

## *Agency or Inspiration—Which?*

BRUCE R. MCCONKIE

I've been many places with my wife when, as we have met members of the Church, stake presidencies, high councils, and the like, they've said to me: "We're surely glad to meet you, Brother McConkie, and we're most pleased to have Sister Smith with us." I've assured her that that was all right with me, as long as they didn't call me Brother Smith. And now that's happened.\*

I've sought the Lord diligently, as is my custom, to be guided and directed this morning in what ought to be said—sought him both for myself and for you, so that I might speak and you might hear by the power of the Holy Spirit. Two subjects have occurred to me. I thought that on the one hand I might talk about "Agency or Inspiration—Which?" Or, on the other hand, I might talk about how to choose a wife. It occurred to me I might consult the student body, but then I said to myself, "No, it doesn't make a particle of difference which subject it is; I'm going to say exactly the same things anyway."

My wife and I were having a serious discussion recently, in which we were counting our many blessings. We named a host of things

that have come to us, because of the Church, because of our family, because of the glorious restoration of eternal truth that has taken place in this day; and then she climaxed the discussion by asking this question: "What's the greatest blessing that has ever come into your life?"

Without a moment's hesitation I said, "The greatest blessing that has ever come to me was on the thirteenth day of October in 1937, at 11:20 a.m., when I was privileged to kneel in the Salt Lake Temple at the Lord's altar and receive you as an eternal companion."

She said, "Well, you passed that test."

I believe that the most important single thing that any Latter-day Saint ever does in this world is to marry the right person, in the right place, by the right authority; and that then—when they have been so sealed by the power and authority which Elijah the prophet restored—the most important remaining thing that any Latter-day Saint can ever do is so to live that the terms and conditions of the covenant thus made will be binding and efficacious now and forever. And so I'd like, if

---

*Bruce R. McConkie was a member of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints when this address was given at Brigham Young University on 27 February 1973.*

\*In the introduction, Elder McConkie was inadvertently referred to as "Elder Smith."

properly guided, to make some suggestions that apply in all fields of choice—in all fields, at least all major fields, of activity—but which apply particularly to the matter of eternal marriage, singling that out as the one thing paramount above all other.

When we dwelt in the presence of God our Heavenly Father, we were endowed with agency. This gave us the opportunity, the privilege, to choose what we would do—to make a free, untrammelled choice. When Father Adam was placed in the Garden of Eden, he was given this same power, and we now possess it. We’re expected to use the gifts and talents and abilities, the sense and judgment and agency with which we are endowed.

But on the other hand, we’re commanded to seek the Lord, to desire his Spirit, to get the spirit of revelation and inspiration in our lives. We come unto the Church and a legal administrator places his hands upon our head and says, “Receive the Holy Ghost.” This gives us the gift of the Holy Ghost, which is the right to the constant companionship of that member of the Godhead, based on faithfulness.

And so we’re faced with two propositions. One is that we ought to be guided by the spirit of inspiration, the spirit of revelation. The other is that we’re here under a direction to use our agency, to determine what we ought to do on our own; and we need to strike a fine balance between these two, if we’re going to pursue a course that will give us joy and satisfaction and peace in this life and lead to eternal reward in our Father’s kingdom.

When we were with our Father in the pre-existent sphere, he observed and studied us; he knew how we would respond to his laws when we were in his presence, when we had the knowledge that he was our Father and that the teachings presented to us came from him. We walked by sight. Now he’s finding out how we’ll respond when we walk by faith, when we’re outside his presence and we have to rely

on other things than the personal counsel that we once received from him.

Well, I’d like, if I may, to present three case studies, out of which, perhaps, we can draw some very realistic and sound conclusions as to what ought to be in our lives. I’ll take these illustrations out of the revelations that the Lord has given us.

#### **“You Have Not Understood”**

Case study number one: There was a man named Oliver Cowdery. In the early days, he operated as an amanuensis to the Prophet. He was the scribe. He wrote down the words that the Prophet dictated while the Spirit rested upon him in the translation processes (the Book of Mormon was then being translated). Brother Cowdery was relatively spiritually immature at that time, and he sought and desired to do something beyond his then present spiritual capacity. He himself wanted to translate. And so he importuned the Prophet, the Prophet took the matter up with the Lord, and they got a revelation. The Lord said, “Oliver Cowdery, verily, verily, I say unto you, that assuredly as the Lord liveth, who is your God and your Redeemer, even so surely shall you receive a knowledge of whatsoever things you shall ask in faith, with an honest heart, believing that you shall receive.” And then one thing he might receive is defined as “a knowledge concerning the engravings of old records, which are ancient, which contain those parts of my scripture of which as been spoken by the manifestation of my Spirit.”

Having thus dealt with the specific problem, then the Lord revealed a principle that applies to it and all other like situations: “Yea, behold, I will tell you in your mind and in your heart, by the Holy Ghost, which shall come upon you and which shall dwell in your heart. Now, behold, this is the spirit of revelation” (D&C 8:1–3).

Well now, Oliver did what a good many of us would have done. He had the instructions

I have read, and he assumed that they meant what they seemed on the surface to say, which was that if in faith he asked God he'd have power to translate. But in his condition of relative spiritual immaturity, he hadn't yet learned what was involved in asking of God, or how to generate the kind of faith or do the specific thing that has to be done in order to get an answer to a prayer. And so he asked. And as you know, he failed; he was totally unable to translate. This caused some concern, I suppose, to him and the Prophet. The matter was referred back to the Lord, whose promise they had been attempting to conform to; and the answer came, the reason came, why he couldn't translate: "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" (D&C 9:7).

Now, seemingly, that's all he'd been instructed to do, to ask in faith; but implicit in asking in faith is the precedent requirement that we do everything in our power to accomplish the goal that we seek. We use the agency with which we have been endowed. We use every faculty and capacity and ability that we possess to bring about the eventuality that may be involved. Now this is translating the Book of Mormon, it's choosing a wife, it's choosing employment, it's doing any one of ten thousand important things that arise in our lives.

The Lord continued:

*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.*

*But if it be not right you shall have no such feelings, but you shall have a stupor of thought that shall cause you to forget the thing which is wrong; therefore, you cannot write that which is sacred save it be given you from me. [D&C 9:8-9]*

How do you choose a wife? I've heard a lot of young people from Brigham Young University and elsewhere say, "I've got to get a feeling

of inspiration. I've got to get some revelation. I've got to fast and pray and get the Lord to manifest to me whom I should marry." Well, maybe it will be a little shock to you, but never in my life did I ever ask the Lord whom I ought to marry. It never occurred to me to ask him. I went out and found the girl I wanted; she suited me; I evaluated and weighed the proposition, and it just seemed a hundred percent to me as though this ought to be. Now, if I'd done things perfectly, I'd have done some counseling with the Lord, which I didn't do; but all I did was pray to the Lord and ask for some guidance and direction in connection with the decision that I'd reached. A more perfect thing to have done would have been to counsel with him relative to the decision and get a spiritual confirmation that the conclusion, which I by my agency and faculties had arrived at, was the right one.

#### **"Why Are You Asking Me?"**

Now, case study number two: There was a man whose name is not so much as preserved to us in the ancient record. He's known as the brother of Jared. From other sources we know his name was Moriancumer. He was the spiritual leader, initially, of the Jaredite people. As they started their progress from the Tower of Babel to their American promised land, he was the one that got in communion with the Lord to get the direction, the spiritual guidance, that they, as a people, needed.

And some very interesting things occurred. They got to the waters that they were going to cross, and the Lord said to him, "Build some barges." But interestingly, the Lord didn't tell him how to build the barges. He'd done it on a previous occasion; he didn't need instruction; there wasn't any revelation that was necessary to guide him. So he built the barges.

But this time they were going to be used under some peculiar and difficult circumstances, and he needed something more than was now present in them: he needed some air.

And this was a problem that was beyond him. So he took that matter up with the Lord, and because it was totally beyond his capacity to solve, the Lord solved it for him and said, “Do thus and so and you’ll have air.”

But then the brother of Jared—having confidence because he was talking to the Lord, because he was communing and getting answers—asked another question: he asked for a solution to a problem that he should have figured out by himself and not taken up with the Lord. He said, “What will we do for light in the vessels?”

And the Lord talked to him about it a little and then he said this: “What will ye that I should do that ye may have light in your vessels?” (Eth. 2:23). In effect, “What are you asking me for? This is something you should have solved.” And he talked a little more, and he repeated in essence the question: “What will ye that I should prepare for you that ye may have light when ye are swallowed up in the depths of the sea?” (Eth. 2:25). In other words, “Moriancumer, this is your problem. Why are you troubling me? I’ve given you your agency; you are endowed with capacity and ability. Get out and solve the problem.”

Well, the brother of Jared got the message. He went up into a mount called Shelem, and the record says he “did molten out of a rock sixteen small stones; and they were white and clear, even as transparent glass” (Eth. 3:1).

I hold here a little piece of amorphous quartz that’s clear as transparent glass. I picked this up in a wilderness area outside of a little community called Crystalina, in a nation called Brazil, in South America. The Brethren thought I was off touring missions, but actually I was doing a little rock hunting. And in that connection, I hope you got the message that the brother of Jared was a rock hound also.

Well, the brother of Jared took sixteen little crystals of some sort (he could hold all of them in his hands); he took them up on the mount.

The record says, “He did carry them in his hands upon the top of the mount” (Eth. 3:1), and then he said in effect to the Lord, “Now this is what I hope you will do.” You really don’t tell the Lord what to do, but you get some inspiration and you use your judgment, and then you talk the matter over with him. And so Moriancumer said to the Lord: “Touch these stones, O Lord, with thy finger, and prepare them that they may shine forth in darkness; and they shall shine forth unto us in the vessels which we have prepared, that we may have light while we shall cross the sea” (Eth. 3:4).

And the Lord did what the brother of Jared asked, and this is the occasion when he then saw the finger of the Lord; and, while he was in tune, he received revelation that exceeded anything that any prophet had ever gained up to that moment. The Lord revealed more to him about his nature and personality than ever theretofore had come forth, and it all came about because he’d done everything that he could do and because he counseled with the Lord.

There’s a fine balance between agency and inspiration. We’re expected to do everything in our power that we can, and then to seek an answer from the Lord, a confirming seal that we’ve reached the right conclusion; and sometimes, happily, in addition, we get added truths and knowledge that we hadn’t even supposed.

### **“They Shall Counsel Between Themselves and Me”**

Now case study number 3: In the early history of the Church, the Lord commanded the Saints to assemble in a certain place in Missouri. The decree went forth: “Assemble.” Specifically, the decree went forth, “Let the Presiding Bishop come here and do such and such.” Now notice what happened. The Lord is talking:

*As I spake concerning my servant Edward Partridge, this land is the land of his residence, and those whom he has appointed for his counselors; and also the land of the residence of him whom I have appointed to keep my storehouse;*

*Wherefore, let them bring their families to this land, [and here's the point] as they shall counsel between themselves and me. [D&C 58:24–25]*

You see, the Lord said “assemble” to Zion. The details and the arrangements, however, the *how* and the *when* and the *circumstances* are to be determined by the agency of those who are called to assemble, but they are to counsel with the Lord. Now, when you counsel with the Lord, you talk something over. I bring my children in and we counsel on a problem. I don't tell them what ought to be; I say, “What do you think? What's your evaluation? What do you want to do in this situation? What's the best thing to do?” And they tell me what they think, and if I happen to have any wisdom or judgment on the matter, I express my views. Well now, the Lord has all wisdom, all knowledge, and all power; he knows how to govern and control and direct us in a perfect manner. He lets us determine what we should do, but he expects us to counsel with him.

Now, after the Lord had said this to the Presiding Bishopric of the Church, he gave the principle that governed in that situation, and it governs in all situations. And this is one of our glorious revealed truths. He said:

*For behold, it is not meet that I should command in all things; for he that is compelled in all things, the same is a slothful and not a wise servant; wherefore he receiveth no reward.*

*Verily I say, men should be anxiously engaged in a good cause, and do many things of their own free will, and bring to pass much righteousness;*

*For the power is in them, wherein they are agents unto themselves. And inasmuch as men do good they shall in nowise lose their reward.*

*But he that doeth not anything until he is commanded, and receiveth a commandment with doubtful heart, and keepeth it with slothfulness, the same is damned. [D&C 58:26–29]*

You know, they said to the Prophet Joseph Smith, “How do you govern so great and diverse a people as the Latter-day Saints?”

He said, “I teach them correct principles and they govern themselves.”

Now, that's the order of heaven. That's how the Almighty operates. That's how the Church is supposed to operate. We're supposed to learn correct principles and then govern ourselves. We make our own choices, and then we present the matter to the Lord and get his approving, ratifying seal.

#### **“Counsel with the Lord in All Thy Doings”**

Now, those are the three case studies; let us come to the revealed conclusion. There was a man named Alma, a mighty and a great prophet. He had a son named Helaman, who was a holy and righteous man, following the pattern that his father had set. And to Helaman, Alma said this: “O, remember, my son, and learn wisdom in thy youth; yea, learn in thy youth to keep the commandments of God. Yea, and cry unto God for all thy support” (Al. 37:35–36). Do you think that if you're counseled to pray to the Lord for support, both temporal and spiritual, that that's all you have to do? The Lord's prayer says, “Give us this day our daily bread.” Do you go out and sit down in the desert or on the mountain and pray with all the fervor you can possess, “Give us this day our daily bread,” or do you go out and plant crops and raise herds and do everything that you can in your situation to accomplish the end result?

Well, continuing: “Yea, let all thy doings be unto the Lord, and whithersoever thou goest let it be in the Lord; yea, let thy thoughts be directed unto the Lord; yea, let the affections of thy heart be placed upon the Lord forever”

(Al. 37:36). Now note: “Counsel with the Lord in all thy doings, and he will direct thee for good” (Al. 37:37).

What was Oliver Cowdery’s problem? “You took no thought save it was to ask. . . . You must study it out in your mind” (D&C 9:7–8).

Well, do you want a wife? Do you want anything that’s right and proper? You go to work and you use the agency and power and ability that God has given you. You use every faculty, you get all the judgment that you can centered on the problem, you make up your own mind, and then, to be sure that you don’t err, you counsel with the Lord. You talk it over. You say, “This is what I think; what do you think?” And if you get the calm, sweet surety that comes only from the Holy Spirit, you know you’ve reached the right conclusion; but if there’s anxiety and uncertainty in your heart, then you’d better start over, because the Lord’s hand is not in it, and you’re not getting the ratifying seal that, as a member of the Church who has the gift of the Holy Ghost, you are entitled to receive.

“Yea, when thou liest down at night lie down unto the Lord, that he may watch over you in your sleep; and when thou risest in the morning let thy heart be full of thanks unto God; and if ye do these things, ye shall be lifted up at the last day” (Al. 37:37). If you learn how to use the agency that God has given you, and if you try to make your own decisions, and if you reach conclusions that are sound and right, and you counsel with the Lord and get his ratifying seal of approval upon the conclusions you’ve reached, then you’ve received revelation, for one thing; and for another thing, you’re going to have the great reward of eternal life, be lifted up at the last day. Now, we’re not all equal by any means; some have one talent and capacity and some another. But if we use the talents we have, somehow we’ll come out all right.

On the recent Monday when we were celebrating Washington’s birthday, I was down

at my mother’s sawing a log in the backyard. She came out to give me some direction and see how I was doing it, and she wasn’t very pleased. She thought I ought to do it differently. She went back into the house and in a few minutes my younger brother arrived. She said to him, “I think you’d better go out in the backyard and give Bruce some help and see that he does this thing right.” And then she said to him, “Bruce isn’t very bright.” Well, so I’m not. So I start where I am, and I go forward from there. I start using such talent as I have, and I begin to apply principles of eternal truth to my life. And I consult and counsel with the Lord in the process. And no matter where I am, the gospel takes me forward and onward and upward, and blessings flow to me that will ennoble and sanctify and improve me in this life and eventually give me glory and honor and dignity in the life to come.

### **We Have the Spirit of Revelation**

Now, I think we’ve said enough; the principles are before us. Let me just do one thing more. Let me do, in effect, what my friend Alma would do. After he’d preached a sermon, he said, “And this is not all. Do ye not suppose that I know of these things myself?” (Al. 5:45). That is, he’d given them the case studies, he’d quoted the revelations, he’d told them what was involved, and then he bore personal testimony. This is what we ought to do in the Church. We ought to learn how to teach by the power of the Spirit, so that when we get through talking about the gospel subjects we’ll know whether what we’ve said is right, and we’ll be in a position to bear testimony, not alone of the truth and the divinity of the work, but also that the doctrine we proclaim and the everlasting truths which we expound are right, that they are the mind and voice and will of the Lord. Now, the glorious, wondrous thing about this work and about these doctrines is that they are true. There isn’t anything in this world, no truth that we can conceive of, to compare with

the truth that the work we're engaged in is true, that the Lord's hand is here. It's a literal fact that we have the gift and power of the Holy Ghost. We have the spirit of revelation, the spirit of testimony, the spirit of prophecy. These things must be, or else we're not the church and kingdom of God; we're not the Lord's people.

Now, the fact is that we do have them; revelation works. Don't shy away from getting revelation. Joseph Smith said, "God hath not revealed anything to Joseph, but what He will make known unto the Twelve, and even the least Saint may know all things as fast as he is able to bear them" (*Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, p. 149). We're entitled to the spirit of revelation. But what I'm attempting to teach this morning is that there's a how and a

procedure, and there are conditions precedent, and it is our obligation to go to work on our problems and then counsel with the Lord and get the ratifying seal of the Holy Spirit on the conclusions that we've reached; and that ratifying seal is the spirit of revelation.

God grant us wisdom in these things. God grant us the courage and the ability to stand on our own feet and use our agency and the abilities and capacities we possess; then let's be sufficiently humble and amenable to the Spirit to bow our will to his will, to get his ratifying, confirming seal of approval, to get in our lives, in that way, the spirit of revelation. And if we so do, there's no question about the result: it's peace in this life; it's glory and honor and dignity in the life to come. Which may God grant for all of us. In the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.