

Traditions of Excellence

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This is homecoming time, a special time for all of us to come to BYU, a time of reunion, and a time of recommitment to the “traditions of excellence” for which Brigham Young University stands. I would like to use the theme of this homecoming week for my remarks today.

The Foundation

We have just experienced the 154th Semiannual General Conference of the Church. Conference time itself marks a time of tradition for many of us. There are the many conference visitors from far and near, the missionary reunions, the long lines and large gatherings of people on Temple Square, and even the conference week sales and specials in many of the local stores. Fathers and sons attend general priesthood meeting together and then converge on the hamburger stands and ice cream shops. Families gather together in front of their television sets to hear the conference messages and music, which never fail to stir our souls. General conference is indeed a good tradition in our lives. It is a time for instilling more deeply within us the truths of the gospel of Jesus Christ *and* the desire to understand them and live them more fully. It is a time when we are taught and reminded of the foundation of

every tradition of excellence—the gospel of Jesus Christ.

The Cultural War

We all recognize that in our lives today, as never before, are those forces that would have us break away from what we know as the traditional values and morals of our culture and religion.

Patrick J. Buchanan of the *Chicago Tribune* wrote a commentary a few years ago describing what he called “an historic struggle taking place between separate, competing and hostile cultures,” a struggle that “divides parties and pulpits, universities and generations. It is carried on in magazines and books, in film and theater . . . it is a cultural war . . . and the issues upon which it is being fought are among the most fundamental.”

Mr. Buchanan described this cultural war as one being fought “not in the arena of weapons, but in the arena of ideas, beliefs, customs, values, traditions, morals and ideals, the outcome

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of which will determine the future of our civilization.”

This same struggle between the false traditions of men and the eternal traditions of the gospel was also apparent among the Saints in the days of the Apostle Paul. Paul wanted to prepare the Saints for the onslaught of persecution that would precede the second coming of Christ. He warned them of the deceit that would be brought among men by the wiles of the adversary. The value of righteous traditions was made clear as Paul wrote to the Saints in Thessalonica.

Therefore, brethren, stand fast, and hold the traditions which ye have been taught, whether by word, or our epistle. [2 Thessalonians 2:15]

Approximately twelve years later Paul wrote a similar appeal in his letter to the Colossians. He pleaded with the people to remain close to Christ, whom they had received, and beware of the sophistries of men.

As ye have therefore received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk ye in him:

Rooted and built up in him, and stablished in the faith, as ye have been taught, abounding therein with thanksgiving.

Beware lest any man spoil you through philosophy and vain deceit, after the tradition of men, after the rudiments of the world, and not after Christ. [Colossians 2:6–8]

A Proper Reply

President Kimball has told of a time when he was meeting with church leaders in a foreign country where different ideologies touched their children. He asked how the parents were able to hold their children and keep them from evil. He said their reply was proper.

We train our children in our homes so completely in the way of right and truth that the destructive, godless philosophies and heresies of

*their other teachers run off without penetrating, like water on a duck's back, and our children remain true to the faith. [“The Family Influence,” *Ensign*, July 1973, p. 15]*

President Kimball then responded, “Ah, that is the answer. Family life, home life, home evenings, dedicated, selfless parents. That is the way the Lord ordained our lives to be” (Family Influence, p. 15).

As we consider traditions of excellence in our lives, it is important for us to evaluate present traditions and look to the future, seriously considering the heritage we are establishing for our children.

Traditions Build and Strengthen

Tradition defined is, first of all, most often associated with family—that which we hand down from ancestor to posterity—the handing down of an inherited culture, attitude, beliefs, opinions, customs, stories, etc., from parents to children.

Excellence refers to that which is clearly above the average, of unusual worth, of excellent quality—worthy.

Traditions of excellence, then, are clearly found within the framework of the gospel of Jesus Christ and are those traditions which build and strengthen family relationships.

Those present at the general priesthood meeting heard Elder Thomas S. Monson speak of the tradition of missionary work established in the family of President Ezra Taft Benson of the Council of the Twelve. President Benson’s father answered the call to serve a mission in England when it meant leaving behind seven children and a wife who was expecting their eighth child. The tradition was set in place as this mother gathered the family together in the evening to read the letters from their missionary father. The spirit of missionary service filled the heart of every family member. The excellent tradition of service to God was established so well that every child in that family

has now completed a full-time mission. This includes President Benson's two widowed sisters, who after many years volunteered to serve as missionaries. To President Benson's delight, they were called to the same mission in which he had served years before in England.

In addition, many of the grandchildren and great-grandchildren have carried on this tradition of excellence through their missionary service. Their response to calls to serve has become predictable—it can be depended upon.

Keep Your Spiritual Balance

You, too, can establish this tradition of excellence in your family. Service to the Lord can be a part of your experience even while earnestly engaged in your academic pursuits. It needs to be if you are to keep the spiritual balance necessary to maintain your eternal perspective.

When Bonnie and I arrived at the University of Southern California to pursue a doctoral degree, we had four children, little money, a fellowship, and lots of hope. We knew there were difficult and demanding years ahead.

My adviser was a fine faculty member who was also a member of the Church. He was well respected on the campus by both faculty and students. I sought his counsel regarding my program and how best to secure the desired degree.

He encouraged me with assurance that we would be able to meet the academic, time, and financial demands. He also reminded me that such a course would require careful attention to priorities. Pursuit of the degree would have to be the number one objective for both Bonnie and me. Of course, we would have to take time with our children and with each other. He advised me to inform our bishop that I would not be available for Church service except on a limited basis on Sunday.

Now, Bonnie and I had determined early in our lives that we would serve wherever and whenever the Lord should call and had done

so from the time we were married. During my freshman year at BYU I had also determined that I would not study my schoolwork on the Sabbath day.

Not long after that the stake president extended a call for me to serve as one of the presidents of the seventies quorum of the stake and as a stake missionary. The call was accepted. The doctoral degree was completed. That experience in service was as important as the educational period that accompanied it.

Key Principles in the Gospel

J. Willard Marriott, whose beneficiaries we are as we enjoy these excellent facilities here at the Marriott Center, feels that the two greatest words in the English language are *work* and *prayer*. Both of these words represent key principles in the gospel of Jesus Christ. It is not surprising then that, as the traditions of work and prayer became hallmarks of his personal and business life, Brother Marriott experienced great success and excellence in both.

So well did Brother Marriott establish these principles in his life that he transmitted them to his children. He has stated that Bill Jr. is so committed to service that he has seen him leave a meeting where matters concerning in excess of one hundred million dollars were being discussed to fulfill a Church service assignment. Both Brother Marriott's children and his employees have grown to experience the satisfaction of a commitment to work, to excellence in service and a desire to make personal improvement. Millions of patrons today benefit from these traditions of excellence.

Forsaking Incorrect Traditions

For the past three and a half years I have had the assignment to serve as executive administrator of the Australia/New Guinea Area. Although my assignment has recently been changed and the title of executive administrator is no longer used, I shall not forget the

experience I had in New Guinea as the Church was first being established there.

Viba Rome and his wife, Mauveri, and their three children live in Papua, New Guinea. About three years ago a missionary couple taught the restored gospel of Jesus Christ to them in small Two-Mile Village, just outside Port Moresby. Two young boys led the missionary couple to the Wadega hut, where they found twelve people living in one small room. Viba and Mauveri were living there with Mauveri's family, the Wadegas. The missionaries taught them the gospel. It was well received by the entire family except for Mr. Wadega, who was reluctant to join any church.

Viba and Mauveri desired to be baptized immediately. Baptism would require them, however, to forsake some long-established traditions of their culture. Fighting, gambling, and beating their wives were traditional and acceptable pastimes for the men of the village. Betel nuts not only colored their teeth and gums a bright scarlet hue but had a narcotic effect upon those who chewed them and made them lazy and lethargic. The women also had changes to make. Attending church meetings would require them to cover their nakedness, a practice contrary to the tradition of their society. The other women of the village ridiculed them and accused them of trying to act superior to them. The traditional role of the women was to be unseen and unheard in any public gathering except when participating in the dances and singing of their culture. Attending church meetings and participating with men in worship service required a very great change in their social relationships.

Viba and Mauveri were baptized in the Coral Sea several weeks after hearing the gospel taught to them. Three weeks following their baptism I had the privilege of conferring the Aaronic Priesthood on Viba and ordaining him to the office of priest. On that day he wore his first white shirt, given to him by the missionary couple, Elder and Sister Campbell.

Viba bore his testimony to the congregation of about 200—most of whom were members of less than one year. These were his stirring words:

Before I accepted the message of Jesus Christ from the missionaries, my heart was as a boiling caldron and my life was filled with fighting and abuse to my family and others. Now my heart is filled with peace and I have only love for my family and I have no desire to injure anyone.

With their acceptance of the gospel of Jesus Christ, Viba and his wife and others have had the determination and courage to break away from the false traditions of their ancestors. The superstitions and voodoo like practices have been replaced with priesthood power and true gospel service. The relationship of husband and wife as a partnership, education, self-improvement, honesty, virtue, and monogomy were all new traditions to be established in the Rome's lives. They have the desire and faith to live close to the Lord and they have the gospel of Jesus Christ and the programs of the Church as full resources to help them establish and maintain desired traditions of excellence.

Viba has a job at a cane furniture factory and is striving to establish an independent home and the traditions of an LDS family. This is not easy for him, because leaving his traditional home has meant taking from his family and the family of his wife their source of income. In New Guinea, when one has a job, all of that person's resources are used to support all family members living in that single dwelling.

Though Viba believes the custom of paying for his bride is not a good one, he will honor the marriage contract he made with Mauveri's father before he received the gospel. Because of the higher value placed on female offspring, Mauveri's value increased as each of their three daughters was born. Viba has determined that he will not carry on this tradition with his own

daughters, however, even though their value would make him a very prosperous man. I think it should be noted here that Mauveri's father delayed setting her final price for five years until he found her true worth: how many daughters she could bear.

Viba now knows the true and eternal value of his family. A little over a year after their baptism I met Viba and Mauveri again, this time in the New Zealand Temple, and had the unforgettable opportunity of performing their sealing ordinance. Their trip to the temple for that special blessing was made possible for them by their gospel brothers and sisters in Brisbane, Australia. For the first time in their lives they rode in an airplane, wore shoes, slept in beds, and ate with forks and spoons from a table set with linen and fine chinaware. They experienced for the first time cold weather and the warmth of borrowed sweaters and the unfeigned love of their brothers and sisters in the temple surroundings.

Viba and Mauveri came forth from the temple endowed with the promise of celestial blessings through their faithfulness. They go forth as the first of their people to be sealed for time and eternity. They will set the eternal traditions before their people and establish among them the true traditions of excellence.

Viba has taught the gospel to his father's family in the village of Garibu. Today, Viba's father is the Garibu branch president. He has expressed his great love and appreciation for his son and the joy of receiving the gospel truths through him.

Fortunately, we here today do not face all the challenges of a Viba or Mauveri Rome. We

are not isolated from our culture while striving to live the gospel of Jesus Christ. Students at BYU are surrounded by the security of daily gospel instruction and almost daily activity in the Church. It is Viba's and Mauveri's challenge to maintain courage and faith to break the ties of old traditions that are contrary to their new life in the gospel and to establish traditions new and different and as yet unaccepted in their culture.

Our Challenge

We face a different challenge of holding fast to the already established and proven gospel traditions, of overcoming complacency and the competing adversary culture—or counter-culture, as described by Patrick Buchanan. The faithful practice of daily prayer and regular scripture study, of moral values and cheerful service to others is common among us. The gospel is taught and followed freely without apology or reservation.

All here who have received the gospel of Jesus Christ and membership in his true Church have the full resources necessary to establish and maintain the desired traditions of excellence. The gospel provides the knowledge, purpose, and principles. The Church provides the programs, ordinances, and power for the development of these eternal traditions.

May each of us today, as we ponder the traditions of our lives, be determined to fulfill our own responsibility to develop the desire and faith to stay true to the teachings of the Lord in the righteous traditions of our fathers. This I pray in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.