

# “Taking Sweet Counsel”

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I appreciate the opportunity to share some ideas with you and would like to invite you to explore with me some ways of applying gospel truth. I prefer to define this process as exploring avenues of application rather than as a mere erudite academic inquiry. The kingdom of God is not a spectator sport. It is an action process requiring learning, commitment, and a special kind of understanding in order to translate truth into action. So I ask *you* to engage in that process—exploring ways of applying gospel truths.

## **Organizations and Relationships**

As a focus for our discussion, I would like to emphasize one important area of gospel truth. Of the many ways to define the purpose of the gospel, let me suggest one for your consideration—the idea of the gospel as a mechanism that (1) defines the meaning of certain organizations, and (2) establishes a set of criteria for quality relationships within those organizations. Now, if this sounds suspiciously close to my academic field, it is. But after all, what else is there besides people behaving, relating, making mistakes, learning, changing, growing?

We have many scriptures and pronouncements from prophets that emphasize the significance of a series of organizations: the family, the neighborhood, the community, the state, the occupational world, the Church, and, ultimately, the kingdom of heaven. The value of the individual is defined and worth is measured in terms of the quality of the relationships we develop in each of these organizational settings: husband and wife, parent and child, individual and neighbor, individual and community, individual and state, individual and occupational setting, individual and the Church, and, finally, individual and God. The principle and ordinances of the gospel are geared not indirectly, but directly, to teaching us what it takes to develop quality relationships in each of these settings. The degree to which we attain those quality relationships is a determinant of our place in the kingdom of God.

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### Counseling with God

I would like to suggest as a text the book of Psalms, where David, reflecting on the challenge of reconciliation with God, cries and struggles as he attempts to escape the consequences of his behavior. In the Twenty-third Psalm David pleads for solace, peace, safety, and protection, but in the Fifty-fifth Psalm he attempts to redefine his relationship with God. In his appeal, he expresses the wish “Oh that I had wings like a dove! for then would I fly-away, and be at rest” (Psalms 55:6). Of course he found he could not. He couldn’t hide. It wasn’t like a military encounter, where he could prove himself by leading the armies of Israel. He had to come to terms with himself. He had to accept God’s definition of a quality relationship both with others (some of whom he had mistreated) and, most significantly, with God. In so doing, he described God as “a man mine equal”—an interesting term—as an acquaintance, as a guide, as a friend (see Psalms 55:13). Then he used a metaphor that I find extremely compelling. He said, in reference to God, “We took sweet counsel together, and walked unto the house of God in company” (Psalms 55:14).

In the quest to take sweet counsel with God—or with a friend, superior, subordinate, enemy, student, teacher, parent, or child—what are we describing? What is the nature of this interaction? What do you need to do to prepare yourself to reach that level of sweet counsel in your relationships? Both parties in a reciprocal relationship need to do a series of things in order to have sweet counsel rather than bitter counsel as the criterion of the relationship.

As I reflect on many of my students over the years, I am not sure that all of them would regard as sweet counsel the responses I gave to papers or to comments in class. I may intend to give sweet counsel, but it doesn’t always come out that way. I have tested this empirically with my children, and they do not regard all of my counsel as sweet. My colleagues do not see

all of my comments as sweet counsel. Neither does my wife. One time I gave a talk on leadership, and at the conclusion of the talk, an individual who had been in the Ann Arbor ward where I served as bishop came up to me and said, “You talk a lot better than you behave.” I have the sweet counsel *theory* down, but it doesn’t always translate into behavior. We need to understand what it takes to apply this important principle. For many of us, that may require some changes.

Sweet counsel first requires trust. Counsel is never sweet unless a relationship has been developed in advance that identifies the love, the care, the commitment, and the concern that transcends bureaucratic encounters, or that transcends an explosion of anger when something goes wrong. For example, it is not useful to tell people that God is disappointed in their behavior unless they care about God. Until they trust that God’s love is something significant and important in their lives, they won’t be interested in obeying God’s commandments. Unless people have a desire to grow, to learn, and to change—counsel is not sweet. Only when both parties bring to the encounter a commitment to explore feelings honestly is it likely to be sweet counsel.

The counseling process is often troublesome. Listen to these two scriptures from the Book of Mormon. Jacob wrote, “Wherefore, brethren, seek not to counsel the Lord, but to take counsel from his hand. For behold, ye yourselves know that he counseleth in wisdom, and in justice, and in great mercy” (Jacob 4:10). As Alma was instructing his son Helaman, he said, “Counsel with the Lord in all thy doings” (Alma 37:37). Notice the emphasis: Do not seek to counsel the Lord, but counsel *with* the Lord. There is a difference.

We do not receive counsel from God until we are prepared to engage in counsel with him. Do you remember the following plea?

*O God, where art thou? And where is the pavilion that covereth thy hiding place?*

*How long shall thy hand be stayed, and thine eye, yea thy pure eye, behold from the eternal heavens the wrongs of thy people and of thy servants, and thine ear be penetrated with their cries?*

*Yea, O Lord, how long shall they suffer these wrongs and unlawful oppressions, before thine heart shall be softened toward them, and thy bowels be moved with compassion toward them?* [D&C 121:1–3]

This was Joseph Smith crying out his honest feelings from Liberty Jail. His cries preceded one of the sweetest, tenderest, and most poignant instructions regarding human relationships and leadership ever given. This was Joseph Smith honestly and emotionally counseling with God—not telling God what he should do in a programmatic sense, but telling God how he felt. God seldom acts without that counsel, without that honest expression of an individual in need.

Recall Christ’s plea: “O my Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me” (Matthew 26:39). And then his cry: “My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?” (Matthew 27:46). This is not a weak sinner struggling with reconciliation, but rather a perfect individual expressing his feelings. If Christ had those feelings and felt it relevant to express them to God, what are your feelings that must precede the sweet counsel *between* you and God?

The preparation for counsel is a process of asking. This is a dynamic, not a passive process. It is not “Lord, what should I do?” or “Who should I marry?” or “What major should I select?” or “Where should we move?” Whenever people have engaged in this type of asking, the response has been rather clear:

*Behold, you have not understood; you have supposed that I would give it unto you, when you took no thought save it was to ask me.*

*But, behold, I say unto you, that you must study it out in your mind; then you must ask me if it be right, and if it is right I will cause that your bosom shall burn within you; therefore, you shall feel that it is right.* [D&C 9:7–8]

In this attempt to simply ask for the translation of the Book of Mormon, an important lesson was taught: Revelations don’t just follow questions, they follow proposals. They follow proactive behavior on the part of individuals who care enough to study, who care enough to trust, and who care enough to formulate proposals. These people may even ask if “God has forgotten them” or if he has gone to sleep (see Psalms 10:11; 42:9). The issue is to communicate the intensity of the concern and to propose alternative actions.

Does God need to know how we feel, or do we need to be humble enough to express how we feel? First, we need to determine how we feel. There is no sweet counsel without honest self-examination and assessment. The human mind is a most remarkable instrument of self-deception that may suppress our true feelings. Honest inquiry requires analysis, criticism, perspective, and a genuine statement of feelings. And if it is important to express these feelings to God, who knows us well, it is even more critical to express them to each other.

We need honest expression, but that only comes after careful self-inquiry and perhaps tears. Almost all revelation starts with a prophet crying unto the Lord, pleading, sometimes criticizing—not telling God what to do, but saying, “God, maybe I don’t understand very well. If you understood the situation the way I do, you would surely take action. Help me understand.” The difference between counseling God and counseling with God is that when we counsel God, we tell him how he should run the Church or the world. When we counsel *with* him, we tell him how we feel, and then he responds after we trust him enough to have an honest relationship.

### Counseling with Each Other

Now, let us move from sweet counsel with God to sweet counsel with each other. In dealing with each other, we can learn many lessons from the way God expects us to deal with him, and from the way he deals with us. The fact that we may not be perfect yet shouldn't deter us from striving for sweet counsel.

When we deal with each other, however, there are many potential dangers. In Ecclesiastes 8:9 we read, "There is a time wherein one man ruleth over another to his own hurt." There is great danger in a relationship when power is seen only as a means to rule or to gain control. Of the scriptures I read that have foreboding consequences for those who abuse relationships, section 121 of the Doctrine and Covenants is the most poignant for me: "Amen to the priesthood or the authority of that man" (v. 37).

*We have learned by sad experience that it is the nature and disposition of almost all men, as soon as they get a little authority, as they suppose, they will immediately begin to exercise unrighteous dominion.*

*Hence many are called, but few are chosen.*

*No power or influence can or ought to be maintained by virtue of the priesthood. [D&C 121:39–41]*

Many are called to serve, to learn, and to grow. Many are given opportunities. Of those many who are called, why are so few chosen? Why do so few avoid the pitfalls and traps that come in relationships as we give bitter counsel, rather than sweet? We all need to carefully consider those situations where our well-intended administrative behavior results in abuse or exploitation. As an example, how many of the following words do you use in describing leadership, authority, power, influence, and management?

- *only by persuasion*
- *long-suffering*

- *gentleness*
  - *meekness*
  - *love unfeigned*
  - *kindness*
  - *pure knowledge*
  - *without hypocrisy*
  - *without guile*
  - *reproving only when inspired, then showing increasing love*
  - *charity towards all*
  - *virtue garnishing thoughts unceasingly*
- [See D&C 121:41–45]

These are the characteristics that lead to sweet counsel in administrative and personal relationships.

In the process of trying to develop these characteristics, we can use another analogous word. I think it is fortuitous that we spell "counsel" with an "-sel" and with a "-cil." The Lord's answer to the exploitation that "almost all" will be subject to in administrative and bureaucratic relationships is found in the concept of a council.

### The Concept of a Council

A council is instituted as the dominant unit of organization in the Church. The highest unit in the Church is referred to very explicitly: the Council of the First Presidency. Councils exist at every organizational level of the Church and, most important, are supposed to exist at the family level as family council.

Some time ago I was asked to write a section in the new Encyclopedia of Mormonism on councils. I wrote that the concept of a council in the Church is both an administrative unit and a philosophy of administrative behavior. The administrative units are clear: a ward council, a high council, the Council of the Twelve, the First Presidency. If employed properly, councils prevent the exercise of unrighteous dominion. Used as an administrative guideline or principle in church or in any other administrative,

leadership, or relationship context, councils prevent bitter counsel and create sweet counsel.

For example, why did we have a *council* in heaven? Why did we not just have an assembly or meeting in heaven? Why not have a committee? If God is omniscient, why does he need a council? Consider the following scriptures, which provide a glimpse of divine councils:

“[Actions are taken] according to that which was ordained in the midst of the Council of the Eternal God of all other gods” (D&C 121:32).

“And the Gods said among themselves: On the seventh time we will end our work, which we have counseled” (Abraham 5:2).

“The Gods took counsel among themselves” (Abraham 4:26).

“And this shall be your business and mission in all your lives, to preside in council” (D&C 90:16).

The presidency of the high priesthood is the “highest council of the church” (D&C 107:80).

It is the duty of the president of every priesthood quorum to “sit in council” with members of that quorum (see D&C 107:85–90).

On one occasion, Church leaders were sent to Missouri to implement a plan for taking care of the poor—a plan necessary for individuals of the Church to achieve salvation. The scripture says, “Let my servant Newel K. Whitney and my servant Joseph Smith, Jun., and my servant Sidney Rigdon sit in council with the saints which are in Zion” (D&C 78:9). The cost of not doing so was that leaders, members, and the Church would fail to achieve their objectives.

Why did these objectives need to be achieved in a council, rather than in other bureaucratic forms of organization? President Joseph F. Smith stated, “In the midst of counsel there is wisdom” (*GD*, p. 130). And in his first sermon after being sustained as President of the Church, he said,

*I propose that my counselors and fellow presidents in the First Presidency shall share with me in the responsibility of every act which I shall perform in this capacity. I do not propose to take the reins in my own hands and do as I please, but I propose to do as my brethren and I agree, and as the spirit of the Lord manifests to us. . . . The Lord never did intend that one man should have the power. [GD, pp. 176–77]*

The definition of autocracy is a government where all power resides in the sovereign ruler. That ruler may be benevolent, like Benjamin, or evil, like Hitler—but the ruler decides everything. The power resides in the sovereign, in the dictator, in the king.

In a democracy, power resides in the people. People vote. They may not vote righteously, they may not vote to do the best thing, but the power resides in the people. In a council, the primary means of decision making is not a vote—instructions are explicit, decisions are unanimous. And in a council, rather than power residing in the sovereign ruler or in the voice of the people—*power resides in truth*. Truth can only be found by an honest exchange of committed people, and when values transcend bottom-line outcomes.

I think it is interesting that in the Council of Heaven, God listened to alternative proposals and allowed people to choose. I often rhetorically ask the question “If God is such a good teacher and such a good leader, how come he lost a third of his followers?” For those who measure organizational effectiveness in terms of universal attainment of a single standard, I would recommend God as a leader. For him, principle is more important than performance. Freedom of choice and honoring the right of others to speak in the council, even though they may not have supported the plan, was more important than universal salvation. Of course there is an implicit contradiction here, because universal salvation can never be forced. In his councils God taught that the

process of honoring every individual and their right to choose, unimpeded by manipulative good intent of obsessive administrators, is of the highest value.

It is this process that is most important. This higher principle of administration is learned in a council. It is not learned in bureaucracies, in kingdoms, in autocracies, or even in democracies. In councils we learn the correct principle that no one person is good enough to take full responsibility for the decision making or the outcome. But even if one leader does have consistent success, there is another problem. When we take full responsibility for the outcome, and when that outcome is good, there is an arrogance of power that corrupts the process by which future decisions will be made.

For example, it is never a bishop's ward. It is never a parent's family. Ownership undercuts equality and shared responsibility. Councils teach that we should have honest expression of feelings and not phony facades that seem to conform to a bureaucrat's or leader's definition of goodness. An honest expression of doubt can be made with a reciprocal agreement that those who hear it will honor it and will not punish those struggling to apply truth in a way that may not be shared or understood by others.

In a council we organize to accomplish objectives. Even if truth is understood by a perfect leader, decisions on implementation are not given by virtue of the truth pronounced. The original decision, understanding of relevant facts, and implementation of assignments must be agreed upon by the people. Those in a council have to verbally and visibly commit themselves to the project or the program that the council chooses. The commitment requires participation, acknowledgment, and action. That does not happen with just an executive pronouncement.

In research that I did some years ago, I learned that half of the decisions made in the

corporate world are never implemented. Some of them are bad decisions and shouldn't be implemented anyway, but some are good decisions that should be carried out. But in the absence of commitment on the part of the implementors, it is an exercise in futility. If there is doubt as to the commitment, then there needs to be understanding and teaching prior to the continuance of the process.

Another issue deals with the simple decisions of organization. Roles must be assigned, rules delineated, and procedures and criteria for a particular activity decided. In the council setting, people agree that other people are important and everyone must understand what is being decided. Unilateral decision making does not fit a council. It may get things done, but it undercuts God's purposes. We should learn to tolerate those we disagree with, and to honor them, as God demonstrated in his councils. We must learn not to honor sin, but to honor people attempting to understand and apply truth. And in the event of a mistake, we still can learn.

It is instructive that the most telling and sensitive scriptures follow the most emotionally distraught expressions to God, such as previously mentioned in the hundred and twenty-first section. Karl Barth said, "He who takes the role of counseling must be prepared to be counseled in turn by his brother, otherwise he attempts too much and becomes a lawgiver. That should be reserved to God."

As we learn the lessons from councils, as we learn that sweet counsel can only be given in a council, as we prepare relationships that enable us to grow and experiment without fear, and as we test without sanction and learn with confidence, we will find ourselves creating organizations that are modeled on God's councils. It is not an easy task; it is a very difficult process. We must learn that principles are more important than control, that honest feelings are more important than smooth facades, and that

understanding new information benefits the individual expressing it as well as the receiver.

By participating in organizations we decide who we are and who we are going to become. If we do not have a council, we increase the risk of becoming victims of the decision-making process, leaving us both cynical and resentful. We will fight back, we will be abused, and will likely abuse others. As leaders and followers, the only protection from these negative side effects is an understanding of the council as a form of organization with sweet counsel as the criterion of interpersonal exchange.

### **That We Might Find Sweet Counsel**

In the final analysis, the only things that last, the only things that stay with us throughout eternity, are knowledge and relationships. We especially need knowledge of God's organizations and an awareness of how human organizations can either get in the way or facilitate God's purposes.

I've been at BYU a long time, and as I look around, I don't always find the ideal of sweet counsel among teachers, students, or administrators. One reason I do not find it is because we are not perfect. But sometimes, I'm afraid,

we don't even want it. I hope that we will want God's form of organization and learning—even if we're not quite prepared, even if some of us have short-term explosions that turn the counsel bitter.

The relationships we develop will only last if they are predicated on the sweet counsel that eliminates the abuse and unrighteous dominion we are warned of. I pray that you and I might find within us the capacity to translate theology and understanding into sweet counsel. In each of the relationships in which we participate—with superiors, with subordinates, in occupational settings, in the university setting, in our homes, and in our church—may we find the way to engage in sweet counsel.

I bear testimony that it is worth it. I bear testimony that the Church has within it the mechanism to teach and bring us to God; that our leaders, while human, also need support; and that we need to do what we can do both as followers and as leaders to create an environment where, as David cried, we may take sweet counsel together and walk unto the house of God in company. I say this in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.