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Devotional

Are The General Authorities Human?

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I am very happy to respond to this invitation--I think. Outside the back door of the chapel is a large poster on which is this question, "Are the General Authorities Human?" and underneath it the words, "Bruce R. McConkie," which I assume means that he has been singled out as the horrible example. So, anything that I might say on this subject which could in any way be interpreted as being less than superlative of necessity has to apply to the indicated "example" and anything that is the reverse to the rest of the Brethren.

I suppose this is a question that is in many minds, and has been from the very beginning; it arises, in the very nature of things, because of the high regard in which we hold the offices that some Brethren are called to.

I recall an instance from early church history, from the days of persecutions and difficulties, Heber C. Kimball, then a member of the Council of Twelve, found himself in circumstances where he sought hospitality from a member of the Church, a widow woman. She fed him what she had, bread and milk, and provided a room and a bed for him. He went to retire. She thought: "Here's my opportunity, I would like to find out--and this is in effect, Are the General Authorities Human?--I would like to find out what an Apostle says when he prays to the Lord." So after the door was closed, she crept quietly up to it to listen. She heard Brother Kimball sit down on the bed; she heard each of his shoes fall to the floor; she heard him lean back on the bed and then these words: "Oh Lord, bless Heber, he is so tired," and that was it.

In that same vein, President Heber C. Kimball, later in his life, I think probably when he was in the First Presidency, was acting as mouth in his own family prayer. His family assembled around, and if I'm not mistaken he had the largest family around, at least from the standpoint of wives. In the middle of his prayer, as he spoke, he suddenly broke out laughing; after he collected himself and was in control, he said, "Excuse me Lord, but it makes me laugh to think of some of the people I have to pray for," and then proceeded on with his prayer in an appropriate manner.

Well, let me talk a little about this subject, "Are the General Authorities Human?" and do it somewhat informally. They told me they would like to record this, and I said that was all right, provided nobody ever heard it at 47 East South Temple, because I enjoyed my membership in the Church.

But there are some things of a serious and proper nature that might be said about this subject, and perhaps we can draw some conclusions and make some points which will have beneficial application to all of us. This is a subject that people have concepts about which aren't always correct. Here is a statement from Joseph Smith indicating this same question is in the minds of many people: "I was this morning introduced to a man from the East. After hearing my name, he remarked that I was nothing but a man, indicating by this expression, that he had supposed that a person to whom the Lord would see fit to reveal his will, must be something more than a man. He seemed to have forgotten the saying that fell from the lips of James, that Elias was a man subject to light passions as we are, yet he had such power with God, that he, in answer to his prayers, shut the heavens that they gave no rain for the space of three years and six months; and again, in answer to his prayer, the heavens gave forth rain, and the earth gave forth fruit. Indeed, such is the darkness and ignorance of this generation, that they look upon it as incredible that a man should have any intercourse with his maker." (Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith, p. 89.)

Such is the view in the world generally; people think: "If there is such a one as a prophet, he is so ennobled and exalted that he is different from the general mass of men." They may think of John the Baptist out in the desert eating locust and wild honey, or of someone like Enoch, of whom the people said, "A wild man has come among us."

And there is somewhat this same concept in the Church. We think of the dignity and glory and greatness of the office. Then some of that feeling spills over and is applied to the individual who holds the office.

There might be a way to get this subject in a better perspective. Instead of "Are the General Authorities Human?" let me say to you, "Is your Bishop Human?" What would the answer be? Or if I say to you, "Are the missionaries human?" Would the answer be yes or no? It depends entirely on what we are talking about. Certainly they are human in the sense that every foible and frailty and difficulty common to the human race attends all of them and all of us. But on the other hand, the General Authorities and the bishops and the missionaries--and this extends out and includes every member of the Church--ought not to be human in the sense of worldliness or of carnal pursuits. None of us should be "human" if by that is meant pursuing carnal mankind.

When we come into the Church, we say that we forsake the world. We are supposed to overcome the world. The Book of Mormon language is that we put off the natural and become a saint through the atonement of Christ the Lord. (Mosiah 3:19.) Well, we, all of us, lived up to our potential and raised ourselves to the standard that we ought to have, then none of us would be human in the worldly or the carnal sense. With it all, we would be so in the sense that we are mortal and all that's related to that.

Well, I would like to read you a couple of quotations. I know these are good quotations because I wrote them myself. The first one is under the heading "General Authorities" in a book entitled, Mormon Doctrine, which is reputed to have said more than it ought to have said on some subjects and this may be one of them. After listing the General Authorities, it says, "These Brethren are all delegated general administrative authority by the President of the Church. That is, they are called to preach the gospel, direct church conferences, choose other church officers, perform ordinations and settings apart, and handle the properties and interests of the Church generally. The labor of their ministries are not confined to stake, ward, or regional areas, but they have general jurisdiction in all parts of the Church." That is all that is meant by General Authority, it means that the administrative authority delegated overlaps local boundaries so that they administer beyond the ward or the stake or the region and act in the Church generally. "Some General Authorities are empowered to do one thing and some another. All are subject to the strict discipline the Lord always imposes upon his saints and those who preside over them. The positions they occupy are high and exalted, but the individuals who hold these offices are humble men like the brethren in the Church. So well qualified and trained are the members of the Church that there are many brethren who could--if called, sustained and set apart--serve effectively in nearly every important position in the Church." (Mormon Doctrine, pp. 283-284.)

About three months ago when we were holding our Priesthood Missionary Committee seminar, Brother Harold B. Lee was speaking and he began his talk by looking at the assembled group of about 40 people, some 30 of them were on the Priesthood Missionary Committee; and he said, "Brethren, there are assembled in this room sufficient men of sufficient spiritual stature so that if all the General Authorities were taken and had to totally reorganize the Church from this group, the Church would continue without missing a heartbeat." That's a substance quotation from his statement, an accurate substance quotation.

Well, this is true. That's true with that body of men; that's true with other Priesthood Committees; and that's true with the assembled congregations that might be put in one room in a host of places and under a host of circumstances. Now to get that in perspective, that's true in a stake and in a ward and in a priesthood quorum. One man is a bishop, one man is a stake president, and one man is a quorum president, but in most places there are a number of individuals who could be bishops, or stake presidents or quorum presidents and who could serve as effectively if it happened they were given the administrative responsibility involved.

Now back to my quotation, "Though General Authorities are authorities in the sense of having power to administer church affairs, they may or may not be authorities in the sense of doctrinal knowledge, the intricacies of church procedures or the receipt of the promptings of the Spirit. A call to an administrative position of itself adds little knowledge or power of discernment to an individual, although every person called to a position in the Church does grow in grace, knowledge, and power by magnifying the calling given him." (Mormon Doctrine, p. 284.)

Well that is one introductory statement, and I would like to read one other, and then we will talk about some applications to us of the principles involved. This also my writing and happens to be under the heading of "Prophets." "With all their inspiration and greatness, prophets are yet mortal men with imperfections common to mankind in general. They have their opinions and prejudices and are left to work out their problems without inspiration in many instances. Joseph Smith recorded that he 'visited with a brother and sister from Michigan, who thought that 'a prophet is always a prophet'; but I told them [this is the Prophet's language], that a prophet was a prophet only when he was acting as such.'" (Mormon Doctrine, p. 547.)

Thus the opinions and views, even of a prophet, may contain error, unless those opinions and views were inspired by the Spirit. Inspired scripture or statements should be accepted as such. We have this problem however. Paul was one of the greatest theologian-prophets of all the ages, but he had some opinions that weren't in complete accord with the Lord's feelings and he wrote some of them down in his epistles, but being wise and discreet he labeled them as such. He said, "This is what I think"; when he got through telling that he said, "Now this is what the Lord thinks." Paul's views, his private opinions, were not very good sometimes.

We even have one of these instances in the Book of Mormon, one where Alma had some personal views on the resurrection. He labeled it as opinion when he wrote it down, and we can stretch and twist and manage to make his personal view conform with what is true, since we have had revelation that tells us what is true on the point. But if we did not have latter-day revelation, it would not be clear, and so we have to conclude that Alma did not have a very good judgment on the particular point that we labeled his opinion.

Brigham Young did the same thing. He said some things on some subjects and they were Brigham Young's idea and they weren't the Lord's idea. A classical story in the Church on this point is that he talked, in the morning session of Conference, and gave a dynamic, fiery speech on a certain subject and then he came back in the afternoon and he said, "This morning you heard what Brigham Young thinks about this subject, and now I would like to tell you what the Lord thinks about it." He reversed himself completely. This is an incident that does not demean or belittle him in any sense. It exalts and benobles him in the eternal perspective in that he, getting the spirit of inspiration and learning what ought to be presented, in effect getting his errand from the Lord, he was willing to bow to his will and present that philosophy and that suggested procedure to Israel.

Well, the point of this is that prophets are men and that when they act by the spirit of inspiration, what they say is the voice of God; but still they are mortal and they are entitled to and do have private opinions. Unless these are inspired and unless they accord with the revelations, they are just as subject to being in a field by themselves, as anyone else in the Church. What I really ought to do is, not talk about General Authorities but talk about bishops and elders, because the principle is precisely the same where everyone is concerned.

Since "the spirits of the prophets are subject to the prophets" (1 Cor. 14:32), whatever is announced by the Presiding Brethren as they sit in council for the Church, will be the voice of inspiration. But the truth or error of any uninspired statement of an individual will have to be judged by the Standard Works and by the spirit of discernment and inspiration that is in those who actually enjoy the gift of the Holy Ghost.

"President Joseph Fielding Smith has said (the rest of this language is in his, not mine): 'It makes no difference what is written or what anyone has said, if what has been said is in conflict with what the Lord has revealed, we can set it aside. My words, and the teachings of any other member of the Church, high or low, if they do not square with the revelations, we need not accept them. Let us have this matter clear. We have accepted the four standard works as the measuring yardsticks or balances by which we measure every man's doctrine. You cannot accept the books written by the authorities of the Church as standards of doctrine, only insofar as they accord with the revealed word in the Standard Works. Every man who writes is responsible; to the Church, for what he writes. If Joseph Fielding Smith writes something that is not of harmony with the revelations, then every member of the Church is duty bound to reject it. If he writes that which is in harmony with the word of the Lord, then it should be accepted.'" (Mormon Doctrine, p. 547.)

Now let me take the remaining moments to give us a little perspective of what we're supposed to be doing, and how this applies to us. I'll do it by reading these words from the revelations. The Lord addressed them to Orson Hyde and applied them to every elder in the Church. This is not addressed to the General Authorities, this is to all of us. In this connection I might remind you that one of Joseph Smith's famous statements is to this effect. "The Lord will not reveal anything to Joseph but he will not reveal to the Twelve or to the least and last member of the Church as soon as he is able to bear it." David O. McKay isn't entitled to get any revelation from the Lord that everyone in this room cannot get, provided we learn how to get in line and have the same communion that he can have. So the Lord says this:

My servant, Orson Hyde, was called by his ordination to proclaim the everlasting gospel by the Spirit of the living God, from people to people, and from land to land, in the congregations of the wicked, in their synagogues, reasoning with and expounding all scriptures unto them.

And, behold, and lo, this is an ensample (note it) unto all those who were ordained unto this priesthood, whose mission is appointed unto them to go forth--

And this is the ensample unto them, that they shall speak as they are moved upon by the Holy Ghost.

And whatsoever they shall speak when moved upon by the Holy Ghost shall be scripture, shall be the will of the Lord, shall be the mind of the Lord, and the power of God unto salvation. (D. & C. 68:1-4.)

Now this is an absolute, basic, fundamental eternal principle of the gospel. It applies to this age and it applies to every age. We think, well here are the apostles, they ought to get revelations, or we think, here is the bishop, he ought to get revelations. People out in the mission field see the missionaries, they think, here are the missionaries, they ought to have inspiration and set the perfect example. Well, all of that is true, it ought to be and in general we have the most capable and able and spiritual people in most positions in the Church or at least some that are among that group. And yet the philosophy of the gospel is not that leaders are endowed and entitled to special inspiration that excels or exceeds or is greater than what the general membership of the Church is entitled to.

Now back in ancient Israel, Moses was getting some assistance, some help, He had complained of his burdens to the Lord. The Lord told him to assemble seventy men at the tabernacle door, and he would come down and talk to them. This happened, except that only sixty-eight were at the appointed place. When the Lord came down, he put his Spirit on this group and they began to prophecy. Also the two that were in the camps of Israel, Medad and Eldad, prophesied. Now here is ancient Israel, and they think what we sometimes think, that nobody's supposed to be prophecying but Moses, and so a young man ran to Moses and told him "Medad and Eldad prophecy in the camp." Joshua, Moses' servant, stood up and said, "My Lord, Moses, forbid them." And then Moses said one of the great statements of all revelation:

Enviest thou for my sake? would God that all the Lord's people were prophets, and that the Lord would put his spirit upon them! (Numbers 11:29.)

That's perfect. That's the same doctrine that Paul taught. Paul said, "Ye may all prophesy." He said, "covet to prophesy." (1 Cor. 14:31, 39.) The whole membership of the Church, the whole body of the Church is supposed to receive revelation. It's not reserved for a select few, the missionaries or the bishops. We ought to get revelation.

Now here is one of the quotations that is powerful on this and applies to all of us:

For thus saith the Lord--I the Lord, am merciful and gracious unto those who fear me, and delight to honor those who serve me in righteousness and in truth unto the end.

Great shall be their reward and eternal shall be their glory.

And to them will I reveal all mysteries, yea, all the hidden mysteries of my kingdom from days of old, and for ages to come, will I make known unto them the good pleasure of my will concerning all things pertaining to my kingdom.

Yea, even the wonders of eternity shall they know, and things to come will I show them, even the things of many generations.

And their wisdom shall be great, and their understanding reach to heaven; and before them the wisdom of the wise shall perish, and the understanding of the prudent shall come to naught.

For by my Spirit will I enlighten them, and by my power will I make known unto them the secrets of my will--yea, even those things which eye has not seen, nor ear heard, nor yet entered into the heart of man. (D. & C. 76:5-11.)

Now that just happens to be some of the introductory language of Section 76, and what it means, among other things, is that anyone in the Church, who will abide the law that enables him to get in tune with the Lord, can receive the vision of the 76th section of the Doctrine and Covenants, on the same basis that it was given to Joseph Smith and Sidney Rigdon. Now that means that you and I have a choice. We can read what is in that revelation; we can meditate about it and get some concept and understanding about it. We can get the Spirit to help us as we ponder, and we can thereby learn an appreciable amount about the eternal worlds of glory. Or we can manage ourselves to get in tune to such a degree that we will see, and hear and feel what the Prophet saw and heard and felt. And there are some things that he saw that he didn't write down, except to say with reference to them, that they could only be understood by the power of God, and not by written words.

Now in this connection, listen to this, and this is Joseph Smith: "Reading the experience of others, or the revelation given to them, can never give us a comprehensive view of our condition and true relation to God. Knowledge of these things can only be obtained by experience through the ordinances of God set forth for that purpose. Could you gaze into heaven five minutes, you would know more than you would by reading all that ever was written on the subject." (Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith, p. 324.)

Now you see what this type of doctrine does. This fixes it up so that salvation is not for David O. McKay and the apostles alone. Salvation is for every man in the whole world who will forsake the world and come into the Church and live the law that gets him in tune with the Almighty. This is the reason that we have hands on our heads and the legal administrator says, "Receive the Holy Ghost."

There is a host of similar revelation we could read and talk about, but what it amounts to is this: Everybody in the Church is entitled to get the inspiration of the Spirit, everybody in the Church is entitled to enjoy the administering of angels, everybody in the Church is entitled to see the face of the Lord. This is written right in the revelations. (D. & C. 93:1.) One of the ancient prophecies talks about a future day when it will no longer be necessary for every man to say to his brother, "Know the Lord, for all shall know me, from the least of them unto the greatest of them". (Jeremiah 31:34.) In that day people will actually enjoy (and this is millennial) the fulfillment of this promise that they will know the Lord without being taught. They will see him, they will be in communion with him; it will be like it was in the days of Enoch's city. The Lord will appear to them, and they will be qualified as far as spiritual stature goes, for what would be the equivalent of translation and more.

Well, this matter of thinking about the people who hold this or that office are human has its humorous aspects, but it affords us the opportunity to open the door to a principle that is glorious and grand beyond all understanding and comprehension. Every soul is equally precious in the Lord's sight. Revelation is not reserved for a few. The Prophet said the Holy Ghost is a revelator. Any man who has received the Holy Ghost has received revelation. Now the revelation is there and the visions are there. If we knew how to attune ourselves to the infinite, we would hear the voices and receive the revelation and see the visions. This room, for instance, is filled with music at this moment but we don't hear it. But if we brought the radio in and tuned it up, we would hear the symphonic presentations. This room is filled with visions, so to speak, but we don't see them. But if we brought television in and tuned it up we would see what was already here available and is not now known to our senses. This room is filled with revelation, this room is filled with the visions of eternity.

If you and I know how to take the souls that we possess and tune them to the wave band on which the Holy Ghost is revealing truth, and on which the Lord is sending forth the visions of eternity, then we would see the visions and receive the revelations. This is not beyond us. We won't have to sit back and think what a glorious thing it is that we have got prophets and apostles. Now that's true, and nobody can emphasize too strongly the importance of having apostles and prophets, because that establishes affirmatively and positively that there are those on earth who do, in fact, get in communion with the Lord. But that is only part of it. The important part, really, to us, in view of the fact that his other already exists, the important part, really, to us is that we have power as individuals to have revealed to us everything that God told Joseph and the Twelve and so on. We can have revelation. We can get in tune with the Almighty, and we can be and are human in the same sense that missionaries are human, and that bishops are and that the Brethren are. The Lord is going to leave us to ourselves in large part because this is a probationary estate; we must work out a lot of things for ourselves, but on the other hand, revelation is also available.

Now there is much more we could say; our time is gone. The work is true. The Lord's hand is in this work. David O. McKay is a Prophet. I have heard him say a number of times in meetings with the Brethren, "The veil is thin; the line of communication between the Lord and his people is open." There is no question that the Church receives revelation all the time. Someone said to Brother John A. Widtsoe, speaking derogatorily, "When did the Church get its last revelation?" He said, "Well, this is Sunday, the last one came last Thursday." And this is just how simple it is. They get direction and revelation all the time, as they meet to direct the affairs of the Church. The Church is true. But the glorious thing to you and me is that we can see and know, because God is no respecter of persons, all that his prophets see and know, if we will just apply the law that is involved, which may God grant in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.