the current construction of the new arts building.

The Church Board of Education has recently expanded support in areas of religious publications, scholarship at the Wheatley Institute, and resources to communicate the university’s mission. Of course the recent announcement of a new medical school at BYU is yet another visible example of the Church’s commitment to this university, especially when these investments closely align with the work of our Heavenly Father.

The medical school announcement is a powerful example, my friends, of how President Nelson’s role expands beyond simple funding investments. Not only would the funding for the medical school not have happened without prophetic approval, but the vision to connect the school to the Church’s humanitarian and international mission came directly because of prophetic insight. Beyond the counsel of specific university projects, President Nelson’s mentoring and direction make your university leadership better and sharpen their capacity to lead this university. I share my witness that when we sit in counsel with President Nelson, he is directing this university in ways that help us become the BYU of prophetic destiny that so many of us hope we will continue to become.

An Invitation and a Witness

I would next like to extend an invitation to the entire university community through you. Two weeks from today, the entire Church will celebrate President Nelson’s one hundredth birthday. I would invite our entire BYU community to honor that milestone by considering

1. How can we amplify the teachings of President Nelson, particularly those teachings he has shared with young adults?

2. How can we better recognize and support the prophetic direction President Nelson is providing this university and its leadership?
3. How can we still give President Nelson a gift? I refer to his June 1, 2024, social media post in which he said:

At age 99, I have no need of physical gifts. But one spiritual offering that would brighten my life is for each of us to reach out to “the one” in our lives who may be feeling lost or alone.

Over the coming months I invite you to consider prayerfully: who do you know who may be discouraged? Who might you need to reconcile with or ask for forgiveness? Has one name been on your mind lately, though you haven’t quite known why? As you bring these questions to the Lord, He will inspire you to know how you can reach out and lift one who needs help.²⁵

Let’s give President Nelson that gift.

I will conclude today with two sacred and personal experiences when I was able to witness President Nelson’s prophetic calling firsthand. Earlier in this speech, I mentioned President Nelson’s first message to the Church as the prophet, given from the temple annex in Salt Lake City. Note that as President Nelson spoke, the entire Quorum of the Twelve Apostles sat behind him, sustaining his message through our participation in the meeting. I was in the second row, personally sustaining his message.

One of President Nelson’s focuses that day was on the temple.

In 2019, all of the First Presidency and the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles traveled to the Rome Italy Temple dedication.

President Nelson called the Rome temple dedication “a hinge point in the history of the Church.” At the time, I didn’t know why. He said, “The Church is going to have an unprecedented future, unparalleled; we’re just building up to what’s ahead.”²⁶ I testify of the prophetic nature of that statement.

I saw it partially fulfilled on April 21, 2024. Sister Rasband and I were assigned to go to the rededication of the Manti Temple with our dear prophet. I felt I was witnessing a partial fulfillment of the 2019 message in Rome. Remember

the “unprecedented future” he commented on? In President Nelson’s ministry now, brothers and sisters, he has announced 168 new temples. Is that not historic? What was said in Rome has been a hinge point in his ministry in the Church.

Brothers and sisters, I witness to you that President Russell M. Nelson is the prophet of God. He represents the Savior whose Church this is, even The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.²⁷ President Nelson is a prophet, seer, and revelator who is our watchman on the tower in these tumultuous times.

President Nelson is also the chairman of the BYU Board of Trustees, and I know we can look to his teachings in confidence as we strengthen the young adults we work with here at BYU. We can also look to his prophetic counsel shared with us directly and to our university leadership. Let me say this strongly: the prophetic governance of BYU is its comparative advantage in the whole world. May we look to our prophet and become the “Christ-centered, prophetically directed university of prophecy” that we are destined to continue to become. This is my prayer and my witness, as I testify of Jesus Christ, whose university this is, in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

Notes

1. C. Shane Reese, “Becoming BYU: An Inaugural Response,” address delivered at his inauguration as BYU president, 19 September 2023.
2. The Aims of a BYU Education (1 March 1995).
3. Strengthening Religious Education in Institutions of Higher Education, Church Board of Education (12 June 2019); emphasis added.
4. Strengthening Religious Education.
5. C. Shane Reese, “Developing Eyes to See,” BYU devotional address, 9 January 2024; see also Reese, “Perspective: Becoming BYU,” *Opinion, Deseret News*, 11 December 2023, deseret.com/opinion/2023/12/11/23997519/c-shane-reese-what-byu-must-become.
6. Spencer W. Kimball, “The Second Century of Brigham Young University,” BYU devotional address, 10 October 1975.
7. Quentin L. Cook, “Preparing Students for Eternity,” BYU university conference address, 28 August 2023.

8. Reese, "Perspective: Becoming BYU."
9. Russell M. Nelson, "The Temple and Your Spiritual Foundation," *Liahona*, November 2021; emphasis in original; see Helaman 5:12.
10. Ronald A. Rasband, "For Such a Time as This," address given at the inauguration of C. Shane Reese as BYU president, 19 September 2023.
11. Russell M. Nelson, remarks delivered on January 16, 2018, after having been set apart on January 14, 2018, as the seventeenth president of the Church; "First Presidency Message: As We Go Forward Together," *Ensign*, April 2018.
12. See Nelson, "The Temple and Your Spiritual Foundation."
13. See Russell M. Nelson, "The Everlasting Covenant," *Liahona*, October 2022.
14. Russell M. Nelson, "Think Celestial!" *Liahona*, November 2023.
15. Russell M. Nelson, "Let God Prevail," *Ensign*, November 2020; quoting Bible Dictionary, s.v. "Israel."
16. See Russell M. Nelson, "Revelation for the Church, Revelation for Our Lives," *Ensign*, May 2018.
17. See Russell M. Nelson, "Peacemakers Needed," *Liahona*, May 2023.
18. See Ezekiel 33:2; Doctrine and Covenants 101:45, 54; see also Ezekiel 3:17; 33:7.
19. Ronald A. Rasband, "Our Watchman on the Tower," devotional for young adults, 9 January 2022.
20. See Russell M. Nelson, "The Love and Laws of God," BYU devotional address, 17 September 2019.
21. Russell M. Nelson, "Choices for Eternity," worldwide devotional for young adults, 15 May 2022; emphasis in original.
22. Russell M. Nelson, "Controlled Growth," BYU leadership meeting address, 25 August 2014; quoted in Jeffrey R. Holland, "The Second Half of the Second Century of Brigham Young University," BYU university conference address, 23 August 2021.
23. Holland, "The Second Half of the Second Century of Brigham Young University."
24. See Anemona Hartocollis, "Can Humanities Survive the Budget Cuts?" *New York Times*, 3 November 2023.
25. Russell M. Nelson, Facebook, 1 June 2024.
26. Russell M. Nelson, quoted in Tad Walch, "Rome Temple a 'Hinge Point' in Latter-day Saint History, President Nelson Says as He Leaves Italy," Faith, *Deseret News*, 11 March 2019, deseret.com/2019/3/11/20668104/rome-temple-a-hinge-point-in-latter-day-saint-history-president-nelson-says-as-he-leaves-italy. See also Sarah Jane Weaver, "President Nelson Calls Rome Temple Dedication a 'Hinge Point' in Church History," News, Church of Jesus Christ, 15 March 2019, churchofjesuschrist.org/church/news/president-nelson-calls-rome-temple-dedication-a-hinge-point-in-church-history.
27. See Russell M. Nelson, "The Correct Name of the Church," *Ensign*, November 2018.