

Hold Fast to the Words of the Prophets

NEIL L. ANDERSEN

Thirty-three years ago, while a student at Brigham Young University, I had a small role in an evening fireside like the one we are holding tonight. The speaker was President Spencer W. Kimball, and I found myself walking next to him as he moved toward the entry coming into the Marriott Center. I asked him if he ever became nervous standing before such a large assembly. With a smile, he responded: “Brother Andersen, you know that the scriptures say, ‘If ye are prepared ye shall not fear’ (D&C 38:30). I am trembling from my head to my toes.” Tonight I know how he felt.

I express my love and respect for each of you seated here and for you who are gathered across the world. I know of your goodness and devotion to the gospel, your faith and hope for the future, and your desire to please your Heavenly Father. I pray that the Lord’s Spirit will bless my words and your understanding.

Hold Fast to the Iron Rod

I want to tell you of the Lord’s guiding hand in our meeting tonight. During the early days of January I worked to organize and outline what I would present to you. Knowing that Elder David A. Bednar was scheduled to speak to you in February, I asked him if he had finalized the subject he would address.

I was taken aback when he responded that his talk was about holding fast to the iron rod. It was the exact title I had chosen for my talk. The choir was already practicing this beautiful number that they have just shared with us.

As Elder Bednar and I discussed the messages we had prepared, it was evident that we had approached the subject differently. Elder Bednar thought for a moment and said: “The Lord loves the young adults of the Church. There is purpose in this. This is a message the Lord wants delivered.” I determined to proceed.

Then, just a week later and before Elder Bednar’s talk, President Boyd K. Packer, acting president of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, gave a BYU devotional address he entitled “Lehi’s Dream and You.”¹ He too included in his talk what it means to hold fast to the iron rod.

My brothers and sisters, this is a subject the Lord wants you to think about.

You will remember from the talks of President Packer and Elder Bednar, and from

Neil L. Andersen was a member of the Presidency of the Seventy of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints when this fireside address was given on 4 March 2007.

your own study of the Book of Mormon, the key elements of Lehi's dream of the tree of life. Elder Bednar taught us that the tree of life, identified as the love of God, is a representation of Jesus Christ and that the joy and happiness received by partaking of the fruit of the tree symbolizes the blessings of the Savior's Atonement (see 1 Nephi 8:10; 11:8–9, 21–24).²

There was also a great and spacious building (see 1 Nephi 11:35–36, 12:18). President Packer's talk opened my mind to new ways of thinking about this part of the dream.

Also in the dream were mists of darkness (see 1 Nephi 12:16–17)—representing the temptations of the devil—that obscured the pathway (see 1 Nephi 8:19–22) leading to the tree. Finally, there was an iron rod (see 1 Nephi 11:24–25)—representing the word of God—allowing one to successfully pass through the mists of darkness and arrive at the tree.

The choir sang so beautifully:

*Hold to the rod, the iron rod;
'Tis strong, and bright, and true.
The iron rod is the word of God;
'Twill safely guide us through.*³

How we loved hearing it sung in Spanish and Portuguese as well, and how we wish we could hear it in all the languages of those who are listening to us tonight.

Nephi promised us that “whoso would hearken unto the word of God, and would hold fast unto it, . . . would never perish; neither could the temptations . . . of the adversary overpower them . . . , to lead them away to destruction” (1 Nephi 15:24).

The iron rod is the word of God. I like to think of it in this way: The word of God contains three very strong elements that intertwine and sustain one another to form an immovable rod. These three elements include, first, the scriptures, or the words of the ancient prophets. You will remember Elder Bednar's piercing question of last month: “Are you and I daily

reading, studying, and searching the scriptures in a way that enables us to hold fast to the rod of iron?”⁴

The second element of the word of God is the personal revelation and inspiration that comes to us through the Holy Ghost. President Packer said it this way:

*If you hold to the rod, you can feel your way forward with the gift of the Holy Ghost. . . .
. . . Grasp the iron rod, and do not let go.
Through the power of the Holy Ghost, you can feel your way through life. (See 3 Nephi 18:25; D&C 9:8.)*⁵

My subject tonight is the third element, a critical addition intertwining with the other two. This third part of the iron rod represents the words of the living prophets. We must also hold fast to the word of God as delivered by the living prophets. My prayer is that from our time together tonight we will increase our attentiveness to what the living prophets are teaching, accelerate our response to what we are learning, and deepen our understanding of what it means to *hold fast* to their words.

The Words of the Living Prophets

Many years ago, President George Q. Cannon, then a member of the First Presidency, said:

We have the Bible, the Book of Mormon and the Book of Doctrine and Covenants; but all these books, without the living oracles and a constant stream of revelation from the Lord, would not lead any people into the Celestial Kingdom of God. This may seem a strange declaration to make, but strange as it may sound, it is nevertheless true.

Of course, these records are all of infinite value. They cannot be too highly prized, nor can they be too closely studied. But in and of themselves, with all the light that they give, they are insufficient to guide the children of men and to lead them into the presence of God. To be thus led requires a living

*Priesthood and constant revelation from God to the people according to the circumstances in which they may be placed.*⁶

Of course we who are here tonight love President Gordon B. Hinckley, the two counselors in the First Presidency, and the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles. But in acknowledging our love and our loyalty, I would ask, “Could our attention to the counsel and the teaching of these Brethren be more active, searching, and responsive?”

Think how you would respond to the following questions: Could you tell me the names of the three members of the First Presidency and the names of each of those who comprise the Quorum of the Twelve? These are the 15 men you and I sustain as prophets, seers, and revelators.

If we were to hold up a picture of these Brethren, would you recognize each of them? We rarely pay close attention to someone we do not recognize or know.

Could you share with me the counsel given by the First Presidency and the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles from last October’s general conference? And could you identify the concerns of President Hinckley, President Monson, and President Faust in the First Presidency messages of the *Ensign* and *Liahona* during the first three months of this year?

Perhaps more important, could you share with me a recent decision where you changed something in your life because of counsel received from one of these 15 men?

The reasons our answers to these questions are so important rest in the calling and responsibility of the First Presidency and the Twelve Apostles. Whenever the Lord’s Church has been established, the Lord has called prophets and apostles. The Savior said, “Ye have not chosen me, but I have chosen you, and ordained you” (John 15:16). To these men that ordination brings a spiritual power and a solemn responsibility—a power to know

and to testify and a responsibility to teach and to bless. It also brings a responsibility and a promise to us. We have the responsibility to listen and to follow, and we have a promise that blessings will come as we believe and act on their words.

When the Lord called twelve disciples in the Americas after His Resurrection, He taught the people this: “Blessed are ye if ye shall give heed unto the words of these twelve whom I have chosen from among you to minister unto you, and to be your servants” (3 Nephi 12:1). In our day, in a very difficult time, the Lord promised the Saints: “If my people will hearken unto my voice, and unto the voice of my servants whom I have appointed to lead my people, behold, verily I say unto you, they shall not be moved out of their place” (D&C 124:45).

This is the Lord’s pattern. He calls 15 men from “the ordinary pursuits of life”⁷ and endows them with the keys and power to guide and direct us. We are not forced to obey; there is no compulsion. But if we will be attentive to their words, if we will be responsive and willing to change our behavior as the Holy Ghost confirms their counsel, we will not be moved out of our place—meaning we will hold fast to the iron rod and will forever remain safely on the path leading to the tree of life.

How do we seek out and hold fast to the counsel of the living prophets? Let’s consider the question by thinking more deeply about the three words we use in sustaining these men—*prophets*, *seers*, and *revelators*.

Prophets

First, the word *prophet*. The Apostle John said that “the testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy” (Revelation 19:10). Prophets testify of Christ. Their sure witness of the living Christ is one of the greatest blessings to the Church and to the world. The Lord declared that these men are to be “special witnesses of the name of Christ in all the world” (D&C 107:23). Above

all else, their voices are raised in testimony of His divinity and His reality. This witness, born in their discipleship and tempered in their ordination, can have a significant influence on our own feelings.

Their testimonies are expressed simply, allowing the Holy Ghost to carry the witness into our hearts. For example, we may hear them testify with such words as these: “As surely as I know that I am here and you are there, I know that Jesus is the Christ. He lives!”⁸ Or, “Mine is the certain knowledge that Jesus is our divine Savior, Redeemer, and the Son of God the Father. I know of his reality by a sure perception so sacred I cannot give utterance to it.”⁹

While these statements are powerful, it is the accompanying spiritual confirmation that burns in our hearts and strengthens us.

Explaining the role of angels, Mormon taught:

And the office of their ministry [the ministry of angels] is . . . to prepare the way among the children of men, by declaring the word of Christ unto the chosen vessels of the Lord, that they may bear testimony of him.

And by so doing, the Lord God prepareth the way that the residue of men may have faith in Christ, that the Holy Ghost may have place in their hearts. [Moroni 7:31–32]

The First Presidency and the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles are the Lord’s chosen vessels.

Our own faith in the Savior grows and develops through the times and seasons of our lives. There may be moments of doubt or discouragement when we feel as though we are enveloped in the mists of darkness. Do not underestimate what we each can receive from the solemn, sure testimony of the Savior borne by His special witnesses. That witness, received in a spirit of faith, will strengthen us in moments of difficulty and give us a firm footing as we move along the path toward

the tree of life. Hold fast to the words of the prophets. Ponder them. Believe them. Trust them. Follow them.

Let me give you an example. A young married friend of mine lost his little daughter in a tragic accident. In the months that followed, with the loneliness, the asking “why,” and the sadness, doubt began to enter his life. He told me that he wasn’t sure what he believed anymore. I suggested to him that in this difficult time he might want to yield to his doubts a little less and trust the words of the Savior and the Savior’s chosen vessels a little more. My friend pored over the scriptures, the promises of the Savior, and the bold, reassuring witness of the living prophets. He held fast to their sure testimony of the Savior when his own seemed to falter. He held fast to the iron rod. With time, the darkness dissipated, the tree came back into view, and he partook of the precious fruit of the Atonement.

Seers

Next, what is a *seer*? In the Book of Mormon, Ammon explained the role of a seer to King Limhi:

But a seer can know of things which are past, and also of things which are to come, and by them shall all things be revealed, . . . and hidden things shall come to light, and things which are not known shall be made known by them. [Mosiah 8:17]

Look at this beautiful picture [a partial photo of blue water and shoreline]: What do you see? Wouldn’t you love to be canoeing in this peaceful setting? Doesn’t it look appealing?

What if your view was suddenly enlarged and you saw this [a full photo showing the same water pouring over a waterfall]: The canoe ride would be very different from what you first perceived.

Spiritually, seers see the wider view. They see what we sometimes cannot see. Their

words and counsel help us see the larger view. If we heed their counsel, holding fast to the iron rod, we will be safe.

Let me give you an example. President Hinckley has spoken strongly about the blessings of tithing. He speaks frequently to the General Authorities on this subject. He has said:

We can pay our tithing. This is not so much a matter of money as it is a matter of faith. . . .

I urge you, . . . every one of you, to take the Lord at His word in this important matter.¹⁰

We reiterate the promise of the Lord given anciently through the prophet Malachi that he will open the windows of heaven upon those who are honest with him in the payment of their tithes and offerings, that there shall not be room enough to receive the promised blessings.¹¹

In the fall of 2001 three of the Twelve were in Brazil at the same time, and each taught the promises of an honest tithing. A few months later a young college student in São Paulo was put to the test. She was working and going to school. Here are her words, which were shared by President Hinckley:

The university in which I studied had a regulation that prohibited the students [who had not paid all their fees] from taking tests. . . .

I . . . faced serious financial difficulties. It was a Thursday when I received my salary. When I figured the monthly budget, I noticed that there wouldn't be enough to pay [both] my tithing and my university. I would have to choose between them. The bimonthly tests would start the following week, and if I didn't take them I could lose the school year. I felt great agony. . . . My heart ached. I had a painful decision before me, and I didn't know what to decide.

Through prayer she determined that she would trust in the Lord and in the words of the

prophets. On Sunday she paid her tithing. The next day she sought a way to be able to take her tests but could not find a solution. She then explained what happened:

The working period was ending when my employer approached and gave the last orders of the day. . . . Suddenly, he halted, and . . . asked, "How is your college?" I was surprised. . . . The only thing I could answer . . . was, "Everything is all right!" He looked thoughtfully at me and bid farewell again. . . .

Suddenly the secretary entered the room, saying that I was a very fortunate person! When I asked her why, she simply answered: "The employer has just said that from today on the company is going to pay fully for your college and your books. Before you leave, stop at my desk and inform me of the costs so that tomorrow I can give you the check."

The student then explained her feelings:

After [the secretary] left, crying and feeling very humble, I knelt exactly where I was and thanked the Lord for His generosity. I . . . said to Heavenly Father that He didn't have to bless me so much. I only needed the cost of one month's installment, and the tithing I had paid on Sunday was very small compared to the amount I was receiving! During that prayer the words recorded in Malachi [and declared so often by the prophets and apostles] came to my mind: "Prove me now herewith, saith the Lord of hosts, if I will not open you the windows of heaven, and pour you out a blessing, that there shall not be room enough to receive it" (Mal. 3:10).¹²

Clouded in the mists of darkness, the decision was difficult; the outcome was unsure. But she held fast to the iron rod. Her faith in the Lord and in the Lord's prophets was confirmed. While all experiences may not be so immediate in their resolution, the promises for those who honestly keep the law of tithing are absolutely certain.

I have heard President Thomas S. Monson say to returned missionaries, “There is one way you will always stay active in the Church—always be honest in your payment of tithing.” What a beautiful promise!

Revelators

Finally, a *revelator*. “The English word *revelation* is translated from a Greek word *apocalypse*, meaning to make known or uncover.”¹³ As revelators, the First Presidency and the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles make known the Lord’s specific concerns for us and what we need to do to respond. Moreover, with so many choices and decisions available to us, revelators help direct our attention to what is most important in our journey through mortality. They help us focus.

In August 2005 President Hinckley invited us to read the Book of Mormon prior to the end of the year. He helped us focus our discretionary time toward what the Lord would have us do. As often accompanies the invitations of prophets, a promise was included by President Hinckley—a promise that I’m sure is as true today as when he said it in August 2005. He said this:

*Without reservation I promise you that if each of you will observe this simple program, regardless of how many times you previously may have read the Book of Mormon, there will come into your lives and into your homes an added measure of the Spirit of the Lord, a strengthened resolution to walk in obedience to His commandments, and a stronger testimony of the living reality of the Son of God.*¹⁴

Were we not blessed just as the prophet promised?

One sister from the Ukraine wrote: “Every morning I asked that the Holy Ghost be my companion so He could enlighten my mind. A miracle occurred: the Book of Mormon was opened to me anew. I received answers to questions I had had for years.” A brother from

Germany wrote: “Because I studied longer each day, I made connections I had never made before. The Book of Mormon truly is full of testimonies of Jesus Christ. Because of the Spirit I felt, my own testimony of my Redeemer increased.”¹⁵

And how about this comment from a young family in Utah: “We wondered if our four-year-old was even listening [when we read the Book of Mormon], but then one day when asked why his room was so messy, he replied, ‘Someone has been plundering in there!’”¹⁶

Here is another example of the role of a revelator. President Hinckley has strongly counseled you, the young adults of the Church, to pursue as much education as possible. In October general conference he said: “I call your attention to another matter that gives me great concern. In revelation the Lord has mandated that this people get all the education they can. He has been very clear about this.”¹⁷

What is the great concern? Education. Who has been very clear about this? The Lord. Who is revealing this to you? His prophet. And, yes, he is speaking to you.

If you come from a family that has few resources for education, you may be unsure about what this means for you. When you are unsure, hold fast to the iron rod. Trust the words of the prophet! The answers will come.

In some parts of the world, such as in the United States and Europe, it may mean that you need to sell your automobile or live in more humble circumstances in order to stay enrolled or return to school. In other areas of the world the sacrifice may be greater. In some countries the Perpetual Education Fund may be able to help. In almost all cases it will require faith, trusting in the Lord and in the Lord’s prophet—holding fast to the iron rod—as you find your way. If you are not sure how to follow the specific counsel of the prophet, pray with all your heart and discuss your concerns with your parents and with your bishop. While it will require patience and faith,

I promise you that answers will come and a way will be opened to you.

I have seen answers come to many young people of faith in Latin America. Thousands are holding fast to the iron rod, trusting in President Hinckley, and pursuing their education.

Prophetic direction flows from each member of the First Presidency and the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, all of whom we sustain as prophets, seers, and revelators. If we had time, we could review the counsel from each of them.

Let me give you an example of counsel from one of the Twelve. Nearly two years ago Elder Dallin H. Oaks addressed you in an evening like we are sharing tonight. You will remember that he caught your attention when he raised the issue of dating rather than “hanging out.” He said:

*My single young friends, we counsel you to channel your associations with the opposite sex into dating patterns that have the potential to mature into marriage, not hanging-out patterns that only have the prospect to mature into team sports like touch football.*¹⁸

Now, the important question: What did you do following his talk? Did anything change? Elder Henry B. Eyring gave this warning:

The failure to take prophetic counsel lessens our power to take inspired counsel in the future. . . .

*Every time in my life when I have chosen to delay following inspired counsel or decided that I was an exception, I came to know that I had put myself in harm’s way. Every time that I have listened to the counsel of prophets, felt it confirmed in prayer, and then followed it, I have found that I moved toward safety.*¹⁹

How do your actions over the past two years show that you are holding fast to the iron rod? Those who responded positively

and promptly to Elder Oaks’s counsel surely found that the blessings of heaven followed. Let me read from a letter sent to Church headquarters from a couple in Arizona more than a year after his talk:

Your remarks have had a lasting impact on our lives. . . .

*. . . Your direct and clear counsel helped us realize that dating was an opportunity to get to know one another better and not an immediate commitment to a long-term relationship or marriage.*²⁰

The result was that they *were* married in May in the Washington D.C. Temple.

I would like to invite my wife, Kathy, who has taught these principles so well to our family, to share her feelings about the importance of the words of the prophets.

Remarks from Sister Kathy Andersen

My dear brothers and sisters, I had an experience about 20 years ago that made a deep impression on me. We were living in Florida. We had taken our children to the stake center to listen to general conference together. A short time later we received our conference edition of the *Ensign* magazine in the mail. We decided that for family home evening each week we would study one of the conference talks given by a member of the First Presidency or the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles.

Our children were young, but they were old enough to read, and we wanted each member of the family to have a copy of the talks so that we could read and study and mark them together. We didn’t have a store in Florida where we could purchase additional *Ensign* magazines, so I took the copy that we had received in the mail to our local copy center and made copies of the talks for our family.

When I finished, I took the copies to the cashier, who tabulated the cost of the copies I had made and announced to me that I owed approximately \$50. I am embarrassed to say

that I felt a little bit sick at my stomach. And I thought, “That is a lot of money to pay to make copies of these talks for our children.” Then, brothers and sisters, this thought pierced my heart: “What is it worth to you and your family to have the words of God’s prophets?”

I knew then, but I know with even greater certainty now, that it is worth everything to us and to our family. It is worth everything to you and to your future families. Of this I bear testimony in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

“As If from Mine Own Mouth”

It is a marvelous blessing to be married to a person who has pure and uncompromising faith. I love you, Kathy, and am grateful for you.

In one month we will have the opportunity to participate in a general conference of the Church and hear the messages of the men we have spoken about tonight. General conference is a time to pause from what we are doing, to listen to the Lord’s servants, and to prayerfully set our course for the months ahead. Please consider these questions:

- Have I clearly marked general conference on my calendar so that I will be able to listen to each of the sessions available to me?
- How will I prepare myself during this coming month so that I will be spiritually ready to receive the messages?

And, as general conference concludes, we might ask:

- What specific impressions came to me during the conference?
- What necessary changes will I make in my life?

The iron rod *is* the word of God. The scriptures, the words of the living prophets, and the gift of the Holy Ghost are powerful in their ability to keep us safe. Let us hold fast to the

words of the prophets. Let us hold fast to the iron rod.

I would like to conclude with an experience we had in March 2000. Sister Andersen and I were invited to attend the temple dedication in Albuquerque, New Mexico. I knew that I would be asked to speak and that my remarks should be brief.

We entered the celestial room dressed in white. President Hinckley sat in the middle chair with a member of the Twelve on his right and with me on his left. As we reverently awaited the first session, I felt a distinct and specific impression that I should adjust the remarks I had prepared. The impression came: “Speak of the keys. Speak of the keys.”

I quickly turned to the scriptures to locate the passages that explain the keys of the priesthood being returned to the earth. Then—and I can remember it as if it were yesterday—a powerful spiritual feeling came into my mind and heart. The feeling that burned within me was this: “He who sits next to you holds all the priesthood keys upon the earth. He who sits next to you holds all the priesthood keys upon the earth.”

I took a deep breath. I looked over at President Hinckley. I could not deny the powerful manifestation of the Spirit. I thought of this scripture:

For his word ye shall receive, as if from mine own mouth. . . .

For by doing these things the gates of hell shall not prevail against you; yea, and the Lord God will disperse the powers of darkness from before you, and cause the heavens to shake for your good. [D&C 21:5–6]

God, our Heavenly Father, lives and loves us. His Only Begotten Son, Jesus Christ, is our Savior. He is resurrected. He lives. Together They appeared to the Prophet Joseph Smith. President Gordon B. Hinckley is the Lord’s anointed prophet today, vested with all the

priesthood keys upon the earth. I so testify in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

Notes

1. See Boyd K. Packer, "Lehi's Dream and You," BYU devotional address, 16 January 2007.
2. See David A. Bednar, "A Reservoir of Living Water," fireside address given at BYU, 4 February 2007.
3. "The Iron Rod," *Hymns*, 1985, no. 274.
4. Bednar, "A Reservoir."
5. Packer, "Lehi's Dream"; emphasis in original.
6. George Q. Cannon, *Gospel Truth*, sel. Jerreld L. Newquist, 2 vols. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1974), 1:323. Relative to the importance of living prophets, President Wilford Woodruff, the fourth president of the Church, said: "If we had before us every revelation which God ever gave to man; if we had the Book of Enoch; if we had the untranslated plates before us in the English language; if we had the records of the Revelator St. John which are sealed up, and all other revelations, and they were piled up here a hundred feet high, the church and kingdom of God could not grow, in this or any other age of the world, without the living oracles of God" (*The Discourses of Wilford Woodruff*, sel. G. Homer Durham [Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1946], 53).
7. Boyd K. Packer, *CR*, October 1996, 5; or "The Twelve Apostles," *Ensign*, November 1996, 6.
8. Boyd K. Packer, *CR*, April 2000, 9; or "The Cloven Tongues of Fire," *Ensign*, May 2000, 9.
9. James E. Faust, *CR*, April 1995, 83; or "Heirs to the Kingdom of God," *Ensign*, May 1995, 63.
10. Gordon B. Hinckley, *CR*, October 1985, 110; or "Let Us Move This Work Forward," *Ensign*, November 1985, 85.
11. Gordon B. Hinckley, *CR*, April 1984, 69; or "The Miracle Made Possible by Faith," *Ensign*, May 1984, 47.
12. Gordon B. Hinckley, *CR*, April 2002, 85–86; or "We Walk by Faith," *Ensign*, May 2002, 73–74.
13. Bible Dictionary, s.v. "revelation," 762.
14. Gordon B. Hinckley, "A Testimony Vibrant and True," *Ensign*, August 2005, 6.
15. Tatyana Vyshemirskaya and Dagmar Leiß, in "Something Remarkable: Testimonies of the Blessings," *Ensign*, December 2006, 17.
16. Buxton family, in "Taking the Challenge," *Ensign*, December 2006, 14.
17. Gordon B. Hinckley, *CR*, September–October 2006, 66–67; or "Rise Up, O Men of God," *Ensign*, November 2006, 60.
18. Dallin H. Oaks, "The Dedication of a Lifetime," CES fireside for young adults, Oakland, California, 1 May 2005.
19. Henry B. Eyring, *CR*, April 1997, 33; or "Finding Safety in Counsel," *Ensign*, May 1997, 25.
20. Letter dated 19 November 2006.

