

# “Hold the Banner High”

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Graduates and all who rejoice with you on this occasion: I enjoy commencement exercises. These are happy times for graduates, for parents, for friends, for teachers, and for administration. These are times to acknowledge past accomplishments and take proud notice of goals attained. These are also times to take notice of potentials certified and to anticipate future achievements.

Commencement exercises are also occasions to celebrate graduates’ progress from one status to another. That is what “commencement” signifies. It is a rite of passage, like a christening, a baptism, or a wedding reception. I am pleased to join in such a happy occasion.

I.

Custom decrees that we dress up in robes for a commencement exercise and that graduates parade before the assembly to hear the reading of their names and to receive well-earned congratulations.

Custom also decrees that you receive written evidence of your new status—a diploma. Here I deviate from normal commencement rhetoric by calling attention to

some embarrassing moments BYU has suffered in the preparation of these diplomas.

A minor example was reported in the *Daily Universe* seventeen years ago. Every student who received a master’s degree in the April commencement in 1995 received a diploma in which the seal of the university contained the wrong date for its founding (see “Defective Y Diplomas Discovered, Replaced,” *Daily Universe*, 20 September 1995, 1). Replacements were, of course, provided.

The report of that mistake, which I found in my files as I did research for this talk, reminded me of an even greater embarrassment that occurred during my own time as president of BYU. This one has never been reported, but since nearly forty years have now passed and since I do not want to continue selfishly concealing my unique knowledge of this matter, I choose to share it now.

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In April 1974, BYU conferred an honorary degree on our beloved apostle Elder LeGrand Richards. Honorary degrees are titled by the awarding institution. Most frequently they are titled Doctor of Laws. In a creative moment, our BYU administration and board of trustees decided to give a unique title to Elder Richards' degree: Doctor of Christian Service. The diploma was prepared and put into my hands, suitably framed in a presentation folder. With loving formality I presented it to Elder Richards in the commencement exercise.

As we took our seats, Elder Richards opened the folder and examined the diploma, which I had neglected to do. As the program went forward, he quietly handed me the opened folder and I read the beautifully inscribed degree: Doctor of Christian Science. Typical of that great gentleman, he never said anything about this embarrassing mistake. As for me, I quietly retained possession of the erroneous document, and we soon provided the correct one. Perhaps we will now have to endure the publicity we avoided in 1974, but I suppose we are now more suited to do so.

## II.

Custom also decrees that, as part of a graduation ceremony, graduates listen to speeches acknowledging the obvious fact that the mere gaining of knowledge and skill is only a partial view of the significance of education. Of even greater importance is how educational attainments will be used. As a result, commencement addresses commonly give graduates advice and take notice of the needs of the world in which they will serve.

You graduate in challenging times. We live in times of wars and rumors of wars, earthquakes, tornadoes, tsunamis, recession, and the prospect of further financial disaster. Values and standards honored for thousands of years are being denied or cast aside. Evil is being called good, and good is being called evil. Selfishness is rampantly replacing service.

Though men's hearts are failing them, you should take heart. There have always been challenging times. We, the generations of your predecessors, have survived daunting challenges, and so will you. The answer to all of these challenges is the same as it has always been. We have a Savior, and He has taught us what we should do. At the end of His ministry He declared: "These things I have spoken unto you, that in me ye might have peace. In the world ye shall have tribulation: but be of good cheer; I have overcome the world" (John 16:33).

As His witness I testify that His teachings are true and that the way He has marked out is the way to peace in this world and everlasting life in the world to come.

## III.

Now, what is your role in all of this?

Almost forty years ago President Marion G. Romney stood at this pulpit and spoke these words to graduates at a BYU commencement exercise:

*You all have a mark upon you after today. . . . You will be known as a graduate of Brigham Young University, [which is] part of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. The people who know you and see you will judge the Church by you. Your great mission is to hold the banner high.* ["Concluding Remarks," BYU commencement address, 20 April 1973, 1]

You "have a mark upon you." We all have marks or labels upon us. Our names and many characteristics of our appearance, such as family similarities, are marks. So is our speech. These marks are involuntary. Other marks are voluntarily assumed, like religious symbols that various faiths use on their apparel, which we honor, and tattoos, which we discourage. Our Savior is the model for a self-imposed mark of the utmost significance. Isaiah spoke messianically as he voiced the Savior's declaration: "I have graven thee upon the palms of

my hands” (Isaiah 49:16). In their own ways, each of these marks—holy and mundane—is a banner that sends a signal.

The mark you receive as a BYU graduate is neither involuntary nor self-imposed. You sought this mark, and it is put upon you by proper authority. After today you have more than a new line on your résumé. You have been marked. As a BYU graduate, you are, as we say, a marked man or woman.

The significance of a mark is twofold. First, like a banner, it will be visible and it will have an effect on others. “He” or “she” is a BYU graduate, some will say, and that statement will identify expectations or disappointment.

But the most important effect of the mark put upon you today is not the signal it sends to others but the influence it should have upon you. A mark can and should be a reminder of our relationship to those who put the mark upon us and also of the responsibilities we have assumed as a result of the certifications they have given us. These are the meanings probably intended when the apostle Paul wrote to the Galatians about their responsibilities as followers of Christ and concluded with his personal testimony that “I bear in my body the marks of the Lord Jesus” (Galatians 6:17).

Paul’s marks may have been scars from persecution suffered in the service of the Master. Your marks from BYU may be academic to others, but to you the mark of a BYU degree should be a continuing reminder.

Foremost among the things you should remember from your years at BYU are the teachings you have received about the things of eternity and the principles of right and wrong that have been up-front in your religion classes and pervasive in many others. I will remind you of some of these teachings and do so in an unusual way. At Brigham Young University it seems appropriate to quote the teachings of the founder, Brigham Young. He spoke as an extraordinarily wise leader, and he also spoke as a prophet.

#### IV.

Here are some of Brigham Young’s wise words about practical living:

*Some think too much, and should labor more, others labor too much and should think more, and thus maintain an equilibrium between the mental and physical members of the individual; then you will enjoy health and vigor, will be active, and ready to discern truly, and judge quickly. [DBY, 261]*

*There is no music in hell, for all good music belongs to heaven. Sweet harmonious sounds give exquisite joy to human beings capable of appreciating music. . . . Every sweet musical sound that can be made belongs to the Saints and is for the Saints. [DBY, 242–43]*

Brigham Young was an aggressive teacher of self-reliance. Here are some of his words on that subject:

*Instead of searching after what the Lord is going to do for us, let us inquire what we can do for ourselves. [DBY, 293]*

*While we can help ourselves, it is our duty to do so. [DBY, 155]*

*Have I any good reason to say to my Father in Heaven, “Fight my battles,” when he has given me the sword to wield, the arm and the brain that I can fight for myself? Can I ask him to fight my battles and sit quietly down waiting for him to do so? I cannot. . . . To ask God to do for me that which I can do for myself is preposterous to my mind. [DBY, 426]*

*Ye Latter-day Saints, . . . learn to do without that which you cannot purchase and pay for; . . . you must and will live within your means. [DBY, 293]*

Beyond Brigham Young’s wisdom—so necessary to lead the Saints in supporting themselves and in building their homes

and society in a barren wilderness—he was foremost a prophet of God. He taught eternal truths and guided the Saints to apply them in their mortal circumstances.

*Our existence here is for the sole purpose of exaltation and restoration to the presence of our Father and God, where we may progress endlessly.* [DBY, 37]

*The Gospel brings intelligence, happiness, and glory to all who obey it and live according to its precepts.* [DBY, 53]

*The Lord has revealed to us a plan by which we may be saved both here and hereafter. God has done everything we could ask, and more. . . . The errand of Jesus to earth was to bring his brethren and sisters back into the presence of the Father; he has done his part of the work, and it remains for us to do ours. . . . He is now King of kings and Lord of lords, and the time will come when every knee will bow and every tongue confess, to the glory of God the Father, that Jesus is the Christ.* [DBY, 27]

In establishing the Academy that was to grow into Brigham Young University, this great founder taught that education was an imperative in the gospel of Jesus Christ.

*All our educational pursuits are in the service of God, for all these labors are to establish truth on the earth, and that we may increase in knowledge, wisdom, understanding in the power of faith and in the wisdom of God, that we may become fit subjects to dwell in a higher state of existence and intelligence than we now enjoy.* [“Remarks by President Brigham Young” (6 October 1870), *Deseret News*, Semi-Weekly, 25 October 1870, 2; quoted in *Teachings of Presidents of the Church: Brigham Young* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1997), 317]

*Man is organized and brought forth as the king of the earth, to understand, to criticize, examine,*

*improve, manufacture, arrange, and organize the crude matter, and honor and glorify the work of God’s hands. . . . It is good for mortals to search out the things of this earth.* [DBY, 49–50]

Brigham Young also taught that we have a responsibility to search out the things of God. And, typical of his philosophy of self-reliance, he taught that we have a duty to know these eternal truths for ourselves.

*I do not want men to come to me or my brethren for testimony as to the truth of this work; but let them take the Scriptures of divine truth, and there the path is pointed out to them as plainly as ever a guideboard indicated the right path to the weary traveler. There they are directed to go, not to . . . any Apostle or Elder in Israel, but to the Father in the name of Jesus, and ask for the information they need. Can they who take this course in honesty and sincerity receive information? Will the Lord turn away from the honest heart seeking for truth? No, he will not; he will prove to them, by the revelations of his Spirit.* [DBY, 429–30]

Here is what Brigham Young said about this responsibility of personal revelation:

*How are we to know the voice of the Good Shepherd from the voice of a stranger? Can any person answer this question? I can. It is very easy. To every philosopher upon the earth, I say, your eye can be deceived, so can mine; your ear can be deceived, so can mine; . . . but the Spirit of God filling the creature with revelation and the light of eternity, cannot be mistaken—the revelation which comes from God is never mistaken. When an individual, filled with the Spirit of God, declares the truth of heaven, the sheep hear that, the Spirit of the Lord pierces their inmost souls . . . and they see and understand for themselves.* [DBY, 431]

How was that individuality to be reconciled with the commandment to follow a prophet, even in the weighty exercise of authority

necessary to settle the wilderness and hold back the world?

*The Lord Almighty leads this Church, and he will never suffer you to be led astray if you are found doing your duty. . . . If [your leaders] should try to [lead you astray] the Lord would quickly sweep them from the earth. [DBY, 137]*

The next teaching I will quote is reminiscent of the Master's teaching that man cannot serve two masters (see Matthew 6:24). In teaching the Saints how to conduct their lives in harmony with the gospel in a world that pursues other values, Brigham Young said:

*The man or woman who enjoys the spirit of our religion has no trials; but the man or woman who tries to live according to the Gospel of the Son of God, and at the same time clings to the spirit of the world, has trials and sorrows acute and keen, and that, too, continually. [DBY, 348]*

As BYU graduates and other Saints suffer worldly criticism and perhaps even persecution, they will do well to remember Brigham Young's declaration:

*Every time they persecute and try to overcome this people, they elevate us, weaken their own hands, and strengthen the hands and arms of this people. And every time they undertake to lessen*

*our number, they increase it. And when they try to destroy the faith and virtue of this people, the Lord strengthens the feeble knees, and confirms the wavering in faith and power in God, in light, and intelligence. [DBY, 351]*

Finally, Brigham Young had an inclusive attitude toward his fellowmen that all should understand and emulate:

*It has never altered my feelings towards individuals, as men or as women, whether they believe as I do or not. Can you live as neighbors with me? I can with you; and it is no particular concern of mine whether you believe with me or not. [DBY, 278–79]*

*Our religion is adapted to the capacity of the whole human family. It does not send a portion of the people to howl in torment for ever and ever, but it reaches after the last son and daughter of Adam and Eve, and will pluck them from the prison, unlock the doors, and burst the bonds and bring forth every soul who will receive salvation. [DBY, 389]*

These are some of the teachings of the great founder of this university. These are the ideals for which it still stands. I testify to you that Jesus Christ is our Savior, that He stands at the head of the church that sponsors this institution. And as His servant I invoke His blessings upon you in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.