

## “Here Am I, Send Me”

M. RUSSELL BALLARD

First, may I commend President Bateman, his staff, and the faculty for the truly great things BYU is doing here on the campus and all around the world. You students are attending one of the greatest universities in the world. I hope you understand and know that. Further, I'd like to congratulate our basketball team.

I have chosen to speak to you today about something that is very close to my heart. I have been married to Sister Ballard, who is with me here on the stand, for 50 years this August. The greatest day in my life was the day I met Barbara Bowen. My greatest accomplishment was convincing her that I was the only true and living returned missionary among all of those that she was dating. It was a most important day when we were married in the Salt Lake Temple. We are the parents of two sons and five daughters. Perhaps being the father of our five daughters and now the grandfather of 22 granddaughters makes me an expert on the subject of women.

Initially I intended to speak to the women in this audience. But as I have considered the days that lie ahead, I believe this message is vital to both men and women. So I invite you men to pay strict attention. In future days your lives will be increasingly influenced by the women who will become your wives, your daughters,

and your associates with whom you will be privileged to work and serve in the Church.

Let me set the stage by reading from a letter sent recently to Church headquarters. This woman wrote:

*I have a wonderful husband and children, whom I love deeply. I love the Lord and His Church more than I can say. I know the Church is true! I realize I shouldn't feel discouraged about who I am. Yet I have been going through an identity crisis most of my life. I have never dared utter these feelings out loud but have hidden them behind the huge, confident smile I wear to Church every week. For years I have doubted if I had any value beyond my roles as a wife and mother. I have feared that men are that they might have joy, but that women are that they might be overlooked. I long to feel that I, as a woman, matter to the Lord.*

Today I would like to respond to the issue that underlies the concern of this faithful

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woman. Does the Lord respect women? Do women matter to the Lord? The answer is yes—a resounding yes!

Elder James E. Talmage stated that “the world’s greatest champion of woman and womanhood is Jesus the Christ” (*Jesus the Christ* [Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1956], 475). I believe that. The first time the Lord acknowledged Himself to be the Christ, it was to a Samaritan woman at Jacob’s well. He taught her about living water and proclaimed, simply, “I . . . am he” (John 4:26). And it was Martha to whom He proclaimed: “I am the resurrection, and the life. . . . And whosoever liveth and believeth in me shall never die” (John 11:25–26).

Then, during His greatest agony as He hung on the cross, the Savior reached out to one person—His mother—when in that terrible but glorious moment He asked John the Beloved to care for her as though she were his own (see John 19:26–27).

Of this you may be certain: The Lord especially loves righteous women—women who are not only faithful but filled with faith, women who are optimistic and cheerful because they know who they are and where they are going, women who are striving to live and serve as women of God.

There are those who suggest that males are favored of the Lord because they are ordained to hold the priesthood. Anyone who believes this does not understand the great plan of happiness. The premortal and mortal natures of men and women were specified by the Lord Jehovah Himself, and it is simply not within His character to diminish the roles and responsibilities of any of His children.

As President Joseph Fielding Smith explained, “The Lord offers to his daughters every spiritual gift and blessing that can be obtained by his sons” (in Conference Report, April 1970, 59; or “Magnifying Our Callings in the Priesthood,” *Improvement Era*, June 1970, 66). All of us, men and women alike, receive

the gift of the Holy Ghost and are entitled to personal revelation. We may all take upon us the Lord’s name, become sons and daughters of Christ, partake of the ordinances of the temple from which we emerge endowed with power, receive the fulness of the gospel, and achieve exaltation in the celestial kingdom. These spiritual blessings are available to men and women alike, according to their faithfulness and their effort to receive them.

The basic doctrinal purpose for the creation of the earth is to provide for God’s spirit children the continuation of the process of exaltation and eternal life. God said to Moses:

*And I, God, created man in mine own image, in the image of mine Only Begotten created I him; male and female created I them.*

*And I, God, blessed them, and said unto them: Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth.* [Moses 2:27–28]

The Church’s proclamation on the family confirms that God has not revoked or changed this commandment. The First Presidency and the Twelve Apostles “solemnly proclaim that marriage between a man and a woman is ordained of God and that the family is central to the Creator’s plan for the eternal destiny of His children” (“The Family: A Proclamation to the World,” *Ensign*, November 1995, 102).

This doctrine sometimes causes women to ask: “Is a woman’s value dependent exclusively upon her role as a wife and mother?” The answer is simple and obvious: No. Although there is nothing a woman can do that has more far-reaching, eternal impact than to rear her children to walk in righteousness, motherhood and marital status are not the only measures of a woman’s worth. Some women do not have the privilege of marrying or rearing children in this life. To the worthy, these blessings will come later. Men and women who do have the privilege of rearing children will of course be held accountable for

that priceless, eternal stewardship. Although there is simply not a more significant contribution you can make to society, to the Church, or to the eternal destiny of our Father's children than what you will do as a mother or father, motherhood and fatherhood are not the only measures of goodness or of one's acceptance before the Lord. Every righteous man and woman has a significant role to play in the onward march of the kingdom of God.

I have a deep and abiding feeling about women and about the crucial difference they make in every important setting—particularly in the family and in the Church. I have spoken boldly about the role women must play in the council system of the Church. We cannot fulfill our mission as a Church without the inspired insight and support of women.

For that reason I am concerned about what I see happening with some of our young women. Satan would have you dress, talk, and behave in unnatural and destructive ways in your relationships with young men. The adversary is having a heyday distorting attitudes about gender and roles and about families and individual worth. He is the author of mass confusion about the value, the role, the contribution, and the unique nature of women. Today's popular culture, which is preached by every form of media from the silver screen to the Internet, celebrates the sexy, saucy, socially aggressive woman. These distortions are seeping into the thinking of some of our own women.

My deep desire is to clarify how we in the presiding councils of the Church feel about the sisters of this Church, how our Heavenly Father feels about His daughters, and what He expects of them. My dear sisters, we believe in you. We believe in and are counting on your goodness and your strength, your propensity for virtue and valor, your kindness and courage, your strength and resilience. We believe in your mission as women of God.

We realize that you are the emotional (and sometimes spiritual) glue that holds families and often ward families together. We believe that the Church simply will not accomplish what it must without your faith and faithfulness, your innate tendency to put the well-being of others ahead of your own, and your spiritual strength and tenacity. And we believe that God's plan is for you to become queens and to receive the highest blessings any woman can receive in time or eternity. On the other hand, Satan's plan is to get you so preoccupied with the world's glitzy lie about women that you completely miss what you have come here to do and to become. Remember, he wants us to "be miserable like unto himself" (2 Nephi 2:27). Never lose your precious identity by doing anything that would jeopardize the promised eternal future your Heavenly Father has provided for you.

Young men, lest you get too comfortable while I focus on the women, you have a significant role in all of this. You are sometimes the reason our young women get distracted from their eternal mission here. Let the women in your life know that you want them to be women of God and not women of the world. Of you the Lord expects protection and safety for His daughters. Great will be your remorse if you should steal from anyone her virtue and purity.

My earnest plea and prayer is that young men and women will understand that our sisters have always been vital and integral to the work of the Lord. Faithful women have labored valiantly in the cause of truth and righteousness from before the foundations of this world. In President Joseph F. Smith's vision of the redemption of the dead, he saw not only Father Adam and other prophets but "our glorious Mother Eve, with many of her faithful daughters who had lived through the ages and worshiped the true and living God" (D&C 138:39).

Think about the incomparable role of Eve, whose actions set in motion the great plan of our Father. And what about Mary, the “precious and chosen vessel” (Alma 7:10) who bore the Christ child? Surely no one would question the contribution made by these majestic women.

Our dispensation is not without its heroines. Countless women from every continent and walk of life have made dramatic contributions to the cause of Christ. Consider Lucy Mack Smith, the mother of the martyred prophets Joseph and Hyrum and the grandmother of President Joseph F. Smith. Her resilience and righteousness under the most emotionally and spiritually taxing conditions surely influenced her prophet sons and set them firmly on the path toward fulfilling their foreordained destiny.

At this point you may be thinking, “But what about me and my contribution? I’m not Eve or Mary or even Lucy Mack Smith. I’m just regular, plain old me. Is there something about my contribution that is significant to the Lord? Does He really need me?” Remember, the righteous who are not highly visible are valued too, and in the words of a Book of Mormon prophet are “no less serviceable unto the people” (Alma 48:19).

President Spencer W. Kimball responded to that question this way:

*Both a righteous man and a righteous woman are a blessing to all those whom their lives touch.*

*[In] the world before we came here, faithful women were given certain assignments while faithful men were foreordained to certain priesthood tasks. While we do not now remember the particulars, . . . we are accountable for those things which long ago were expected of us. [My Beloved Sisters (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1979), 37]*

Every sister in this Church who has made covenants with the Lord has a divine mandate to help save souls, to lead the women of the world, to strengthen the homes of Zion, and to build the kingdom

of God. Sister Eliza R. Snow, the second general president of the Relief Society, said that “every sister in this church should be a preacher of righteousness . . . because we have greater and higher privileges than any other females upon the face of the earth” (“Great Indignation Meeting [Continued],” *Deseret Evening News*, 15 January 1870, 2).

Every sister who stands for truth and righteousness diminishes the influence of evil. Every sister who strengthens and protects her family is doing the work of God. Every sister who lives as a woman of God becomes a beacon for others to follow and plants seeds of righteous influence that will be harvested for decades to come. Every sister who makes and keeps sacred covenants becomes an instrument in the hands of God.

I have been drawn to an interchange between God the Father and His eldest and Only Begotten Son, who is the ultimate example of living up to one’s premortal promises. When God asked who would come to earth to prepare a way for all mankind to be saved and strengthened and blessed, it was Jesus Christ who said, simply, “Here am I, send me” (Abraham 3:27).

Just as the Savior stepped forward to fulfill His divine responsibilities, we have the challenge and responsibility to do likewise. If you are wondering if you make a difference to the Lord, imagine the impact when you make commitments such as the following:

“Father, if you need a woman to rear children in righteousness, here am I, send me.”

“If you need a woman who will shun vulgarity and dress modestly and speak with dignity and show the world how joyous it is to keep the commandments, here am I, send me.”

“If you need a woman who can resist the alluring temptations of the world by keeping her eyes fixed on eternity, here am I, send me.”

“If you need a woman of faithful steadiness, here am I, send me.”

Between now and the day the Lord comes again, He needs women in every family, in every ward, in every community, in every nation who will step forward in righteousness and say by their words and their actions, "Here am I, send me."

My question today is, Will you be one of those women? And will you men who hold the priesthood answer the same call?

Now I know most of you want to. But how will you do it? How, in a world filled with deceptive messages about women and the family—and the significance of both to the Lord—will you perpetually respond to the Lord, "Here am I, send me"?

For those who really want to live up to who you are, for those who at all costs want to repent if necessary and who want to see through Satan's deceptions, I have two suggestions: First, listen to and follow those whom we sustain as prophets, seers, and revelators. Second, learn to hear the voice of the Spirit, or the voice of the Lord as communicated by the power of the Holy Ghost.

I cannot stress enough the importance of listening to and following the prophet and the apostles. In today's world, where 24 hours a day the media's talking heads spew forth conflicting opinions, where men and women jockey for everything from your money to your vote, there is one clear, unpolluted, unbiased voice that you can always count on. And that is the voice of the living prophet and the apostles. Their only motive is "the everlasting welfare of your souls" (2 Nephi 2:30).

Think of it! Think about the value of having a source of information that you can always count on, that will always have your eternal interests at heart, and that will always provide inspired truth. That is a phenomenal gift and guide.

Just four months ago President Hinckley spoke to you in a Churchwide fireside. Have you studied his message and identified things you need to avoid or do differently? I know a

17-year-old who just prior to the prophet's talk had pierced her ears a second time. She came home from the fireside, took off the second set of earrings, and said to her parents, "If President Hinckley says we should only wear one set of earrings, that's good enough for me."

Wearing two pairs of earrings may or may not have eternal consequences for this young woman, but her willingness to obey the prophet will. And if she will obey him now, on something relatively simple, how much easier it will be to follow him when greater issues are at stake.

Today I make you a promise. It is a simple one, but it is true. If you will listen to the living prophet and the apostles and heed our counsel, you will not go astray.

If you want to avoid the snares of Satan, if you need direction when the choices in front of you are puzzling and perplexing, learn to hear the voice of the Lord as communicated through the Holy Ghost. And then, of course, do what it tells you to do.

Nephi taught clearly that the Holy Ghost "is the gift of God unto all those who diligently seek him" and that "he that diligently seeketh shall find" (1 Nephi 10:17, 19). The stunning reality, my dear young brothers and sisters, is that you control how close you are to the Lord. You determine just how clear and readily available promptings from the Holy Ghost will be. You determine this by your actions, by your attitude, by the choices you make, by the things you watch and wear and listen to and read, and by how consistently and sincerely you invite the Spirit into your life.

Contemplate for a moment the extent and the impact of this blessing! You have been given a gift that when exercised and respected will give you the answers to all of the confusing, thorny questions and problems you will face in your lives.

I can only imagine some of the questions you are facing right now. Should you marry the young man you are now dating, or not?

Should you finish your degree, or not? Should you serve a mission, or not? What career should you pursue? Why pursue a career with vigor when all you've ever really wanted is to be a mother?

As life progresses, how will you respond to challenges that will inevitably come? Will you know where to turn for peace and consolation if you are called upon to bury a child—as two of our own children have done—or if a child threatens to stray from the gospel path? How will you know what to do when you face financial reverses? Where will you turn for insight and inspiration when you are called upon to lead in your ward or stake? You young men are facing similar kinds of questions.

To all of you there is only one way to safely and confidently meet the obstacles and opportunities that are part of life's path. First, listen to the prophet and the apostles. Study the principles we teach. Then take those principles to the Lord and ask Him how you should apply them in your life. Ask Him to influence your thoughts, temper your actions, and guide your steps. "Counsel with the Lord in all thy doings, and he will direct thee for good" (Alma 37:37). He will communicate with you through the power and presence of the Holy Ghost.

There are several things that greatly enhance our ability to understand the promptings of the Holy Ghost and thereby hear the voice of God.

**First is fasting and prayer.** When the sons of Mosiah were united with Alma the Younger, they rejoiced in their reunion and acknowledged that because "they had given themselves to much prayer, and fasting," they had been gifted with the spirit of prophecy and revelation, and "when they taught, they taught with power and authority of God" (Alma 17:3).

**Second is immersing yourself in the scriptures.** The word of God "will tell you all things what ye should do" (2 Nephi 32:3). The scriptures are a conduit for personal revelation. Your generation is much more versed in holy writ than was mine at your age. You

have been taught to read and study the scriptures. I urge you to intensify your study of them. I promise that your ability to hear the voice of the Lord as communicated through the Holy Ghost will increase and improve.

**Third is preparing to spend time in the house of the Lord.** When the time appropriately comes for you to go to the temple, you will leave the temple "armed with . . . power" (D&C 109:22) and with the promise that as we "grow up" in our knowledge of the Lord, we will "receive a fulness of the Holy Ghost" (D&C 109:15). The temple is a place of personal revelation. If you are endowed, visit the temple regularly. If you are not, prepare yourself to enter, for inside the doors of the temple rests the power that will fortify you against the vicissitudes of life.

**Fourth is listening to the counsel of your father and mother.** They are wise and experienced. Share with them, as my children have shared with me, your fears and concerns. Seek blessings from your father. If for some reason he is not worthy or able, go to your bishop or your stake president. They love you and will count it a privilege to bless your life. You should also receive your patriarchal blessing.

**Fifth is obedience and repentance.** There are certain things you simply cannot do if you want to have the Holy Ghost with you. It is not possible to listen to vulgar lyrics, watch movies filled with sexual innuendo, tamper with pornography on the Internet (or anywhere else for that matter), take the name of the Lord in vain, wear revealing clothing, compromise in any way the law of chastity, or disregard the values of true manhood and womanhood and expect the Holy Ghost to remain with you. Whenever anyone participates in those kinds of activities, it should not be a surprise if feelings of loneliness, discouragement, and unworthiness follow. Do not make the choice to go it alone rather than have the Spirit of the Lord to guide,

to protect, to prompt, to warn, and to fill you with peace. Repent if you need to so you can enjoy the companionship of the Spirit.

Women and men who can hear the voice of the Lord, and who respond to those promptings, become invaluable instruments in His hands. I will never forget an experience I had following a stake conference. I was asked to participate in a blessing for a young woman your age who was suffering with cancer. The family were converts, and they had found peace through the promptings of the Spirit. Prior to our giving the blessing, this dear sister said to me: "Elder Ballard, I am not afraid to die, but I would like to live here with my family. I am prepared to accept the will of my Father in Heaven. Please bless me to find peace and to know that He will be with me." What faith, insight, and courage the Spirit had blessed her with! A few months later the family advised me that Heavenly Father had called her home. She died in peace, and the family lived in peace because they were familiar with the Spirit. One of the sweetest messages the Spirit will relay is how the Lord feels about you. And that reassurance will strengthen you in a way that almost nothing else can.

Now, finally, I turn again to you dear sisters, you who have such a profound, innate spiritual ability to hear the voice of the Good Shepherd. You need never wonder again if you have worth in the sight of the Lord and to the Brethren in the presiding councils of the Church. We love you. We cherish you. We respect you. Never doubt that your influence is absolutely vital to preserving the family and to assisting with the growth and spiritual vitality of the Church. This Church will not reach its foreordained destiny without you. We men simply cannot nurture like you nurture. Most

of us don't have the sensitivity—spiritual and otherwise—that by your eternal nature you inherently have. Your influence on families and with children, with youth, and with men is singular. You are natural-born nurturers. Because of these unusual gifts and talents, you are vital to taking the gospel to all the world, to demonstrating that there is joy in living the way the prophets have counseled us to live.

More than ever before we need women of faith, virtue, vision, and charity, as the Relief Society declaration proclaims. We need women who can hear and who will respond to the voice of the Lord, women who at all costs will defend and protect the family. We don't need women who want to be like men, sound like men, dress like men, drive like some men drive, or act like men. We do need women who rejoice in their womanhood and have a spiritual confirmation of their identity, their value, and their eternal destiny. Above all, we need women who will stand up for truth and righteousness and decry evil at every turn and simply say, "Lord, here am I, send me."

I bear my witness and testimony to you this morning, my beloved young members of this church, that you are precious, that this is The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. The kingdom of God will roll forward until it fills the entire earth. It is for you to be beacons and banners to the entire world, to show the women and the men of the world there is such a natural disposition in women to do good, and to seek after things of the Spirit, what is right and what is true.

I simply say to you this morning, God bless the women of the Church, in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.