

Special Issue:
Leadership

It Is the Position That Counts

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My dear brethren of the priesthood, it is a great honor and a solemn responsibility to speak at this priesthood meeting. I might make a comparison with this meeting and the meetings held in general conference in Salt Lake City. We have the general sessions in Salt Lake City, as we have had here. In the past we have held a Relief Society session in October generally, where the matters relating to the sisters in the Relief Society were taken up. Occasionally, there is a leadership meeting called for welfare or other services, where the priesthood leaders and some of the auxiliary leaders are invited. But on Saturday night is the priesthood meeting. Only those holding the priesthood are invited to attend. The sisters do not attend the priesthood meeting at the general conference.

And so it is arranged that at these area conferences, we have general sessions and then we have a session for all of the sisters, and now we are convened in a priesthood meeting, with only holders of the priesthood in attendance. This pattern of bringing general conference to the people is a signal of the great world growth of the Church.

Now I have a message that I hope to have inspiration to convey to you brethren. And I would like to tell of a little incident that happened to a great member of the Church in Germany, Karl G. Maeser, a great educator, a doctor of education, a man of great dignity and wisdom. It was he who founded Brigham Young University.

Under the direction of President Brigham Young he went to Provo, with the simple instruction that he was to found the university and to teach not even the multiplication tables without the Spirit of God. Beyond that, Brigham Young said, "Good luck and God bless you." Brother Maeser had been converted here in Europe. This man of great dignity and prestige was a very humble man, and his attitude seems to me to characterize what we should be as holders of the priesthood.

I mention two incidents: On one occasion he was going with a group of young missionaries across the alps. They were crossing a high mountain pass on foot. There were long sticks stuck into the snow of the glacier to mark the path so that travelers could find their way safely across the glacier and down the mountain on the other side.

When they reached the summit, Brother Maeser wanted to teach the young elders a lesson. He

stopped at the pinnacle of the mountain and pointed to those sticks that they had followed. And he said, "Brethren, behold the priesthood of God. They are just common old sticks, but it's the position that counts. Follow them and you will surely be safe. Stray from them and you will surely be lost." And so it is in the Church. We are called to leadership positions and given the power of the priesthood. And we are just common old sticks, but the position we are given counts. It is separate and apart from us, but while we hold it, we hold it.

Now in our wards and in our branches and in our stakes, the Lord calls to positions of leadership the brethren who are there. None of them is perfect. But they hold the office, and we are to be obedient to them.

When Brother Maeser was going to Zion, he stopped in London, where he was called on a mission and told he wouldn't be going on to Zion for a long period of time. That was a great disappointment to him. And there was a great test connected with it. He had been the headmaster of a school, a professor of great dignity. When he walked into a class, all of the students stood up out of respect to this distinguished scholar.

He felt because of his social position there were some things he couldn't do. He wouldn't carry packages in the street, for instance; that was below his station in life. He wouldn't carry a suitcase; that was below his station in life. Wasn't he Herr Dr. Professor, the headmaster, a man of great dignity? And his test came from two humble missionaries. They were going to leave London and go up north to do their missionary work.

The young elder said, "Brother Maeser, you take your suitcase and meet us at the station, and we will meet you there and go on the train." Brother Maeser paced his room all day to think that they had told him to carry a suitcase through the streets. He worried about it, he talked to his wife about it, and she counseled him, and finally he said to himself and his wife, "The elders have told me to do it, and they are presiding over me, and I will do it." And he took his suitcase and walked to the station.

Now that is just a little thing, but it was almost like Gethsemane for Dr. Maeser, to submit himself to the leadership of these young elders.

There is something of the spirit of the priesthood there. When I was a little fellow, I can remember once having an evening meal at home. Father was having a conversation with Mother. Mother had been shopping in town that day. Father said, "Did you get the things you wanted in town?"

"Yes," she said, "I got everything I wanted."

And he asked, "Well, did anything special happen to you in town?"

And my mother said, "Oh, yes. I met the bishop!"

Mother had met the bishop. Now she saw him every week. And it was just Brother Dredge who ran the seed store. But he was the bishop.

Now the conversation didn't go like this:

"Anything special in town?"

“No, nothing.”

“See anybody you know?”

“Oh, nobody special. Oh, I did see the bishop.”

No, not with my mother. She hadn't just seen the bishop. She had seen the *Bishop*.

Do you understand, brethren? Somehow there was born into my soul an idea that my mother knew that the bishop was a servant of the Lord. And it wasn't just Brother Dredge. I don't know that we have a perfect bishop in the Church. Or a perfect stake president. Or even a perfect General Authority. I know many of them are near perfection. But they are called to preside over us.

Now, brethren, when someone is called to the position to preside over us, we become obedient, just as Brother Maeser did. The great Herr Dr. Professor said of the young elders, “They have been called to preside over me, and they have told me to do it, and I will do it.”

Years ago I was a member of a stake high council. There was presented to the high council a man to be a bishop of a ward. He had been approved by the Brethren. Then they presented the men he had nominated as his counselors. One of the men was the husband of a woman whom I knew to be a gossip. She had injured many people with her gossip. I thought, “A man like that can't serve. His wife is too much of a gossip.” When the vote was taken, two of us voted against it. But the stake president said this: “Brethren, there is a greater principle here. He should have the right to nominate his counselors. I feel to approve it.” And he asked for another vote, and we all voted in favor. But I didn't feel very good about it.

When the conference came, Elder Harold B. Lee was the visiting General Authority. When it came time to set apart and ordain the bishop, Elder Lee took care of that, and he ordained and set apart the first counselor. When the other counselor came forward to be set apart, Brother Strong, the other man who had voted against him, said to me, “Now we will see whether the Church is run by revelation or not.” Elder Lee put his hands on this man's head and began the setting apart. Then he hesitated and said something like this: “The blessings pronounced upon these other brethren apply to you as well. But for you there is a special blessing. ...”

It was a long blessing on keeping counsel, about not talking with his wife about problems in the ward—a marvelous blessing. I was amazed. At the next meeting, one of the brethren asked the stake president, “Did you tell Elder Lee about Brother So-and-so and the problem that had been raised?” He said, “No, I meant to, but we didn't have time.”

I had the privilege of asking Brother Lee, “Did you know about that problem with the man?”

“No,” he said, “I didn't, but I felt something when I went to bless him.”

I learned a great lesson. This church is run by revelation. It comes to those who have the responsibility to preside. I am not sure you could get me to vote against a proposition presented by my presiding authority. I'd be very careful. He might just be a common old stick, but it would be the position that counts.

So in our home, we don't talk about the bishop. We talk about the *bishop*. We don't just have a bishop. We have a *bishop*. And we have *home teachers*. And we have a *stake president*. And in this Church we have a *prophet*. And it's the position that counts. And the power and the authority go together.

God grant that we who hold the priesthood will be obedient and sustain all those who are called to preside over us. I bear witness that God lives. Jesus is the Christ. President Spencer W. Kimball is his authorized representative on this earth. These brethren on the stand here are servants of the Lord. In the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.