

When the Prophet Speaks, Sisters, the Debate is Over

As she continued her message of following the prophet she said these words:

“My firm feeling is that we must pursue a course of a covenant people....your priorities ought to be known to you as a daughter of God. Personal opinions may vary. Eternal principles never do. When the prophet speaks, sisters, the debate is over. So I urge us all to provide powerful unity as women for those things we can agree upon—family, chastity, accountability to the Lord, responsibility to the community, sharing the gospel...and sisters, we emphatically and happily declare, “I will be obedient! I will help strengthen others that they may be so too!”

This declaration caused quite a stir in the Church and in the community. There were those who thought Elaine was encouraging people to blindly follow their leader like sheep or lemmings who are known to run off a cliff, one after the other.

The principle, as Elaine believed and taught it, was that one should follow the prophet because of a fervent belief, borne of experience, that the Prophet would not lead anyone astray. Her testimony and experience were sure in that thing. So while she took a lashing from critics, she remained confident in the truth of her statement.

President Kimball called Elaine regarding the controversial statement. He commended her for her example and abilities, but gently asked her not to use the phrase “when the prophet speaks, the debate is over” again. He felt it conveyed a message that was too easily misunderstood. He wanted to be sure that members of the Church would feel free to decide for themselves, prayerfully and faithfully, about the statements of a prophet. Elaine was sensitive to the mild chastisement and realized she still had much to learn.

Less than a year later, President Tanner, a counselor to President Kimball, quoted her in the First Presidency Message in the Ensign of 1979. He said:

“Recently, at the Church-wide fireside meeting held for the women of

the Church, Young Women President Elaine Cannon made the following statement:

“When the Prophet speaks, the debate is over.”

“I was impressed by that simple statement, which carries such deep spiritual meaning for all of us. Wherever I go, my message to the people is: Follow the prophet. Why else has the Lord placed prophets on the earth throughout the dispensations of time? In his infinite wisdom, and as part of the plan of life and salvation for his children, God has given us the blueprint to follow, the leadership to direct us and keep us on course, and the Church organization to help us lay the foundation and develop the skills, or make the preparations necessary, to lead us back to our eternal home.

“It is foolish to suppose that men can be left to their own devices and accomplish what God intended for them. That is just as unreasonable as it would be to leave a newborn babe on its own and expect it to learn to walk and talk and feed and clothe itself without assistance from those responsible for its care and training. A child so neglected and left alone would soon perish.

“So it is with us. Without a knowledge and understanding of the gospel, or God’s plan for his children, we cannot live according to the law which is necessary for our salvation; and therefore, those who neglect their spiritual training or fail to heed the warning voice of the prophets will suffer a spiritual death.

“...Today there are many issues under debate as controversies rage all around us. It should be evident to all that we need divine directions, as men and women who argue their causes seem to be unable to come to workable or peaceable solutions. It is sad that the world does not know or accept the fact that in our midst is a prophet through whom God can direct the solution of world problems. True Latter-day Saints have no such dilemma...We must turn this about. We cannot serve God and mammon. Whose side are we on? When the prophet speaks the debate is over.”

What President Tanner explained so well is what Elaine was trying to say. Years later, Sister Sheri Dew said something similar, speaking to

a group of seminary and institute teachers at BYU. She said, "When the prophet says something—that's good enough for me." Less inflammatory than Elaine's wording, and more personal, Sister Dew's statement reminds us of the same truth—we need appreciate the rich blessing of having a living prophet on the earth.

The night after the first broadcast, Elaine evaluated the meeting. She thought the General Women's Meeting was very good, as noted in her journal. She also recorded her memory of what various Church leaders said to her about her talk.

“Sunday, September 16, 1978

People have been kind.

Pres. Benson tried to fix my corsage after and I said, "Is that thing upside down?"

"That thing may be but you are not. You are very right side up. It was perfect."

G. B. Hinckley said, "Elaine, you said all the right things in just the right way. Excellent."

Bruce McConkie: "You are doing a very fine thing for the women of the Church. You are what they need."

Bro. Howard, "I am such a fan of yours!"

Vaughn Featherstone, "I could listen to you forever. You make the gospel come alive."

Jim Faust, "You're the best. The absolute best. Poise. Wonderful smile and you obviously love the people." He also told me he had ordained Winfield [Jim's brother] a patriarch in Singapore. Isn't that marvelous?

I feel very blessed. ”

Pinned to this same page in her journal was a note from Jim. After noting several phone messages, he wrote:

"Secondly, you were great. While it is fresh on my mind I'd like to make a few observations: 1) Sis. Kimball's remarks were terrific. In fact,