

Latter-day Prophet-Presidents I Have Known

BELLE S. SPAFFORD

President Oaks and students, I always appreciate an invitation to meet with the students of Brigham Young University. I have many happy memories of the years when I was here at the University. I know the heartbeat of this great school, and I have seen its progress through the years. And I am deeply grateful to have an opportunity to be with you this morning. I hope that I may be able to say something that will be of interest to you and perhaps give you a little broader insight into the natures of the great leaders who have presided over us as presidents of the Church. Today I wish to speak to you of prophets, with special reference to those under whose immediate direction I have served as president of Relief Society.

A Prophet Speaks in God's Name

In the Articles of Faith, penned by the Prophet Joseph Smith, in which are set forth the basic tenets of our faith, one—Article 6—declares our belief in prophets as a part of the organization of the Church, both in the primitive church and in the Church today. It reads:

We believe in the same organizations that existed in the Primitive Church, viz., apostles, prophets, pastors, teachers, evangelists, etc.

Scriptures also attest the reality of prophets in Old Testament days: Moses, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Micah, Malachi, and others too numerous to mention.

A prophet in no wise must be regarded as a soothsayer, one who, relying upon his own reasoning, foretells future events. Nor should he be compared to a so-called fortuneteller, one who professes to predict the future. A prophet, as I understand it, is one chosen and inspired of God to speak in God's name regarding the future happenings pertaining to the Church on earth and also to the well-being of God's children. We in this dispensation know that by the will of God our prophet is also the seer and the revelator. As the revelator, he is the one to whom the Lord reveals whatever is necessary for the conduct of the affairs of the Church and the good of the people. He is the living oracle of God, God's mouthpiece on earth. In the Doctrine and Covenants we read: "For his word [the prophet's] ye shall receive, as if from

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mine own mouth, in all patience and faith” (D&C 21:5).

In the Church, the prophet is also God’s chosen servant to preside over the Church as its president, accepted and upheld as such by a vote of the priesthood and the laity of the Church assembled in an officially called general Church conference. To him are given all the keys of authority of the priesthood of the Church upon earth, and by the word of the Lord he is president of the high priesthood of the Church. As such, he presides over the priesthood, and every office in the Church is under his direction, while he himself is directed of God.

These are marvelous things to contemplate, and if we truly believe in prophets and their divinely ordained calling, as we claim to do in the Articles of Faith, we impose upon ourselves a responsibility of strict obedience to their teachings. Since the founding of the Relief Society, the presidency of the society has been favored in having frequent opportunities to meet with the presiding prophet-president of the Church and to receive his inspired counsel and direction. This was true in the days of the Prophet Joseph Smith, who, according to the Relief Society records, met often with the Relief Society sisters in Nauvoo, giving them instruction and encouragement, confiding in them, and blessing them. The minutes of the first meeting record the Prophet as saying, “I gave much instruction, read in the New Testament and Book of Doctrine and Covenants” (*Documentary History of the Church*, 4:552).

This same attention to Relief Society has been given by the prophet-presidents during the days I have served as Relief Society president. It has been my unusual and blessed privilege to serve as president of Relief Society under five prophet-presidents. I was called to office by President Heber J. Grant. I later served under President George Albert Smith, then President David O. McKay, then President Joseph Fielding Smith, and presently under

President Harold B. Lee. I bear witness to you that I know each was divinely ordained for his great and responsible calling. Each one, I am confident, was among the noble and great spirits which the Lord showed unto Abraham, who were chosen before the world was, and was chosen for his great and responsible earthly mission. As I have met with each in council regarding the affairs of Relief Society and matters pertaining to women generally, I have been awed by the depth of insight and understanding, I have marveled at the foresight and the wisdom of counsel, and I have been blessed by the patience and the tenderness of each, as he has directed the course to be pursued by Relief Society. I have heard each speak of the future with prophetic vision, and I have seen the fulfillment of his words.

This does not mean that these five prophets with whom I have had close association were alike as men. On the contrary, they differed in personality, in their native endowments, in their approach to building the kingdom, and in their methods of dealing with the work and dealing with those over whom they presided.

As I consider the men and the needs of the Church and of the world during the time of the presidency of each, I feel confident that each was prepared and peculiarly suited to preside over the Church at the exact period of his calling.

Although I could relate many great and divinely inspired prophecies, as well as highly significant counsel pertaining to the work of the women of the Church given by each of these prophets-presidents, time does not allow for this. I will pass on to you, however, bits of wisdom—given informally, in most instances—that have served me well and which may also serve you and give to you some insight into the natures of these God-ordained Church leaders.

Heber J. Grant

Prior to being made Relief Society president, I was for eight years editor of the *Relief*

Society Magazine. During this period I became quite well acquainted with President Heber J. Grant, who exercised close, watchful care over the contents of all of the Church publications. If an issue appeared containing something displeasing to him, particularly as it related to Church doctrine, you may be sure the editors would hear from him. He was quick in his judgments, forthright, but always right in counseling us. He admonished us always to make certain that articles dealing with Church doctrine were in harmony with interpretations given by the presidents of the Church. He advised us to be precise in quoting the scriptures or the words of the Brethren, and always to give source references. He warned us repeatedly against publishing accounts of dreams of individuals which they regarded as spiritual manifestations, almost personal revelations. Said President Grant to me at one time with regard to these, "It is all right to encourage the people to read the revelations, but let them be the revelations recorded in the Doctrine and Covenants."

An oft-repeated bit of wisdom from President Grant which has served me very well is this: "Discouragement is one of the sharpest tools in the hands of Satan to weaken a person and open the way for the devil to gain power over him. Avoid discouragement as you would avoid a plague."

George Albert Smith

President George Albert Smith, the next president, was a man who taught and practiced brotherhood. He was very approachable. Many times he would drop into my office and say he had just come to visit, and we would visit together for several moments. There was an occasion, during the last illness of President Smith, when I was deeply impressed with his words. I was driving home after a busy day at the office and passed his place of residence. I knew he was seriously ill. Nonetheless, I felt prompted to stop and, without going into the

house, to ask his nurse to express to him the love and concern of the women of the Church for his well-being and to assure him that we were praying for him. The nurse kindly asked me to wait a moment while she conveyed the message. Returning to the door, she said the President wished me to come in, as he wanted to talk with me.

After a short period of time, the nurse assisted the President in to the living room and seated him, well wrapped, in an easy chair. He thanked me for the support the women of the Church had always given him as president. He said he knew that his earth life was nearing its end, that he was unafraid of death because he knew he understood it. One thing he sorrowed over, however, he said, was the fact that he might not be spared long enough to dedicate the Los Angeles Temple. This had been a long-time dream. He said he knew it was just a human and selfish desire. And then he spoke of selfishness and said how important it was that we learn to overcome it. Then, with conviction, he said that he knew that in the Lord's own due time the Los Angeles Temple would be dedicated, and it would be dedicated by a prophet of God, one of the Lord's choosing, even though it appeared that he would not be that one. He said the work of the Church goes on as the Lord desires and will do so until all is accomplished. He affirmed, as the Lord's plan for his children, the law that each must go on to another sphere of service as his individual earthly mission is completed, that everyone should accept release from earth life with joy if he has been obedient to God's commandments. He reiterated that the Church would endure and would always have a prophet at its head.

Thus testified a dying prophet, whose earthly mission closed in a few short days. This was a deeply moving experience for me.

David O. McKay

Now of President McKay. An unusual experience with President McKay comes to

mind in which you may be interested. One day I received a wire from President John F. Kennedy, inviting me to attend a meeting at the White House the following week, to which the presidents of women's organizations of the United States, having membership of 100,000 or more, were invited. I didn't wish to attend. I was of the opinion the matter to be discussed was controversial legislation. I felt I might be called upon to speak, and I preferred not to be involved. I knew, however, that I should refer the matter to President McKay before sending my regrets. I took the wire to the President, who read it, and then, to my surprise, he repeated the twelfth Article of Faith: "We believe in being subject to kings, presidents, rulers, and magistrates, in obeying, honoring, and sustaining the law." Concluding this, he said, "In view of this belief, I don't see how you can refuse to honor the request of the president of the United States, if it is at all possible for you to go." Of course I agreed to attend the meeting. I then explained my reason for hesitating, saying what I thought would be the nature of the meeting, and inquired if the President had counsel for me. To this he replied, "Indeed I have. Remember, you do not speak for the Church. This is my role. You speak only for Relief Society." Then, with a twinkle in his eye, he said, "We would expect, of course, that what you say would be in harmony with Church views, insofar as you know them."

With the interview closed, I rose to leave the room. The President, as was his custom, walked with me toward the door. In leaving, I once again said, "President McKay, are you sure you have no further counsel for me?"

With great understanding for my feelings he replied, "Yes, I do have further counsel. Go in peace and learn to trust in the Lord."

I went in peace, and I trusted in the Lord, and I was called on to speak, as I expected. And I attest that I was guided in my actions and directed in my speech during that meeting.

Joseph Fielding Smith

Our next president, President Joseph Fielding Smith, a man of tenderness and great love for the people, evidenced at all times a depth of understanding of the work of the women of the Church, and he passed this on to the Relief Society presidency countless times and in many ways, opening our vision and directing our ways. An oft-repeated statement, relative to this, which is recorded in one of President Smith's Relief Society conference addresses is as follows: "Relief Society was revealed to the Church as a fundamental part of the Gospel."

Harold B. Lee

It is my firm conviction that our present president-prophet, President Harold B. Lee, is endowed with all of the graces, gifts, and powers needed to conduct the affairs of a fast-growing and expanding church in a perilous period of time. He continually evidences great concern for the home and family life of the people. He also evidences warm friendship and concern for the youth of the Church. He never spares himself when the well being of a Church member seems to require his service. His life is the embodiment of his belief that "the Church hath need of every one." Some thirty-five years ago, the Relief Society presidency met weekly with the brethren of the Church Welfare Committee, as this program was in the course of development. President Lee, at the time, was a member of the Council of the Twelve and one of the leading men in the development of the program. With foresight and inspired wisdom beyond our comprehension, he would voice viewpoints and influence decisions related to the future of the welfare program that seemed so remote, indeed so far outside the realm of fulfillment, as to be beyond our understanding. Yet today we see these views firmly incorporated in the Church Welfare Services program, as among its cardinal principles, and his prophetic

judgments are an essential part of the Church Welfare Services programs and procedures today.

Sister Florence Jacobsen, former president of the YWMIA, and I visited with President and Sister Lee one day, three or four years ago, in their hotel room in New York City. President Lee spoke of his concern for the youth of the Church and his feeling that the Church needed to do more for them, and in a better way. As he talked, we became aware that he envisioned efforts that could affect long-established patterns, some of them related to the auxiliaries over which we were presiding. Leaving him, we both affirmed our conviction that we had listened to prophetic utterances. Today we see the fulfillment of his inspired prophecy in the new programs and patterns for youth that are being set into action.

One of the treasured blessings of my life is the personal friendship President Lee has extended to me.

The Prophets Need Our Obedience

Thus I speak of prophets I have known personally. We may speak with equal conviction of the greatness of all of the prophet-presidents who preceded them in this dispensation. Church history is replete with convincing evidence of this truth. I cite one example which relates closely to President Lee's prophetic wisdom as it relates to the youth of the Church. From Gospel Doctrine, I quote the words of President Joseph F. Smith, spoken during April Conference of the Church, sixty-six or sixty-seven years ago:

I expect to see the day when this organization [the Relief Society] will be one of the most perfect, the most efficient and effective organizations for good in the Church. But that day will be when we shall have women who are not only imbued with the spirit of the gospel of Jesus Christ, and with the testimony of Christ in their hearts, but also with youth, vigor, and intelligence, to enable them to

discharge the great duties and responsibilities that rest upon them. We want the young women, the intelligent women, women of faith, of courage and of purity, to be associated with the Relief Societies of the various stakes and wards of Zion. We want them to take hold of this work with vigor, with intelligence, and unitedly, for the building up of Zion and the instruction of women and their duties—domestic duties, public duties, and every duty that may devolve upon them. [Gospel Doctrine, 3rd ed., p. 484]

This [the Relief Society] is an organization that was established by the Prophet Joseph Smith. It is, therefore, the oldest auxiliary of the Church, and it is of the first importance. It has not only to deal with the necessities of the poor, the sick, and the needy, but a part of its duty—and the larger part to—is to look after the spiritual welfare and salvation of the mothers and the daughters of Zion; to see that none is neglected, but that all are guarded against misfortune, calamity, the powers of darkness, and the evils that threaten them in the world. It is the duty of the Relief Societies to look after the spiritual welfare of themselves and all female members of the Church. [Gospel Doctrine, 3rd ed., p. 482]

Are we not justified in feeling that these are prophetic words, along with those of President Lee, that are being fulfilled today in the announcement made at the recent general Church conference, in relation to the Melchizedek Priesthood MIA and the assignment of all single females eighteen years of age and over to Relief Society?

Again, I attest that the great prophets under whose direction I have worked as president of Relief Society have counseled me with prophetic vision relative to the work of Relief Society. In addition, I am convincingly impressed that the prophet-presidents who preceded them were chosen of the Lord. The world has always needed prophets—never more, I believe, than today. Blessed are we

indeed to have the restored gospel with a prophet to lead us in these troublesome times.

We must remember, however, that just as we need prophets, so the prophets need us. They need our faith, our prayers, our labors, our sensitivity to the demands made upon them. They need our obedience to their teachings. The Prophet Joseph Smith appealed to the sisters in Nauvoo: "Your prayers in my behalf

shall avail much: let them not cease to ascent to God continually in my behalf" (*Documentary History of the Church*, 5:141). Even as that first prophet-president of this dispensation needed this support from his people, so does he who presides over the Church today as our prophet and president. And may we give to him this support, I sincerely pray in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.