

Decisiveness in the Face of Uncertainty: The Basis of Progress

LYNN A. MICKELSEN

What is relevant to you today? A few weeks ago I attended a young single adult ward in Washington, D.C., where I met Dean Magleby for the first time. As we came here this morning, I was a little apprehensive about this assignment until I was able to see some of you whom I have known: some of our missionaries—well, many of our missionaries; those of you we have visited in your mission—and we consider you ours; as well as mission presidents and others we have had experiences with.

After sacrament meeting in Washington, D.C., we stayed in the chapel and took the rest of the block time to answer questions. I wish we could do that today. I would be more comfortable with a microphone walking through the audience and asking you questions and answering your questions. Then we could talk about what is on your minds—not just what is on my mind.

Several months ago, when I received this assignment to speak here, my thoughts went back to the devotionals I attended while at BYU. My objective in speaking today is to say something that will be relevant, something that you will not just listen to but that you will hearken to.

How I envy you! What a marvelous time you live in, and what a happy time this should

be. I don't want to live my life over—it has been full and wonderful—but, from my perspective, BYU students have never had it better.

The Chosen Generation

When I was here as a student 50 years ago, I remember hearing from Church leaders that we were “the chosen generation,” that we were among the spirits held back to come forth in this last dispensation. We were told that great responsibility would rest upon us to prepare the way for the coming of the Savior, that no one had ever faced the challenges we would, and that no one had ever been equipped to handle them as we were. I confess my feelings upon hearing this were mixed. There were days I believed what we were told, and other times I rejected it as hyperbole—exaggeration spoken with the intention to get us to behave better than the previous generation. Now that I am in a position to do the preaching, I admit to some hyperbole, but I say with conviction that the Lord meant what He said:

Lynn A. Mickelsen was a member of the First Quorum of the Seventy of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints when this devotional address was given on 28 June 2005.

Even before [you] were born, [you], with many others, received [your] first lessons in the world of spirits and were prepared to come forth in the due time of the Lord to labor in his vineyard for the salvation of the souls of men. [D&C 138:56]

How Do You Become Chosen?

From the beginning of creation, our Father in Heaven has singled out from among His children those He has referred to as “chosen.” We can be chosen by birthright, through the covenants we make, or both. Abel was chosen, for it was said of him that he “*hearkened* unto the voice of the Lord. . . . And the Lord had respect” for his sacrifices (Moses 5:17, 20; emphasis added). Because Cain wanted it *his* way, he was not counted among the chosen and rebelled against God. After Cain killed Abel, Adam and Eve prayed for a worthy son, and Seth was born after the image and likeness of Adam. Seth was called chosen, and his sacrifices were acceptable before the Lord. Being born after the image and likeness of Adam, he looked like him, but, more important, he *acted* like him. He was chosen because of the way he chose to live.

Throughout time the Lord has chosen righteous servants to carry out His work. Noah pronounced Shem the chosen of his three sons, and—although he was not the eldest—in his patriarchal blessing he received *all* the promised blessings of the birthright. Through the lineage of Shem came Abraham. The Lord made a covenant with Abraham: “I will make my covenant between me and thee, and will multiply thee exceedingly. . . . Thou shalt be a father of many nations” (Genesis 17:2, 4). The covenant included the priesthood and great responsibility that through his seed “all the nations of the earth [would] be blessed” (Genesis 22:18).

The Responsibility of Being Chosen

There is a bit of irony in being chosen. One might suppose that being chosen makes a per-

son better than others, yet the Lord has made it clear He is no respecter of persons. What does it mean, then, to be chosen? Peter spoke of “a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, an holy nation, a peculiar people; that *ye should shew forth the praises of him* who hath called you out of darkness into his marvellous light” (1 Peter 2:9; emphasis added).

To those who are chosen, the Lord has always opened the heavens to that marvelous light. The promised light includes understanding the plan of salvation and participation in the covenants and blessings from God. It includes the blessings of the priesthood, the key of the knowledge of God, and exaltation. That marvelous light comes through the Holy Ghost. Those who have not enjoyed the experience of light and knowledge through the Holy Ghost ridicule those who have because they cannot produce empirical evidence to substantiate their knowledge. Notwithstanding the disdain of skeptics, we have that knowledge, and with that marvelous light we have great responsibility. The Lord said, “Of him unto whom much is given much is required; and he who sins against the greater light shall receive the greater condemnation” (D&C 82:3).

The Holy Ghost and the Marvelous Light

The Savior promised His disciples that when He left, they could continue to learn from the Holy Ghost, who would “teach [them] all things, and bring all things to [their] remembrance, whatsoever [He had] said unto [them]” (John 14:26). The Prophet Joseph Smith, in explaining the Godhead, said the Holy Ghost is “a personage of Spirit” so that He can dwell in us (D&C 130:22). As he dwells in us, that marvelous light is increased, and he works as the agent to cleanse us of our sins and confirm truth to our minds and our hearts as we hear it or read it. It is through the inspiration of the Holy Ghost that we come to know the things of God.

Inspiration and Agency

There is an interesting dichotomy between inspiration and agency. The Lord has made it clear: He will inspire, He will guide, He will prompt, He will teach, but He will not *choose* for us. Oliver Cowdery thought that getting inspiration and guidance would be easy. The Lord does not work that way. First we must “study it out in [our minds],” and then *we* must decide (D&C 9:7–9). It is with the exertion of studying it out that inspiration comes. It is through our earnest seeking and thinking that the Holy Ghost can speak to our minds. Part of that deliberation is formulating the right question in our minds so we can then ponder and seek the answer to the question.

When we have made a preliminary decision and settled on a solution or answer, we then take it before the Lord. He has promised us a confirmation of our decisions through a burning in our bosom if it be right and a stupor of thought if it be wrong. A stupor of thought affects each of us in different ways. It may come as a complete brain cramp, when you can’t think of anything. I remember some of those times here at BYU when I had not studied adequately for an exam. You all know what I am talking about. Of course, if the exam is multiple choice, you can always guess. But understand this, the important questions of life are essay questions, and you either know or you don’t.

Asking the Right Question

In 1972 we had a large family and a very small home. Seven of our nine children were then under the age of 12, and our five girls shared a single bedroom. We had only one bathroom. The opportunity came to move to a much larger and nicer home that was also closer to my work. It seemed like a simple, uncomplicated decision. It meant a change in ward, stake, and school, but that didn’t seem important in light of the advantages. I spent two frustrating months considering the move.

I was learning about stupors of thought. I finally decided to take the problem to the Lord in a serious way. I determined I wouldn’t eat until I made a clear decision. For three long days the same frustrating ideas went through my mind. Finally I asked the right question: not about money and convenience but about family and Church. The next morning in the shower I knew we should stay where we were, and I made the decision. The calm peace “which passeth all understanding” (Philippians 4:7) came over me, and I knew it was right. I didn’t know *why*, I just knew. I learned why two months later, when I was called to be the stake president. The Lord, of course, knew all along. I just had to ask the right question.

The Light of Christ

In addition to the blessing of the Holy Ghost, our Father in Heaven has provided another marvelous resource to guide us in our choices. When Elohim confronted Lucifer in the Garden of Eden, He said to him, “I will put enmity between . . . thy seed and [the woman’s] seed” (Moses 4:21). We feel this enmity toward Satan through the Light of Christ. The Light of Christ plants within our hearts a natural hostility toward Satan and his followers, who have set about to frustrate the plan of God. The Light of Christ is given to every man, and it is what makes sin repulsive to the honest in heart. Goodness, innocence and faith, the honesty of a little child, and disgust at the sight of sin are personifications of that enmity. The Light of Christ is one of the most precious possessions we can have. However, if we persist in rejecting His inviting and enticing, we can lose that help, for the Spirit “will not always strive with man” (2 Nephi 26:11).

The Meaning and Purpose of Agency

The Light of Christ gives us the foundation in choosing between good and evil, and the

Holy Ghost is our teacher. Together they will guide us toward the light, but the choice is ours, with no compulsion. The purpose of our existence is to develop the character and capacity to make right decisions; it is based on the eternal principle of agency that began in our premortal existence. I believe it was just as difficult to make right decisions then as it is now. There was as much uncertainty then as we face now. We had to be decisive, to make up our minds. We chose right in the War in Heaven—otherwise we wouldn't be here.

Explaining the meaning and purpose of agency, Lehi told Jacob that if there were not opposition in all things, it would destroy the wisdom of God and His eternal purposes (see 2 Nephi 2:11–12).

Agency and Eternal Life

A life without opposition would be a life without agency, and without agency there could be no progression. But because of agency there can be progression. Lehi continued:

Men are free according to the flesh. . . . They are free to choose liberty and eternal life, through the great Mediator . . . , or to choose captivity and death, according to the . . . power of the devil.
[2 Nephi 2:27]

God gave man agency so that he could act for himself, which he could not do if he were not tempted “by the one or the other” (2 Nephi 2:16). Agency is the essence of eternal life, for eternal life, or God's life, cannot be if there is no agency. Or, in other words, if we can make our agency eternal through right choices, then through the grace of Christ we will have eternal life (see D&C 84:37–38, 121:46).

Man is free to choose between eternal life—which is an eternal continuation of the right to choose—or eternal death, wherein we can no longer choose. One choice perpetuates agency, the other terminates it (see D&C 93:30–31). When we make wrong choices, the door of

opportunity closes behind us. If we continue in error, the doors keep closing until the night of darkness comes when agency is lost and no labor can be performed (see Alma 34:33).

“We Will Prove Them Herewith”

The Lord said through Abraham, “We will prove them herewith, to see if they will do all things whatsoever the Lord their God shall command them” (Abraham 3:25). I have no doubt you are among “the noble and great ones” Abraham saw (verse 22), but that is not a *free pass*; you will have to prove yourselves. The choices we make always determine the outcome or consequences. The Lord has given us commandments to guide us. It seems simple enough. The rub is to make the right decisions. That will require the application of faith. To even know there is a God requires faith. Faith is the basis of our obedience to God. It follows then that faith is an important part of making *right* decisions.

Exercise of Faith

With each decision we exercise our faith. That expression, “exercise faith,” has always intrigued me. I know what exercise means in a physical sense. Physical exertion causes us to sweat. But exercise of the mind and will, the exercise of the spirit, is harder to understand. With greater uncertainty, greater faith is required. Perhaps every decision, to be consistent with God's plan, requires an element of faith. The real exercise of our faith and spirit comes when we make decisions out of our comfort zone. At this time in your lives, you are weighed down with decisions outside your comfort zone. If you are single, you have a marriage decision ahead of you. If you are married, you have homes to buy and children to bring into the world. You wonder, “How will I support my family?” These decisions you face today will require the exercise of faith. We exercise our faith by stepping into the darkness. If we step with faith, surely the light will follow.

The courage to take that step is based on the evidence and the substance we have added to our faith by earlier stretching. And if you have practiced that procedure, you will be decisive and boldly step into the darkness, knowing the light will follow. Mature faith leads to pure knowledge.

When our faith has matured, making the right decision in spiritual things is automatic. It requires little effort, for when you are standing in the light, the decision is clear. The choice has already been made. Moses was caught up into an exceedingly high mountain, where he was able to see all of creation from the beginning to the end. When he came down from his great vision, Satan came tempting him. He appeared as an angel of light, claiming to be the Only Begotten. (He can do that, you know.) But Moses was not deceived, for he said: “[The Spirit of the Lord] hath not altogether withdrawn from me. . . . [Therefore,] I can judge between thee and God” (Moses 1:15). When we have the Spirit of the Lord with us, the decisions are easier, for with that light the difference can be as clear as the day from the darkest night (see Moroni 7:15).

Time of Uncertainty

We live in an information age. With a key-stroke or two you can access information that, when I was here, would have taken hours of research in the library. These are also very uncertain times—in part because of that flood of information and the resulting contradictory information. What is truth and what is propaganda? What is right? What is wrong? Isaiah saw this day and declared:

Woe unto them that call evil good, and good evil; that put darkness for light, and light for darkness; that put bitter for sweet, and sweet for bitter!
[Isaiah 5:20]

During the American Revolution, Thomas Paine declared: “These are the times that

try men’s souls.” He then spoke of summer soldiers and sunshine patriots who chose to hide and watch, to wait and see. (*The American Crisis*, no. 1, 23 December 1776.)

We have our choice today. We must never be summer Mormons or sunshine Saints.

This Is Not a Time to Wait and See

This is not a time to wait and see; this is a time of decision. Unfortunately many of us go through life knowing the things we should do but then fail to make the decisions that allow us to act prudently. We put off important decisions until they require a quick or an impulsive answer.

Early in life our choices and decisions were guided by our parents, teachers, or Church and political leaders. My father died 13 years ago. I miss him. I miss him because there was great certainty in his counsel. It is always comfortable to have someone validate your decisions, but the most important thing is to learn to make right decisions yourself.

Following the gospel plan trains us in making decisions. Through the gospel we receive God’s commandments, and we choose to obey or disobey. As we make the right spiritual choices, our capacity to make right decisions increases in every facet of life. You are here at school to learn how to make right decisions from the experience of others. Going to school is for your temporal life what studying the scriptures is for your spiritual life.

The Season of Decision

In training missionaries, I counsel them to make up their minds about what they intend to do when they grow up, and I teach them that this decision will help them to be better missionaries. In Mexico, one of the elders, obviously a very bright young man, asked, “You mean you want me to take time out of my missionary service to make that decision?”

I asked him, “How much time do you need?”

He replied, “At least a week of fasting and prayer so that I can know the will of the Lord in that important choice in my life.”

My answer surprised him, as it may surprise some of you. I said, “Elder, I don’t think your career matters to the Lord. As long as you keep the commandments and prepare to serve Him, your career is your decision.”

I don’t mean to imply we should not confirm that kind of decision with the Lord, but I believe He expects us to go through the process of making the decision first.

Elder Bruce R. McConkie, many years ago, told a group here at BYU about meeting the girl he would later marry. “When I saw Amelia,” he said, “I knew what I wanted. I didn’t have to ask the Lord.” Then, in reflection, he said, “I guess I could have confirmed that with the Lord, but it was clear to me.”

Indecision Is No Choice at All

Becoming decisive is part of our spiritual growing up. This growing up requires constant decision making. We must learn to be decisive, because indecision is no choice at all. If we fail to choose, we fail to act. With no action, the second law of thermodynamics takes over. That law, simply stated, is that without power or energy applied, things tend to deteriorate. The easiest path is always followed unless we choose otherwise. The Lord expressed it this way: “Strait is the gate, and narrow is the way, which leadeth unto life, and few there be that find it” (Matthew 7:14). And “wide is the gate, and broad is the way, that leadeth to destruction, and many there be which go in thereat” (Matthew 7:13). It is a life-or-death issue. To overcome this entropy requires power. That power is generated by faith, as we follow the narrow way.

The Most Important Choices

We make two kinds of decisions in our lives. The critical decisions determine our standing before our Eternal Father. These decisions have

to do with eternal truth, and the Holy Ghost can confirm the rightness of our choices. Many other decisions don’t make a difference in our standing before the Lord, but they are school-masters that help us to learn and gain experience. They are noncritical decisions like “What color of shirt should I wear today?” (For me, that is easy. With my assignment it is always white.)

And, speaking of white shirts, one of the Brethren told me this experience. He said his wife had given him a colored shirt, a bright yellow shirt, as a present. He knew that to make her happy he had to wear it. So one day, knowing that he was going to the temple, he thought, “I’ll wear it as I leave home. Then I’ll change into my white shirt at the temple.” As he stepped into the elevator at the Church Office Building, one of the senior Brethren saw him and said, “Hmmm. Nice shirt.”

We learn from making those noncritical kinds of decisions. I’ve made the decision to wear a white shirt always so that won’t happen to me! Learn from those decisions and move on. A wrong decision in the noncritical department may embarrass us or cause some other discomfort, but it will not affect our standing before the Lord.

The Nonnegotiables

The critical decisions have to do directly with the gospel, the plan that the Father has given us to guide us back to His presence. These decisions are eternal in consequences and require nonnegotiable commitments. These are the “I will never” and “I will always” parameters that will accelerate our progress and build in a powerful protection when we are tempted to stray from the celestial path. I knew a young man who exemplified this. He overcame difficult physical obstacles in order to fulfill his life’s dream—to serve a mission. At his farewell his father said, “My son will not make many decisions on his mission.” I wondered where he was going with that statement,

but then he continued: “Because he only makes a decision once.” We all need to be like that with the nonnegotiables.

The Thomas Paradox

These nonnegotiable commitments give us greater access to the Holy Ghost to build and strengthen testimony. A testimony of the gospel goes beyond believing to a profound certainty that comes through personal spiritual witness. As Latter-day Saints we are surrounded by the truth—by the truth and the testimonies of others. In that insulated environment we run the risk of depending on others for our certainty. We can find ourselves caught in what I call “the Thomas paradox.” Thomas had spent three years with the Savior, yet when Jesus told His apostles He was leaving and was going to prepare a place for them, Thomas said, “We don’t know where you are going and we don’t know how to get there” (see John 14:2–6).

Contrast Thomas’ indecisiveness with the testimony of Peter when the Savior asked him, “Whom say ye that I am?” (Matthew 16:15).

Peter declared, “Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God” (verse 16).

Then the Savior confirmed Peter’s source of that knowledge: “Flesh and blood hath not revealed it unto thee, but my Father which is in heaven” (verse 17).

If we will be decisive in our desire for personal witness, we can know just as Peter knew.

The Step of Faith

In San Antonio, Texas, I met a man who had married a faithful Latter-day Saint girl. He was not a member of the Church, and they made an agreement that they would not discuss or argue about religion. His wife was true to her commitment, but shortly after they were married the missionaries came calling. He remained true to his commitment and didn’t argue or complain, and the missionaries just kept coming. He went through so many sets of missionaries he lost count. Three years went by, but he still

remained indifferent to the gospel. He was a good man; he was just not willing to expend the faith necessary to believe.

One evening he came home from work, and his wife said, “The missionaries are coming tonight.”

He thought to himself, “Oh, no. Not again! Haven’t I been through this enough already?”

But that night was different. An older stake missionary was with the elders, and as they began the lesson, he said to this man, “It’s time you joined the Church. You need to make the decision now!”

And he heard himself saying, “I know. You’re right. It is time.”

As he said those words, he felt a powerful confirmation of the Spirit and knew it was true.

He later said to me, “I really didn’t know until that moment, but then I knew with a confirmation that I could not deny.” His one step of faith into darkness opened the door to the confirming Spirit.

I rejoice in the principle of agency. I am grateful for opposition that helps us grow.

So what happens when we make wrong choices? With everyday mistakes in everyday temporal decisions, opportunities are lost and physical or mental discomfort may result. But these consequences can be overcome, and the experience gained is valuable to our development.

The Gates of Hell

However, if we make wrong choices in keeping the commandments, the consequences are far more serious. When we disobey the commandments of God, we suffer spiritual death. We cannot return to His presence without help.

There is a trap used to catch pigeons. It is a wire cage with a hinged gate that only swings to the inside. As the pigeon eats the feed on the perch, he focuses on his appetite for the food and blissfully walks through the gate, finding himself trapped. The gate will not swing out. The gates of hell are like that. If we follow our

carnal appetites and commit sin, in effect we pass through that gate. We are powerless to open it, but the Master can and will if we will repent.

How I love our Savior. I know He vicariously suffered spiritual death for us if we will

leave behind the mistakes we have made and follow Him. We can become the “new creature” through Him (2 Corinthians 5:17). I know that is what He wants, and above all that is what I want. In the name of Jesus Christ, amen.