

Choose to Serve

M. RUSSELL BALLARD

I thought that you might be interested in some of the things that have happened in my life in the last few months. On Thursday morning, October 10, 1985, in the fourth-floor council room of the Salt Lake Temple, I was invited to sit on a small stool placed at the feet of President Spencer W. Kimball, who sat in a chair. With President Kimball's hands on my head, and surrounded in a circle by President Hinckley and all the members of the Council of the Twelve, I was ordained an apostle of the Lord Jesus Christ and set apart as a member of the Council of the Twelve. President Hinckley was voice. I was given a blessing that is a great source of comfort and strength to me. To say the least, my brothers and sisters, I was then and still am now overwhelmed with this calling to serve as a special witness of the Lord and to serve you, the members of the Church.

In 1974 President Kimball called me to preside over the Canada Toronto Mission. He also called me to serve as a member of the First Quorum of the Seventy in 1976. It is very special to me to know that the last priesthood ordinance he participated in before his passing was my ordination to the holy apostleship. I have a deep love and respect for our beloved President Kimball. He will always hold a very special place in the hearts of my wife, Barbara,

our children, and myself, as I know he does in all of your hearts.

As I have relived this most meaningful experience in my life over and over again, I have asked myself the question that I believe almost everyone asks when called to serve in the Church, "Why me, Lord?" The privilege of serving as a member of the First Quorum of the Seventy for the past nine and one half years has taken me to many parts of the earth on errands for the Lord. I believe I know as well as anyone in the Church that there are thousands of faithful and devoted men and women who serve the Lord with their whole soul and they serve him with great distinction. Knowing as I do that there are many men worthy and capable of such a sacred calling as mine, the question "Why me?" has had a sobering impact upon my own soul.

I have, during the past three months, come to the comforting knowledge that the Lord and my Brethren see in me something I can do to help the work of the Lord continue to move

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forward. In my specific case I am also aware that the dedicated service of many of my forefathers could well have influenced my call to the Council of the Twelve. Since the very beginnings of the restoration of the Church they gave all that they had, even their lives, for this great work. Family members of the Prophet Joseph Smith and his brother Hyrum have served in the Council of the Twelve since the organization of the Council of the Twelve in 1835.

I count it a blessing to be a representative now of the family of Joseph and Hyrum, and acknowledge publicly that to follow my great-grandfather, Joseph F. Smith, and both of my grandfathers, Hyrum Mack Smith and Melvin J. Ballard, into the Council of the Twelve Apostles is a great honor and responsibility. I will do my very best to be the kind of a servant that is worthy of such a birthright.

On several occasions I have been assured by my Brethren that they felt my forefathers must have sustained my call in the councils on the other side as well as the First Presidency and the Council of the Twelve on this side of the veil. But how is it that a call to serve in the Church comes into the lives of sons and daughters of God? Let me explore this with you for a few minutes.

By Their Own Choice and Agency

To begin with, I am sure that our behavior in the premortal world had a great deal to do with our birthright here upon the earth. I do not pretend to understand the whole process, but I have come to a comfortable assurance in my own heart that to be born in a land that is free, where men and women can worship God through the dictates of their own feelings and consciences, is a great blessing. As you know, in many countries of this world today a meeting such as this one could never be held. The blessings of the abundance of physical conveniences of life that every one of us enjoys is overwhelming when we compare our

abundant life to the struggle for survival that is ever present in many parts of the earth.

Nineteen eighty-five took me twice to the vast continent of Africa, where I walked among the people and observed firsthand their terrible suffering. For example, the value of a tent placed on bare earth to shield the children of God from the cold night winds of the desert and the scorching heat of the day has a new and impactful meaning to me that is very difficult to express in words. You and I have beds with mattresses and bedding to sleep on. We have hot and cold running water at our command. We have sanitation facilities to help control disease and sickness of all kinds. Our homes are heated, and some are air conditioned. Many of us have comfortable air-conditioned automobiles in which to travel.

The question could well be asked, How in the plan of our Heavenly Father do some of his children have so much while others have so little? One answer for us who are sitting here tonight is found in this mandate from the Lord, “For of him unto whom much is given much is required” (D&C 82:3).

God the Father and Jesus Christ his Son have every right to expect much from you and me. In the great plan of salvation all of the mortal children of our Father in Heaven, while in the premortal world, elected by their own choice and agency to follow the Lord rather than Lucifer. By this choice we earned the right to receive a physical body of flesh and bones. The blessing of our mortal body perhaps will not be fully understood until we pass from this life into the next one. We know, however, that to receive this physical body is absolutely essential to “dwell in the presence of God and his Christ forever and ever” (D&C 76:62).

By our mortal life we can experience the testing process of exercising our free agency. The right to make our own choices is essential to our preparation for celestial living in the presence of God. We learn by this process to

either love and embrace the teachings and commandments of the gospel of Jesus Christ or to follow the temptings and enticements of the devil. Every human soul makes hundreds of choices daily, and when these are compounded and totaled they will determine our eternal destiny. Never forget that one of life's most important choices is to repent and turn away from evil to embrace gospel standards. This process is part of the great plan of life. In our case, as members of the true Church of Jesus Christ, we have the perfect standard or guideline for knowing how to choose the right way to live in mortality. The gospel of Jesus Christ with its teachings and commandments leading to eternal life is what we must choose to follow. We are blessed while living in mortality to have both physical body and spirit joined together. In this state of our existence we are on the road to becoming as our Father in Heaven. For he said after the fall of Adam, "Behold, the man is become as one of us, to know good and evil" (Genesis 3:22).

The prophet Alma explains the great experience of mortality as a probationary state or existence.

And we see that death comes upon mankind, yea, the death which has been spoken of by Amulek, which is the temporal death; nevertheless there was a space granted unto man in which he might repent; therefore this life became a probationary state; a time to prepare to meet God; a time to prepare for that endless state which has been spoken of by us, which is after the resurrection of the dead. [Alma 12:24]

And so we are here in mortality with a physical body and the spirit united to help us work out our own salvation. The spirit within each one of us must learn to bring our body under subjection. By the power of our spirit, we must bring ourselves under the control of the commandments and teachings of the gospel of Jesus Christ. We should always

remember that to die without embracing the gospel and living its commandments will only complicate our eternal progress, because it is far easier to repent and change while living in this probationary state. Do not suppose that your desires and appetites will change because you die. We will surely rise from the grave with the same desires and habits that were present upon our interment to the grave.

Therefore, as Alma pled,

And now, my brethren, I wish from the inmost part of my heart, yea, with great anxiety even unto pain, that ye would hearken unto my words, and cast off your sins, and not procrastinate the day of your repentance. [Alma 13:27]

The Struggle Between Good and Evil

The challenges to live in the world are great. In many ways these challenges are more difficult for you young people today than they were when I was your age. In a recent issue of a national magazine the whole issue of morality was examined. Let me quote from that article:

The Pentagon launches an investigation of 45 of the nation's top 100 defense contractors for bribery, kickbacks, false claims, bid rigging and overcharges.

...

[A] stockbrokerage [firm] pleads guilty to defrauding banks of tens of millions of dollars and is fined 2 million dollars.

Major student cheating scandals are disclosed at Stanford University, the University of California at Berkeley and the University of Southern California.

Professional baseball players admit to using cocaine, a major point-shaving scandal hits the Tulane University basketball squad, and several other schools are cited for recruiting violations.

Kickbacks to Salvation Army officials are admitted by two Philadelphia exporters who said they sought favored treatment in purchasing used clothes from the charitable organization.

A New York socialite whose ancestors go back to Mayflower Pilgrims is set free with a token fine after confessing that she ran a million-dollar-a-year prostitution ring. . . .

I'm just highlighting from this article, and I want to continue.

. . . Gambling used to be widely condemned. Now, many more churches run bingo games, and 22 states and the District of Columbia operate lotteries. Drinking used to be widely condemned. Now, nearly two thirds of Americans drink at least occasionally.

Premarital sex used to be widely condemned. Today, it is commonplace, although many still consider it a moral lapse. Federal statistics show that about half of the women who married during the early 1960s said they had sex before their weddings. Now, more than four fifths report they had sexual experience. On average, U.S. girls have their first sexual intercourse at age 16, boys at 15 and a half. "Premarital sex is seen as part of discovery" . . .

Notes a woman college student at Northwestern University: "There has to be concern about birth control and getting an education before people engage in premarital sex, but it's not wrong. It's perfectly natural." . . .

. . . A recent Yale University study for Psychology Today of 7,500 readers showed that 45 percent of women as well as 45 percent of men said they had cheated on their spouses. . . .

For some, honesty depends on the circumstances. As sociologist Seymour Martin Lipset of Stanford observes: "Everybody lies. But the question is, to what extent do you consciously deceive others? Do you exaggerate to impress a girl or a guy? Do you fudge on your curriculum vitae to impress an employer? Do you twist the truth to succeed in your job?"

No one knows whether the truth is more twisted today than in the past. But some scholars think it is. . . .

. . . [Lying] allows many people to excuse dishonesty on grounds "that it does not matter

whether or not we lie when we have a good reason for doing so."

A major legal and ethical dilemma for Americans is abortion. Before 1973, it was illegal in most states and practiced sub rosa. Today, it is legal in most cases, widely practiced and under furious attack. . . .

Teen pregnancy has become so acute that groups across the nation are trying to combat it. . . .

Cheating, stealing and lying at work have "really popped to the surface since the recessions of the early 1980s," . . . "honesty tests" for job applicants [show that] 3 of every 10 prospective retail workers admit stealing from a previous employer" . . .

"Teaching values has always been a cooperative effort by the family and the social institutions" . . . "Now, you have TV instead, but it is hard to see what moral values, if any, are taught by TV. The institutions where moral values are usually reinforced have fallen apart."

Frank Newman, president of the Education Commission of the States, says that "by the time the typical student graduates from high school, he or she has spent more hours with TV (15,000) than with teachers (12,000)."

The U.S. News poll showed that 20 percent of young adults have tried cocaine and half of those under 30 have smoked marijuana. Atty. Gen. Edwin Meese, citing the nation's 24 million cocaine users, warns, "A national disaster is in the making." ["The State of American Values," U.S. News & World Report, 9 December 1985, pp. 54–58 passim]

What is the impact of television shows that present violence, killings, sex, the image of wealth, the power of money? Who do you suppose is influencing the writers and producers of such programs? Surely Satan has his hand in this programming. As our Heavenly Father and the Lord Jesus Christ observe how you and I live our lives in this present environment, as they see how we deal with the struggle between good and evil, they come to know

us, to trust us with the work of leading their Church. We demonstrate every day that we are learning to choose the right and to depart from evil. Through this process we are preparing to meet and live with God.

The Power of Revelation

The power of revelation from God to man is the way the Lord reveals his will to his servants. The process of extending calls to members to serve in the Church is a process of revelation. If you are true and faithful to the teachings of the commandments of the gospel, if you repent and turn away from sin, revelation will come to your Church leaders at the ward, stake, and general levels to call you to serve in the callings you have prepared yourself to receive as a result of your exercising your free agency in choosing to keep the commandments of the Lord.

As an example of this process, let me share with you an experience I had when I was on assignment in South America. I was asked by the Brethren to divide a stake and choose new leadership for the new stake.

I realize that to some of you this may not sound like a very difficult assignment, but let me assure you that it is a very important responsibility. The reality was that I knew the Lord had already chosen, by the process we have been discussing, the man he wanted for stake president. You should know that the General Authorities seek to know the mind and will of the Lord in order to extend on his behalf the call from him to his sons and daughters to serve.

In this instance, when I arrived at the stake to begin the interviewing of the potential leaders, the current stake president advised me there were only three men who could possibly be considered to serve as the stake president. Since I do not speak nor understand Spanish, everything that was said to me had to be translated and everything I said also needed translating. I explained to the stake president that

the procedure of the Church was that I would interview all of the priesthood leaders living within the new stake.

Since there were over thirty priesthood leaders to be interviewed through the interpreter, that process took considerably longer than normal. Late Saturday night I had not found the person the Lord wanted to preside over this new stake. I reviewed once more with the current stake president all of the potential leaders. We discovered that there was one man who lived in a small district that was being incorporated into the new stake. I inquired after this man and learned that the reason he had not come in for an interview was that he was at home caring for his wife and three children who were ill. Telephone communication, as you know, is very limited in many parts of South America; so it required sending someone out to this brother's home, which was some distance away from where we were, to invite him to meet with me early Sunday morning.

When this fine man arrived I interviewed him, and I knew this was the man to be the new stake president. You see, he had been preparing through thirty-four years of living for this call by repenting of his sins and striving to keep the commandments of the gospel of Jesus Christ, by serving a full-time mission, by accepting responsibilities and leadership and teaching positions in the Church. The Prophet Joseph Smith taught that "Every man who has a calling to minister to the inhabitants of the world was ordained to that very purpose in the Grand Council of heaven before this world was" (*Teachings*, p. 365). I believe this. It behooves everyone of us to live as close to the teachings of the gospel as we can so we will not forfeit our foreordained opportunities to serve the Lord.

I called this faithful brother to serve at 7:20 a.m. Sunday morning, knowing that the general session of the conference would begin at 10:00 a.m. It seemed almost impossible to me

how he would ever select his counselors, organize his high council, and make other calls to leadership in such a short period of time.

Expressing my concern that we were under such a terrible time constraint, this wonderful man smiled, reached into his shirt pocket, pulled out a piece of paper, and then said to me, “Brother Ballard, I am prepared. You see, I was told by the Spirit last night that I would be called to be the stake president. Here are my counselors, here are the men I would like to be my high council, here are the others to serve as leaders of the stake.”

The new stake was organized and the leaders sustained during the 10:00 a.m. session. Immediately following the general session I set apart the leadership of the new stake. All was done through the use of interpreters and was possible because the principle of revelation directed the callings of Heavenly Father’s children.

There is no doubt in my mind that the principle of revelation directs the Church today. I also know that our lives are carefully observed by Heavenly Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. We prepare to serve by the daily decisions we make, and these righteous decisions prepare us to fulfill the will of the Lord in helping to build the Church and the kingdom of God.

Now as we embark on the new year of 1986, I pray that the Lord will bless each one of us that we might make the necessary commitments in our own lives to live worthy of our membership in the only true church of Jesus Christ. May we prepare ourselves to serve the Lord in whatever capacity he may desire to call us. May the Lord bless each of us to repent where repentance is necessary, to choose to do the right things in life for the right reasons.

A Sure Witness

In closing, I feel impressed, my brothers and sisters, to share with you another very special experience that occurred on Sunday, November 10, in that same fourth-floor council

room. I am the newest special witness of the Lord Jesus Christ, and I testify to you that our Heavenly Father’s will was manifest through the spirit of revelation when the Council of the Twelve unanimously sustained the ordination and setting apart of President Ezra Taft Benson as the President of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Let no one question or wonder whether or not the power of revelation is manifest in the leading councils of the Church, for I witness to you tonight that as I stood in the circle as the junior apostle and laid my hand—along with the hands of the other apostles—upon the head of President Benson, the confirming witness came to me that the will of the Lord was being fulfilled on that sacred occasion. This experience was another sure witness to me that God our Father does live, that Jesus Christ is his son, that by the power of revelation the will of the Lord is made manifest in the callings of his sons and daughters to serve them in the Church.

May God bless every one of us here tonight that we will so live to have the Spirit of the Lord with us to help us make wise choices in the daily decisions of our lives. May you students especially be blessed to live in this world without ever succumbing to the evil practices that are so prevalent all about you.

Anchor Your Faith

I would pray a blessing to be upon each one of you, by the apostolic power that is mine under the ordination I have discussed with you tonight, that you might anchor your faith in the divine mission of this Church, in the mission of the Prophet Joseph Smith, and in the words of the scriptures that he brought forth to us in this last day, even the Book of Mormon, the Doctrine and Covenants, and the Pearl of Great Price.

You need anchors, my dear young brothers and sisters. Anchor your faith. If you are wavering for any reason, go to your knees, pick up your scriptures, study, ponder and

pray, call down the blessings of heaven, and by the same power that we talked about this evening, the power of revelation, God will reveal to your soul the truthfulness of this great work.

There have been many attacks in many parts of the earth against the Church. We have been through some difficult times in these last few months. But I suggest that times could well get much worse than they are now, and the anchor to your faith and the anchor to mine must be on our own personal witness and revelation that the gospel of Jesus Christ has in fact been restored to the earth in its fullness through the Prophet Joseph Smith.

I have been rereading the history of the Church. We just don't know what trouble is compared to the problems of the early leaders of this Church. I submit to you that those who remained true and faithful and went forward

to establish this great work on the face of the earth were those men and women who had an unwavering testimony, a witness in their own hearts by the power of revelation earned by their own study, pondering, and prayers.

We love you. You are the future of the Church. I pray God will bless every one of you individually in your lives. If you are troubled with something, go to him in your prayers. If you need help, go to your bishops. Trust in the power of revelation and in the power of faith, which is the great power that moves this work forward.

May you be prepared to do all that you know how to in living your lives in such a way that you will be prepared to be chosen by the Lord to serve this great Church. This is my humble prayer that I offer in your behalf and mine in the sacred and beloved name of the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.