

Becoming a Light That Is a Standard to the Nations

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Just over a week ago in our August commencement, President Hinckley was asked to give impromptu remarks at the close of the ceremony. He arose and with great feeling exclaimed that he was so proud of BYU—this “crown jewel” in the kingdom, as he called it. He was proud of the graduates who represent the university so well. He singled out the faculty and said that he was proud of your excellence and your service to the kingdom.

Other members of the board of trustees have expressed similar feelings in the recent past. I believe that collectively we have been making significant progress lately. As I have reflected on my sense that BYU is becoming a more refined instrument of light, a standard that shines forth, I have felt a reassuring confirmation that the Lord’s hand is operating to help us. I want to share with you some recent examples of this phenomenon and make some observations about what I think is fostering this progress.

President Bateman discussed with us this morning our current draft of BYU’s institutional objectives. I think it has been helpful for us to discuss with the board of trustees and with deans, directors, and department chairs a statement of objectives. We want to continue that discussion with the campus community during

this school year. Specifically, my colleagues and I on the Academic Vice President’s Council hope to discuss your response to and questions about these objectives as we visit with you in informal department brown bags during the year.

As we have developed the institutional objectives, a key theme for me has been the clarification of BYU’s role in the kingdom. The more clear we become about our role in the kingdom, the more light from the Lord’s Spirit I feel among us, the greater the harmony I feel with the board, and the greater unity I feel among us as a community. In addition, this growing alignment with the Lord’s purposes has inspired people of goodwill who have contributed record amounts and are enthusiastic about continuing to help us as President Bateman showed us this morning.

I think that there are several factors that contribute to this growing alignment and unity at BYU:

1. As I said, we are clarifying BYU’s role in the kingdom of God.

Alan L. Wilkins was the academic vice president at Brigham Young University when this address was delivered at the afternoon faculty session of the BYU Annual University Conference on 23 August 1999 in the de Jong Concert Hall.

2. We are making hard choices to focus our offerings and services.

3. We are seeking to get our hearts right, to collaborate in the spirit of self-sacrifice to improve these areas.

4. We are becoming leaders in the fields where we have chosen to focus.

Clarifying BYU's Role

In 1975 President Kimball gave an address to commemorate the beginning of BYU's second century. He provided some ideas that are particularly relevant to aligning the university with the gospel and the needs and standards of the Church. I quote now from that address:

*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!"*¹

*BYU can tower above other universities . . . because of the unique light BYU can send forth into the educational world. 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.*²

*Members of the Church are willing to doubly tax themselves to support the Church Educational System, including this university, and we must not merely "ape the world." We must do special things that would justify the special financial outpouring that supports this university.*³

In the "Second Century" address and in some of the other talks⁴ he gave here at BYU, President Kimball suggested what some of these special things are that we must do. Some of them include:

1. Teach for the eternities, giving prominence to revealed truth in our teaching.

2. Strengthen the testimonies and character of young people along with their intellects.

3. Prepare youth to serve as leaders in the Church, their families, and society so as to provide dividends on the Church's investment in them.

4. Be a refining host for brilliant stars—our graduates—in a variety of fields.

5. Hire and develop faculty who are men and women of God.

6. Qualify ourselves to receive, when the Lord chooses, revelation for our scholarly and creative pursuits in addition to "the natural unfolding of knowledge [we expect] to occur as a result of scholarship."⁵

7. "Be willing to break with the educational establishment (not foolishly or cavalierly, but thoughtfully and for good reason) in order to find gospel ways to help mankind. Gospel methodology, concepts, and insights can help us to do what the world cannot do in its own frame of reference," he said.⁶

8. Develop art that does not "give in to the ways of the world" and "that edifies man, which takes into account his immortal nature, and which prepares us for heaven."⁷

9. "Become the acknowledged language capital of the world in terms of our academic competency"⁸ and through the MTC.

10. Provide "pockets of competency" to "be used by the Church increasingly" for special purposes.⁹

President Kimball explicitly mentioned that these were just a few of the areas of special concern for development at BYU.¹⁰

Our recent efforts to align our programs with the needs of students and the priorities of the Church have seemed to be a kind of fulfilling of President Kimball's vision. For example, President Kimball mentioned a focus on languages. We have recently established a Center for Language Studies that will help us focus

and develop our language learning capability and service. Some of the strategic questions for BYU, in light of Church and student needs, are: Which languages shall we offer? At what level? And for whom? The center will lead our discussions to determine student and Church needs, to help us improve our research and capability in language learning, and to consider how we can serve as many people as possible. For example, the center is preparing a Summer Language Institute for next year that will provide intensive language learning for both matriculated and non-matriculated students in less commonly taught languages as well as in “bottleneck” major language courses. We can invite visiting faculty from around the world to teach students—especially returned missionaries or preparing missionaries—in this program. The center will also coordinate collaborative research with the MTC.

It has been enlightening to observe the development of the School of Family Life and the former NGO Family Voice, now the World Family Policy Center, over the past few years. The proclamation on the family by the First Presidency and the Quorum of the Twelve has been a wonderful boon that has galvanized the faculty.¹¹

We have encouraged and watched with interest a conversation among the animal science faculty led by Dean Kent Crookston that I believe is leading to some good ideas. The question they have begun to ask is: What should our program look like at BYU, given worldwide Church needs? Their program has to some extent focused on farm production more attuned to the needs of Utah and other western states. As they consider collaboration with Church needs, they are seeing the opportunity to design a program that will bless their students and the Church significantly, even though it may not look like more conventional agricultural station programs. This is precisely the kind of thinking that President Kimball was encouraging.

Focusing Our Efforts

Paradoxically, being of service, especially when our cause is important, can lead us to say yes to too many things and therefore fail to be as good as we need to be at any of them. I have seen many departments and individual faculty overextend themselves because they want to help the Church and respond to every student need. If we are to be very good, given finite resources, we must decide which of the many good things we can do that should be done. However, this is a very difficult task at a university. Indeed, some observers say that it is nigh unto impossible to make significant changes to focus and reallocate attention from one area to another. For example, Arthur M. Cohen, in his well-written and well-regarded recent book entitled *The Shaping of American Higher Education*, commented that we can’t reallocate resources and thus refocus higher education institutions because we don’t have a “way of determining relative value.”¹²

BYU is, in many ways, faced with this same challenge. However, we do have some help in “determining relative value.” I have seen how President Bateman has worked with the Brethren to develop a sense of current Church priority. For example, we have concluded that we should focus particular attention on three countries—China, the Ukraine, and Jordan—to help the Church open doors there. Our faculty have responded brilliantly, and we have some exciting developments taking place.

I also think that we are improving our ability as an institution to manage change and to refocus. I have watched faculty and other groups be prayerful about understanding the needs of students and of the Church and come to a consensus that I thought would be impossible at the outset. The organization of the School of Family Life is a good example of this phenomenon. It took some time for the former Family Sciences Department and their colleagues in other departments and in the Law School who were interested in the family to

come to some broad consensus about a focus and a structure to help them pursue that focus. I watched skillful people like Clayne Pope and Jim Harper involve and incorporate ideas from approximately 80 faculty members, external advisors, central administration leaders, and members of the board of trustees. They worked hard to address a host of differences in approaches to research, preferences for organizational arrangement, disciplinary interest, and so on. As they have aligned themselves with the principles of the Church's proclamation on the family, they have developed increased clarity about curriculum needs, research topics, and outreach activities to strengthen the family. I compliment them on beginning such a large refocusing operation with deliberate care.

I also think that the Brethren have been inspired to give us counsel and guidance as we started the School of Family Life, which has lifted us beyond our traditional disciplinary commitments. For example, President Packer presented a stirring charge to the new School of Family Life. He saw them as being willing to break with some educational fashion to do what they are doing and told them that they *must* be successful because of the demise of the family in so many quarters. He told them that they would be able to go where the Brethren could not go and that their work was critical to the kingdom.

In addition to this inspiration and guidance, the support of the Brethren has led to significant increases in donor support for the new school and its programs. We have also been able to reallocate resources from other areas of the university to support the clarified mission.

We have just completed another quite successful reorganization as we created the Center for Instructional Design. Based on excellent work by faculty and staff committees, Noel Reynolds and Scott Howell combined people from three different organizations to improve our ability to prioritize and develop course materials for BYU, Continuing Education,

Ricks, BYU—Hawaii, the LDS Business College, and the Church as a whole. Here again we have been able to improve our focus and knit people together in ways that promise to make us better.

We are just starting another effort to improve about which you should be aware. Our admissions and records office programs are known nationally for providing student access to information and telephone registration. IBM just reported on a best-practices survey of work in this area. I quote from that report:

*The University of Delaware and Brigham Young University . . . started their change processes before most of the rest of us realized the need for change. They had the luxury of learning at their own pace before the Web changed everything. Now, when these institutions consider next steps, they do so with a staff that is prepared for successful change. They are leading institutions.*¹³

Notice that the principal praise from this IBM survey was for our ability to adapt and continue to improve. We have recently launched a committee called VISTA that will look at how we can improve even further our services to our students—all of our students, on and off campus, undergraduate and graduate, entering and graduating—with information for planning, advising, registration, finding grades, and so forth. We want to provide one-stop services and quick access to personal attention when needed. This committee's membership comes from Student and Campus Life, Continuing Education, faculty, students, Admissions, Records, Financial Aid, and software development. They have taken time to build their team and to listen to students and major service providers. They are planning significant data gathering and planning efforts this fall and winter. We will keep you informed about their progress.

If we are going to continue to improve our contributions to students, to the Church, and

to society, we will have to get even better at managing thoughtful and careful changes like these. We will also need to get better at using assessment tools and processes to help us engage in ongoing reevaluation of the results of our work so that we can keep learning and adjusting along the way. From what I have seen, I am hopeful that we will be able to do so.

Getting Our Hearts Right

One of the reasons I am optimistic about our chances of refocusing and improving over time is the sense I have of your hearts. I see in you as a body a willingness to put first the needs of students and the Church. Indeed, I think that we have a comparative advantage in this regard that allows us to collaborate across organizational and disciplinary boundaries that are much more difficult to transcend in other universities of similar size. Consider just a few examples.

I speak with administrative colleagues in other institutions who are amazed at the size of our Freshman Academy. This fall almost one-third of our freshmen are enrolled in this living/learning program. They are even more amazed at the close collaboration between housing, student life, and faculty personnel that is required to make it work well.

I attended a national conference in June on educational renewal in Seattle. Our Center for the Improvement of Teacher Education and Schooling represents one of the two most prominent national efforts to create a partnership between schools of education, university faculty, and public schools. This partnership has established exciting initiatives to improve the preparation of elementary and secondary teachers, to provide improved literacy for grade-school students, and to prepare administrators, to name just a few. But the most impressive thing to the people in other institutions is the degree of involvement from our deans and faculty in various disciplines. This is a national problem,

and although we aren't perfect, we have remarkable support at BYU.

However, collaborating across the organization is not the same thing as giving up programs in which we have invested our expertise and identity. But, here again, I have seen people with great hearts respond beautifully to changes.

For example, a chief source of funding and positions for the new School of Family Life has come from the former department of Clothing and Textiles, which was just formally terminated this year. I can tell you from personal experience with our colleagues in that department that they were, to a person, opposed to the decision we finally made to close the department. They were articulate defenders of the programs they had so lovingly and skillfully developed. However, once the decision was made, they have made great efforts to find new ways to contribute. One faculty member is currently helping the Theatre and Media Arts program, another is in the Chemistry Department, and the rest of the faculty, along with the staff and office support, have gone to the new School of Family Life. This infusion of people and resources into the family work will prove to be invaluable. As I mentioned earlier, the opportunity to align with student, Church, and societal needs brings light and excitement and the opportunity to be a standard to the world. This was not a choice between good work and bad work. This choice, like almost all of our choices, was between two or more good things.

I hasten to clarify that my talk about focusing our university should not be construed to mean that we intend to stamp out individual inspiration and creativity. Our efforts must leave room for some experimentation and individuality. I'll give just one example that may illustrate my concern here. Cole Durham of our Law School just received a university professorship for work that is leading to the establishment of a center to foster religious

liberty—work that neither he nor the Law School predicted would be so important to the Church, the discipline, and the world when he arrived some 20 years ago. Until nine years ago he was establishing academic credibility in comparative criminal law, human rights, and comparative religious liberty law. He had felt inspired by something President Oaks had said about international constitutional issues and had been casting about to find his niche. Then, in 1990, the Berlin Wall came down. Cole was in just the right places, with good credentials and contacts. He has been commuting to former Soviet bloc countries ever since to help them fashion new constitutions and statutes that provide for religious liberty. He has become a world expert in this area. His yearly conference on this topic at BYU brings scholars and country officials from across the world. His work has been enormously helpful to the Church in improving its legal status in a variety of countries and in opening doors for our missionaries. We have to have room for such inspiration.

As an institution we cannot focus on everything. We have to make decisions about where to allocate resources. However, in such a large place we have to provide room for individuals to take risks, to follow their individual inspiration from the Lord, and to pursue important work that may not bear fruit for years.

Becoming Leaders

By clarifying BYU's role, focusing our efforts, and collaborating as Christians, we have in many ways become a light and a standard to the nations. There is much at stake. Recent experiences have confirmed to me how important it is to be true to our trust as the Church's university and to be very good at what we choose to do. During the past year or so we have gone through reaccreditation reviews for three programs whose associations had strict policies forbidding discrimination with respect to sexual preference: the Law School, Marriage and Family Therapy, and

Clinical Psychology. In each case we explained that our approach is to avoid demeaning others but to be clear that sexual activity outside the bounds of a duly authorized heterosexual marriage would not be accepted. We also suggested that those who fomented in favor of such behavior would be subject to discipline. In each case the accrediting bodies had to consider the quality of these nationally prominent programs and the clarity of our position and practice. All three were given exceptions and were reaccredited.

However, the case of Clinical Psychology was particularly challenging. The American Psychological Association (APA) sent a second team composed of two members of their national council to investigate this issue after the first visiting team had given us a clean bill of health. President Bateman and I met with them following their interviews with faculty, students, and program administrators. They confirmed that our faculty and students were excellent and that they handled this issue well within the context of our clear policy. I remember telling them that they, the APA, had a real problem. What would it do to their credibility both within and without their association to turn down a program that had contributed so much to the profession for a policy that was so closely aligned with our strongly held religious beliefs? Didn't they believe in institutional pluralism, in our right and responsibility to make our unique contribution to society? They agreed with my assessment. This was their problem, a very difficult one. Shortly after their visit, we received notification that the program had been fully reaccredited.

I don't relish such confrontations. But I foresee that this is not the last time we will be called to account for our moral choices. We must be very clear about our commitments and our rationale for them. We must also be very good. As President Kimball said, we must be a "unique university in all the world" with a "special glow." If we are, the Lord will bless

and prosper our efforts to become a light and a standard to the nations.

Conclusion

The work I have been talking about is the institutional equivalent to having our “eye single to the glory of God” (D&C 4:5, 82:19). As you remember, the Lord promises that “if your eye be single to my glory, your whole bodies shall be filled with light, and there shall be no darkness in you” (D&C 88:67). The opposite is also true. Unless we align our eyes and our hearts with God’s glory, we will, to that extent, be filled with darkness.

At the inauguration of President Dallin Oaks, then commissioner of education Neal A. Maxwell said: “Brigham Young University seeks to improve and ‘sanctify’ itself for the sake of others—not for the praise of the world, but to serve the world better.”¹⁴

May we so sanctify ourselves is my prayer in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

Notes

1. Spencer W. Kimball, “The Second Century of Brigham Young University” (10 October 1975), *Classic Speeches* (Provo: Brigham Young University, 1994), 148; also excerpted in *Educating Zion*, eds. John W. Welch and Don E. Norton (Provo: BYU Studies, 1996), 63–75.
2. Kimball, “Second Century,” 136.
3. *Ibid.*, 139.
4. See also Spencer W. Kimball, “Education for Eternity,” address to BYU faculty and staff, 12 September 1967; and “Installation of and Charge to the President,” *Inaugural Addresses*, 14 November 1980, 9–10. Both talks are also excerpted in *Educating Zion*, 43–63 and 75–78, respectively.
5. Kimball, “Second Century,” 144.
6. *Ibid.*, 145.
7. *Ibid.*, 146.
8. *Ibid.*
9. *Ibid.*, 148.
10. See *ibid.*, 146.
11. See “The Family: A Proclamation to the World,” *Ensign*, November 1995, p. 102.
12. Arthur M. Cohen, *The Shaping of American Higher Education* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1998), 387.
13. Earl H. Potter III, “Change Management,” in Martha Beede and Darlene Burnett, eds., *Planning for Student Services: Best Practices for the 21st Century* (Ann Arbor, Michigan: Society for College and University Planning, 1999), 139.
14. Neal A. Maxwell, “Greetings to the President,” *Addresses Delivered at the Inauguration of Dallin Harris Oaks*, 12 November 1971, 1.