

Wednesday, 8 [February 1843]—This morning, I . . . visited with a brother and sister from Michigan, who thought that “a prophet is always a prophet”; but I told them that a prophet was a prophet only when he was acting as such.  
Joseph Smith in *History of the Church* 5:265

## HOW TO KNOW WHEN A PROPHET IS SPEAKING AS A PROPHET ●

*An address delivered at Ricks College devotional  
February 24, 1970.*

Recently a young lady student came seeking an interview. She wanted to know how she could tell when a prophet is speaking as a prophet. This question arose in an institute class in which the statement of the Prophet Joseph Smith that a prophet is a prophet only when he is acting as such (*History of the Church* 5:265) had been discussed.

A few days later a perplexed young man came questioning the recent restatement of the First Presidency of the Church concerning who can be given the priesthood.

These two incidents, and the discussions they provoked, underscore the great importance of one's knowing how to recognize inspired statements of prophets and other teachers.

Because you are students, as were the two young folks above referred to, it occurred to me that you might also be interested in the questions. I have there-

fore decided to say to you some of the things I said to them.

At the outset I informed them that the sure way to know when a prophet is speaking as a prophet—or whether the statement of the First Presidency concerning who may receive the priesthood or, for that matter, the gospel truth in any statement, teaching, or practice by anybody or from any source whatever—is by the power of the Holy Ghost.

Since the Holy Ghost reveals gospel truth and since we cannot discern such truth unless he reveals it to us, I am sure we can, with profit, give serious consideration to the manner in which such revelation comes. To begin with, it is comforting to know that all members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints have had the gift of the Holy Ghost bestowed upon them. It is also comforting to know that all men may, by obedience to the required principles and ordinances, have the gift of the Holy Ghost bestowed upon them.

Very early in this dispensation—a year before the Church was organized, in fact—the Lord identified and explained certain manifestations of the power of the Holy Ghost, which he said was “the spirit of revelation” (D&C 8:2, 3).

On April 5, 1829, Oliver Cowdery went to the home of Joseph Smith and proffered his services in bringing forth the Book of Mormon. On the 7th of April, two days following his arrival, he began to write as the Prophet translated the Book of Mormon record. Before long, however, Oliver “became anxious to learn . . . the will of the Lord concerning . . . his connection with the work then coming forth” (B. H Roberts, *Comprehensive History of the Church* 1:120). Where-

upon, at Oliver's request, the Prophet inquired of the Lord.

Before he went to see the Prophet, Oliver had boarded at the home of the Prophet's parents for a short period. He learned from them and from his conversations with David Whitmer, who knew the Smiths, and he developed such an intense interest that he had secretly inquired of the Lord as to the truth of what he had heard about the Prophet. In response to his prayer, he had received a manifestation from the Lord that Joseph's account of the gold plates was true. It was against this background, of which Joseph knew nothing, that the Lord spoke through the Prophet to Oliver:

Verily, verily, I say unto thee, blessed art thou for what thou hast done; for thou hast inquired of me, and behold, as often as thou hast inquired thou hast received instruction of my Spirit. If it had not been so, thou wouldst not have come to the place where thou art at this time.

Behold, thou knowest that thou hast inquired of me and I did enlighten thy mind; and now I tell these things that thou mayest know that thou has been enlightened by the Spirit of truth;

Yea, I tell thee, that thou mayest know that there is none else save God that knowest thy thoughts and the intents of thy heart. [It seems most remarkable to me that the Lord should talk to Oliver in this manner through one who had no knowledge of his secret prayer and the guidance of the Spirit he had received.]

I tell thee these things as a witness unto thee—that the words or the work which thou hast been writing are true. . . .

[Then, as a final emphasis, the Lord adds:] Verily, verily, I say unto you, if you desire a further witness, cast your mind upon the night that you cried unto me in your heart, that you might know concerning the truth of these things.

Did I not speak peace to your mind concerning the matter? [This is one way, and perhaps the most common way,

in which the Holy Ghost reveals the truth to a person.] What greater witness can you have from God?

And now, behold, you have received a witness; for if I have told you things which no man knoweth have you not received a witness? (D&C 6:14-17, 22-24).

Following receipt of these instructions, the Prophet wrote in his journal that Oliver "had kept the circumstance" referred to in the revelation "entirely secret, and had mentioned it to no one; so that after this revelation was given, he knew that the work was true, because no being living knew of the thing alluded to in the revelation, but God and himself" (*History of the Church* 1:37).

In this same revelation, the Lord also said to Oliver Cowdery, "Behold, I grant unto you a gift, if you desire of me, to translate, even as my servant Joseph" (D&C 6:25).

Oliver soon became anxious to receive and exercise the promised gift. Whereupon the Lord, through the Prophet, gave another revelation in which he confirmed his promise to Oliver and explained that the translations he could receive would come into his mind and heart by the power of the Holy Ghost, which, said the Lord, is the spirit of revelation. Listen now to the words of the revelation:

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. . . .

Yea, behold, I will tell you in your mind and in your heart, by the Holy Ghost, which shall come unto you and which shall dwell in your heart.

Now, behold, this is the spirit of revelation; behold, this is the spirit by which Moses brought the children of Israel through the Red Sea on dry ground.

Therefore, this is thy gift; apply unto it. (D&C 8:1-4).

Unfortunately for Oliver Cowdery, he never did properly "apply unto it." In his attempt to exercise the gift, he failed. He was, of course, disappointed and had a disposition to complain. The Lord, therefore, in another revelation, explained the reason for his failure.

Behold, I say unto you, my son, that because you did not translate according to that which you desired of me, . . .

It is not expedient that you should translate at this present time.

And, behold, it is because that you did not continue as you commenced, when you began to translate, that I have taken away this privilege from you. . . .

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.

But if it be not right you shall have no such feeling, but you shall have a stupor of thought (D&C 9:1, 3, 5, 7-9).

There is much for us to learn in these early revelations. The truths they teach have universal application. They teach us that the Holy Ghost is the spirit of revelation. From them we learn that instruction by the power of the Holy Ghost is indeed a reality. We further learn something about how such instruction is received. Listen again to some of the language the Lord used:

I did enlighten thy mind (D&C 6:15).

Did I not speak peace to thy mind concerning the matter? (D&C 6:23).

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 8:2, 3).

We learn also from these early revelations that instruction by the Spirit comes only to those who earnestly seek it. It is not received by the light-minded, the

giddy, the immoral, nor by those whose minds are surfeited with the things of this world. It is not received by the lazy, the indolent and slothful, nor by the unbelievers.

Note the Lord's reference to Oliver Cowdery's attitude at the time he first received knowledge by revelation: "Cast your mind upon the night that you cried unto me in your heart, that you might know concerning the truth of these things" (D&C 6:22).

Oliver was earnestly praying, pleading for light. Consider also the condition under which he was to receive further knowledge through revelation:

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 . . . (D&C 8:1).

To believe that we shall receive the things we pray for, as promised by the Lord, takes a lot of faith. On an occasion when some of the early brethren failed to receive a promised blessing, the Lord said to them:

Ye endeavored to believe that ye should receive the blessing which was offered unto you; but behold verily I say unto you there were fears in your hearts, and verily this is the reason that ye did not receive (D&C 67:3).

The attainment of such faith is not beyond our reach, however. The Prophet Joseph Smith had it when he went into the Sacred Grove to find out which of all the churches was right. Nephi had it when he went into Jerusalem to get the brass plates.

We Latter-day Saints must develop such faith and get the spirit of revelation so that we can feel within ourselves and know when a prophet speaks as a prophet and when others speak by the power of the Holy Ghost.

We must be able to get for ourselves the witness that when the First Presidency issues a statement on Church doctrine or practices, they speak for the Lord by the power of the Holy Ghost. On this point President Brigham Young once said:

You may know whether you are led right or wrong, as well as you know the way home; for every principle God has revealed carries its own convictions of its truth to the human mind, and there is no calling of God to man on earth but what brings with it the evidences of its authenticity (*Journal of Discourses* 9:149).

Further on in the same address he cautioned the Saints not to let their confidence in their leaders keep them from inquiring

for themselves of God whether they are led by Him, I am fearful they settle down in a state of blind self-security, trusting their eternal destiny in the hands of their leaders with a reckless confidence that in itself would thwart the purposes of God in their salvation, and weaken that influence they could give to their leaders, did they know for themselves, by the revelations of Jesus, that they are led in the right way. Let every man and woman know, by the whispering of the Spirit of God to themselves, whether their leaders are walking in the path the Lord dictates, or not. . . .

Let all persons be fervent in prayer, until they know the things of God for themselves and become certain that they are walking in the path that leads to everlasting life (*Journal of Discourses* 9:150).

Moroni promised this kind of knowledge concerning the Book of Mormon to all who would ponder in their hearts the things which were therein written and then "ask God, the Eternal Father, in the name of Christ, if these things are not true." Hear the words of his promise:

And if ye shall ask with a sincere heart with real intent, having faith in Christ, he will manifest the truth of it unto you, by the power of the Holy Ghost. [He then adds this all-inclusive and most significant promise:]

And by the power of the Holy Ghost ye may know the truth of all things (Moroni 10:3-5).

I bear you my witness that these teachings and promises are true. If we follow them, they will bring us to a knowledge of all truth. I have personally put Moroni's promise to the test and have learned for myself that the Book of Mormon is true. Through following the same pattern, I have learned the truth of many things.

By consistently seeking the guidance of the Holy Spirit of revelation in the manner prescribed in the revelations we have been considering, and living by them, we shall be able to tell when a prophet is speaking as a prophet and correctly understand the statements of the First Presidency of the Church.

To learn to live by the spirit of revelation is of first importance. Only those who do so will be prepared for the second advent of the Savior. Speaking of that glorious occasion, the Lord said:

At that day, when I shall come in my glory, . . . they that are wise and have received the truth, and have taken the Holy Spirit for their guide, and have not been deceived—verily I say unto you, they shall not be hewn down and cast into the fire, but shall abide the day (D&C 45:56, 57).

That we may all so qualify, I humbly pray.