

# Children of the Covenant

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Sister Bateman and I approach the beginning of each school year with excitement as we greet 7,000 new and 21,000 returning students. We extend a special welcome to everyone, including more than 6,000 missionaries who have returned to campus during the last year. The safe arrival of each student is of utmost concern. Labor Day weekend, with many students traveling home and then returning, is of concern. Historically it is a dangerous time, as lives are sometimes lost. We are pleased to report that no accidents resulting in death have been reported as of this morning.

At the beginning of each new year, we are excited to meet the freshman and transfer students and feel their energy and enthusiasm. The meeting two weeks ago with parents of new students was a special highlight, as was the freshman commencement that concluded a week of orientation. Conversations with parents of new students revealed a deep appreciation for Brigham Young University and its mission. As the world drifts farther away from well-proven principles, parents are concerned for the moral and spiritual welfare of their young people as they leave home for college life. An e-mail message received last week from the father of a new freshman is typical of parents' feelings. The message reads:

*Dear President Bateman,*

*Thank[s] for taking the time to speak with us new-student parents last Thursday afternoon. [The parent meeting] and the "commencement" later that night were a . . . highlight in our trip to bring our daughter to school. I was especially impressed by two things:*

- *[The] sincere effort to get the freshmen involved;*
- *[The] down-to-earth manner in discussing the challenges students will face.*

The father then concluded his message with the following statement:

*I felt something in those meetings that I haven't felt for a long time; the excitement of being a part of a community that is really doing something important, meaningful, and beneficial to the world. We know our daughter is in good hands and are thrilled that she's able to attend BYU.*

*Best regards . . .*

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*Merrill J. Bateman was the president of Brigham Young University when this -devotional address was given on 8 September 1998.*

The theme for my remarks centers on the father’s feelings of “being part of a community that is . . . doing something important.” There are two parts to the statement. I wish to discuss both and then suggest ways in which each member of the community can live up to the opportunities that are here.

The father indicated that he felt the “excitement of being part of [the Brigham Young University] community.” What is the BYU community? What is the source of excitement felt by the father? Is BYU making a meaningful contribution to the world? I believe that BYU’s mission is among the most important on earth! What is it? In the next few minutes I wish to address these questions in the hope that our view of the university will be broadened and our commitment deepened.

### **The Mission of Brigham Young University**

Two weeks ago at the Annual University Conference I shared a story with the faculty and staff concerning the mission of BYU. Since the students were not there, let me repeat it for their benefit. The incident took place in 1885, 10 years after the founding of Brigham Young Academy. In those days the school was funded by local donations with little support from Church headquarters, and the college had fallen on hard times. There was not enough money to pay teachers or provide supplies. The situation was desperate, and it appeared that the academy’s doors would close. Zina Young Williams, dean of women and a daughter of Brigham Young, initiated a meeting with President John Taylor in the hope of obtaining Church help. The story unfolds as follows:

*After listening to Sister Williams’s plea for help, President Taylor took her hand “in a fatherly way” and said:*

*‘My dear child, I have something of importance to tell you that I know will make you happy. I have been visited by your father. He came to me in the silence of the night clothed in brightness and with a*

*face beaming with love and confidence told me things of great importance and among others that the school being taught by Brother [Karl G.] Maeser was accepted in the heavens and was a part of the great plan of life and salvation; . . . and there was a bright future in store for . . . preparing . . . the children of the covenant for future usefulness in the Kingdom of God, and that Christ himself was directing, and had a care over this school.’*

[Leonard J. Arrington, ed., *The Presidents of the Church* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1986), pp. 108–9]

In spite of the dark hour overshadowing the academy in 1885, one can say with hindsight that it had a “bright future.” As one compares today’s marvelous campus nestled against the Wasatch Mountains with those early beginnings in downtown Provo, the connection is almost unrecognizable in physical terms. The small seedling Zina Young Williams tried to protect has developed into a mature forest. There is a stark contrast between the few dozen students gathered from local communities in 1885 and today’s almost 30,000 students assembled from all 50 states and 117 foreign countries. But elaborate facilities and a large student body are not sufficient to fulfill President Taylor’s dream. Brigham Young’s statement to President John Taylor is fulfilled only if the university prepares “children of the covenant for future usefulness in the Kingdom of God.” The mission of BYU encompasses the academic but is more—much more. Who are the “children of the covenant,” and how does the university prepare them to be useful in the kingdom and the world?

### **The Children of the Covenant**

The BYU community is composed of children of the covenant. In order to know who these people are, one must know something about the covenant. The revealed gospel of Jesus Christ is called the “new and everlasting covenant.” We believe that it embraces every

set of promises that God has made or will make with men and women on this earth (D&C 132:5–7, 133:57). One enters into this covenant through faith, repentance, and baptism. One continues in the covenant through obedience to gospel principles and by participation in even higher covenants.

The “new and everlasting covenant” is the most potent force shaping the destiny of Brigham Young University. It produces the light that helps us see the university’s mission. It generates the power that draws us together and focuses our energy in the discovery of knowledge. The bond that creates the special BYU community is not just the contractual relationship each person has with the university but the covenantal relationship that exists between us and the Lord. Elder Dallin H. Oaks discussed this special relationship in the Annual University Conference fireside two weeks ago (see Dallin H. Oaks, “Why Do We Serve at BYU?” BYU Annual University Conference fireside, August 23, 1998). He pointed out that members of the Church have covenanted at baptism and in the temple to live a righteous life and to contribute to the building of the kingdom. The university is part of the kingdom. Since his presentation I have given considerable thought to the status of non-LDS persons associated with BYU.

A large portion of the faculty, staff, and students are members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. As such, they have entered into covenants with the Lord through Church ordinances. What about non-LDS members of the BYU community? They have not participated in these ordinances. Are they covenant makers or is their relationship only contractual? It is my view that nonmember faculty, staff, and students may enjoy more than a contractual relationship with the university. It is my belief that non-LDS faculty and students become covenant participants when they agree to support the university’s mission and participate with full heart to preserve the

covenantal environment. I arrived at this conclusion after reflecting on many conversations with nonmember faculty and after reading a letter written by a new member of our faculty who is non-LDS. The letter was written by him to former colleagues explaining why he left his position at their university to join us. With his permission, I share a portion of the letter:

*For those of you who are unfamiliar with BYU, it is the flagship university of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. . . . Neither [my wife] nor I are members of the LDS Church, but as embodied in its university and the warmth of its members’ acceptance of us, we have found it to represent a remarkable testament to God’s work on earth. Indeed, Brigham Young University is one of the rare remaining examples of what all religiously affiliated universities once aspired to be—an institution that sees its students as persons of infinite worth and believes that their education for faithful lives represents the world’s best hope for a humane and productive future. The educational program and student experience at BYU [are] built around such core values. [Letter from Professor Tom Morgan to George Washington University law faculty, January 12, 1998]*

The letter’s message closely parallels Brigham Young’s statement to John Taylor. The letter illustrates the faculty member’s understanding of and willingness to contribute to the university’s mission. He is committed to prepare students for “faithful lives” in the hope of building a better world. He understands that each person is of infinite worth and is prepared to treat them as such. He is committed to working in a covenant environment. His heart and mind indicate that his relationship is more than a contractual one.

During the past three years, conversations with other non-LDS faculty at BYU have revealed the same commitment and attitude. Almost all see students in an infinite light. We are grateful that non-LDS faculty assembled at

BYU are true to the university's purpose and that your standards are our standards. We express appreciation for the contributions you make and want you to know that you would be as comfortable in the temple with us as you are in the classroom.

All of us, members and nonmembers, are affected by the covenantal environment that exists. The infinite and eternal relationship is the engine that empowers us to change lives intellectually and spiritually. President Gordon B. Hinckley described the unique features of BYU in his devotional one year ago. With regard to the faculty, he stated that they

*feel as much at home in the house of the Lord as they feel in the classrooms of this university. When all is said and done, it is not this elaborate campus that really counts. It is the faculty who teach you, who lead you, who encourage you, who help you find your way as you go forward with your studies. This . . . is an element of the singular BYU experience.* [Gordon B. Hinckley, "The BYU Experience," BYU Devotional, November 4, 1997, p. 3]

Although I have suggested that all members of BYU are children of the covenant, President Young's reference was directly applicable to students. His concern was with you, the student body. The "bright future" that lay in store for the university is now your present. The purpose of the university is to help you become useful in the kingdom of God. The Lord's definition of intelligence encompasses both intellectual and spiritual acumen (D&C 93:36–37). He is concerned with you as a whole person. That is why Brigham Young wanted the students to experience every subject taught under the influence of the Spirit.

There are data that confirm the status of BYU students as "children of the covenant." You are different in many respects from students at other universities. In the most recent survey of 311 colleges by The Princeton

Review, BYU students ranked first on the "stone-cold sober" list. Just as important, you also ranked first for "students [who] pray on a regular basis." You helped BYU rank second in the "town-gown relations" category. (See *The Best 311 Colleges—1999 Edition* [New York: Random House, 1998].) This is important. BYU is a significant part of the Provo-Orem community. We must be good citizens. Civic leaders in both communities are working closely with BYU to solve the housing, parking, and traffic problems that beset all of us. There is a cooperative spirit, and solutions will be forthcoming.

There is another survey in which BYU students participate that highlights some other characteristics. It is called the "College Student Experiences Questionnaire," in which 30 major universities participate. Participants include students from Duke, Pennsylvania State, UCLA, Washington State, Southern Methodist, and others. The survey is a nationally normed, stratified, random sample of 25,000 students with 1,500 BYU participants. The survey has been administered over the years, with the last survey taken in March 1997. Some interesting comparisons between BYU students and their counterparts are the following:

- BYU students spend significantly more hours per week doing school work.
- BYU students spend significantly more hours per week working at a job.
- BYU students are much less likely to have their expenses paid by their family.
- The parents of BYU students are more educated than their counterparts.
- BYU students are more likely to engage in activities relating to art, music, and the theater.
- BYU students experience a significantly higher number of writing experiences in the form of essay exams, term papers, and written reports.

The questionnaire also revealed that BYU students are above average in gaining a broad general education, in acquiring knowledge and skills for work, and in developing their own values and ethical standards. The data are highly complimentary of this student body. Research has shown that the most important factor in student learning is the quality of effort students themselves apply to their institution's available resources. It is clear that our students are more mature and more committed as they devote additional time and energy to both study and work. These characteristics suggest that you take seriously your responsibilities as "children of the covenant."

Not long ago an international diplomat visiting campus asked two questions that reflect on us as a covenant people. He had spent the morning lecturing and visiting with students and faculty. He then came to my office for a brief exchange. The first question he asked was, "Are all the buildings new?" When told that some were 50 to 60 years old, he replied, "But they are so clean." The second question asked was, "Why is everyone so happy?" Because he knew little about us, my answer centered on our beliefs and our standards of behavior. The short answer, had he known more about us, could have been, "Because we are a covenant people!"

During the past few weeks, as preparations were made for the Annual University Conference and the beginning of a new school year, a number of impressions and feelings came regarding the mission and destiny of Brigham Young University. Some of these feelings and insights were shared with the faculty and staff three weeks ago. There is one impression that was not shared. It concerns the current status of BYU in the Lord's plan. I arrived at the University in January 1996 believing that Brigham Young University was "in the process of becoming a 'Zion university'" (Merrill J.

Bateman, "A Zion University," included in "Learning in Zion: Two Addresses," *Educating Zion* [Provo: BYU Studies, 1996], p. 251). It was my belief then that considerable progress had been made over the years in achieving the goal of academic excellence in a climate of faith but that there was still a long road to travel before the designation "a Zion university" would be appropriate.

In contrast to my views of three years ago, the recent impression was that Brigham Young University *is* a Zion university. At first I resisted the notion. None of us believes that we have reached our potential—either as scholars or as Saints. On the other hand, perhaps Tessa Meyer Santiago was right when she implied that Zion is not a destination but a covenant people with "a knowledge of the gospel and the resurrected Christ in [their] hearts," all journeying to the promised land (Tessa Meyer Santiago, "Under Covenant Toward the Promised Land: Section 136 as a Latter-Day Type," *BYU 1996–97 Speeches* [Provo: BYU, 1997], p. 241). No wonder the father of the young freshman daughter felt the excitement and sensed the importance of this university. He felt the influence of the Lord's Spirit as all of us are committed to preparing the children of the covenant for useful lives in God's kingdom.

### **The Challenge**

I close with a challenge for all of us to be true to the promises we have made—both to the university and to the Lord. Obedience to true principles is not a burden when one's relationship to God is understood and when one has a burning within regarding the verity of the restored gospel. May each of us recommit on our sacred honor to the journey of a Zion university. This is my prayer in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.