



President Cecil O. Samuelson

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Gifts of the Spirit

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President Cecil O. Samuelson, a member of the First Quorum of the Seventy, is president of Brigham Young University.

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My dear brothers and sisters, I appreciate this opportunity to be with you and, under the direction of President Monson, address you. I anticipate that this will be a wonderful conference session, and I invite your faith and prayers in my behalf that my comments will not detract from the special spirit that will attend us.

Just three weeks ago, my wife, Sharon, and I had the opportunity of attending a fine sacrament meeting in Monterey, California. We had been invited by some special friends to be there as part of my responsibilities to advance the cause of Brigham Young University. All of the messages, testimonies, and music in that meeting were uplifting. I was particularly touched by a wonderful talk given by their youth speaker, a lovely young woman who was on her way to Provo for school. She spoke about the gifts of the Spirit, and as she spoke with maturity and understanding, the Spirit was present in abundance.

When I complimented her after the meeting, her bishop, a convert to the Church as an adult and a very effective priesthood leader, made the comment, “I asked her to speak on this subject because I have learned that even many of our lifelong and active members do not fully appreciate the gifts of the Spirit that we have.”

As I considered his comment, I concluded that he may well be correct. I did not ask what he meant by “appreciate,” but it does occur to me that he may have meant more than one thing. Initially, it seemed

plausible in his ward of generally great affluence, comfort, and beautiful surroundings that many of whom their bishop spoke did not fully value or feel gratitude for the blessings of the Spirit that were regularly theirs. As I considered further, it too seemed possible that he could also have been referring to another definition of the word “appreciate”—that is, that they might not have been fully aware of the blessings of the Spirit or that what they were experiencing or feeling was truly a manifestation of spiritual blessings.

I suspect for all of us, there is a risk that we may not understand or recognize that we are greatly blessed with several gifts of the Spirit. Even when we do, we may not fully value them or recognize the significance of them in our lives and in our baskets of overflowing blessings. Today, I will not take time to enumerate the many scripturally described blessings of the Spirit found in such places as in the writings of Paul, the book of Moroni, or the forty-sixth section of the Doctrine and Covenants. It is a wonderful personal exercise to think of them and find how many of these gifts are, or have been, operative in our lives.

You will recall in the troubled and difficult last years of the Prophet Joseph Smith’s mortal ministry, he and some of the brethren traveled to Washington DC to meet with the president of the United States, Martin Van Buren. While there was disappointment that the Church did not receive the relief or redress that the brethren had hoped for, they were able to bear testimony directly to the president of the United States. One of those present recorded the following: “In our interview with the President, he interrogated us wherein we differed in our religion from the other religions of the day. Brother Joseph said we differed in mode of baptism, and the gift of the Holy Ghost by the laying on of hands. We considered that all other considerations were contained in the gift of the Holy Ghost.”¹

On another occasion, the Prophet Joseph Smith said this:

We believe in the gift of the Holy Ghost being enjoyed now, as much as it was in the Apostles’ days; we believe that it [the gift of the Holy Ghost] is necessary to make and to organize the Priesthood, that no man [or woman] can be called to fill any office in the ministry without it. . . . We believe that the holy men of old spake as they were moved by the Holy Ghost, and that holy men in these days speak by the same principle; we believe in its being a comforter and a witness bearer, that it brings things past to our remembrance, leads us into all truth, and shows us of things to come; we believe that “no man can know that Jesus is the Christ, but by the Holy Ghost.” We believe in it [this gift of the Holy Ghost] in all its fullness, and power, and greatness, and glory; but whilst we do this, we believe in it rationally, consistently, and scripturally.²

As we know, the Latter-day Saints are not unique in believing in the Holy Ghost. Where we differ is in our understanding made possible only by modern revelation. We know that the Holy Ghost, a member of the Godhead, indeed is one with the Father and the Son in purpose and spirit, but is clearly and necessarily a distinct, individual, and separate personage and spirit being.

As we read in the Doctrine and Covenants, “The Father has a body of flesh and bones as tangible as man’s; the Son also; but the Holy Ghost has not a body of flesh and bones, but is a personage of Spirit. Were it not so, the Holy Ghost could not dwell in us” (D&C 130:22). This clear distinction helps us understand the significance of His mission and calling. Often, when we bear testimony of the Father and the Son, as we should with power and great frequency, we may tend to take more lightly the third member of the Godhead and His essential role in our lives. Let me again return to the words of the Prophet Joseph: “There is a difference between the Holy Ghost and the gift of the Holy Ghost. Cornelius received the Holy Ghost before he was baptized, which was the convincing power of God unto him of the truth of the Gospel, but he could not receive the gift of the Holy Ghost until after he was baptized. Had he not taken this sign or ordinance upon him, the Holy Ghost which convinced him of the truth of God, would have left him.”³

This key point is emphasized in the concluding verse of the 130th section of the Doctrine and Covenants: “A man may receive the Holy Ghost, and it may descend upon him and not tarry with him” (D&C 130:23).

I suspect that we who have been blessed to receive the gift of the Holy Ghost and to understand the basic doctrine which we have briefly reviewed can understand the truthfulness of this principle experientially in our own lives and in the lives of others we observe. Like so many other gifts of the Spirit and blessings, the companionship of the Holy Ghost is conditional and depends on our attitudes, worthiness, receptivity, and willingness to have the gift. Most of us know, through the gift of the Holy Ghost itself, when we are in tune and have the Spirit with us and when we don’t. It is not that we usually consciously try to drive the Spirit away but that we allow ourselves to become distracted or deflected and crowd out the Holy Ghost with thoughts, feelings, ambitions, or sins that are not compatible with the presence of this holy influence.

You know well the story of Lehi and his family and their long and arduous trip from Jerusalem to the promised land. Their lives were not tranquil all of the time. There were challenges of many sorts. There were frequent hunger, fatigue, thirst, and discouragement. There were

frequent family difficulty and disagreement. And there were remarkable and sublime moments when the blessing of the influence and presence of the Holy Spirit was clearly abundant. During all of this, the family was moving into the unknown.

The Lord in His great mercy provided for them the guidance they needed. As Lehi, under the direction of the Lord, prepared to take his family into the wilderness, he found the “round ball of curious workmanship” made of brass that had pointers directing them in the way that they should go (see 1 Nephi 16:10). Quickly he and his family learned that the pointers in the ball “work[ed] according to the faith and diligence and heed” that they gave to them (see 1 Nephi 16:28).

In this regard, the gift of the Holy Ghost is not unlike the Liahona. That is, it can be our constant companion and guide when we nurture it with faith, diligence, and heed. When we neglect these things, like the pointers in the brass ball, direction ceases and we are left to our own devices, which often are so woefully inadequate. There is a reason the scripture refers to a “still small voice” (1 Nephi 17:45), because the Holy Ghost does not force Himself upon us. We need to demonstrate our desire for the gift of the Holy Ghost to be manifest in our lives, and we do so by the way we live with faith, diligence, and heed.

It is in this sense that all who have received the gift of the Holy Ghost are entitled to receive revelation for the guidance of their own lives and for their family responsibilities, Church callings, and all other aspects of their existence. It is important to know that the Holy Ghost operates within the bounds of our own stewardships. Thus, a mother will not receive guidance for the rearing of her neighbor’s children, although she may see obvious things that could be done better. A bishop will not receive inspiration for the direction of a ward other than his own, although he might be tempted on occasion to share his insights. Of course, in these examples it is not inappropriate to share feelings and experiences when asked, but only when appropriately asked. Even when properly requested, however, the proffered insights do not come with the same authority as those given by the Holy Ghost to a specific individual or situation. This is fully consistent with the order of the kingdom and the stewardship of the recipient.

A sometimes tricky and occasionally confusing truth about the gift of the Holy Ghost and the inspiration received is that it will not violate another’s agency. Let me use as an example an occurrence not rare on the BYU campus.

As we encourage our young women and young men to date and after appropriate preparation and courtship to marry the partner of their

dreams, we occasionally meet someone a little confused about the process and what the feelings and inspiration he or she has received means. It is not unheard of for a fine young man to feel greatly attracted to a beautiful young woman who meets all of the essential characteristics on his list of what his ideal wife should be. He enjoys being with her and becomes convinced he would like to solidify a permanent relationship. Because he wishes to be sure, he makes it a matter of prayer and is convinced that heaven approves. The same basic experience may occur with a young woman as well. Fortunately, the feelings and inspiration are often reciprocal, and thus the kingdom continues to grow. Somewhat unfortunately, on other occasions, it may be that only one of the pair has the strong feeling and seemingly sure confirmation.

Herein lies the challenge. The other person in the proposed partnership may not feel exactly the same way nor has experienced the same inspiration. Is one wrong? Not necessarily and usually not. There are many matters of individual agency that can be approved by the guidance of the Holy Ghost that are not mandated. Thus, we all must be sure that we do not try to impose unduly our own will or choice on another, even when we feel strongly that it is heaven approved.

Not every acceptable choice, decision, or alternative is the only correct one. Of course, when we are confronted with serious binary questions (meaning only two available options) such as should we be morally clean or not, or should we be absolutely honest as we pay our taxes, take examinations in school, make and keep our temple covenants, or not, then there is only one correct choice and it is essential that we make the correct one.

On the other hand, the Lord leaves much in our hands and expects us to work out and consider carefully before deciding among several acceptable options. Years ago, I worked closely in attempting to advise and counsel a young man as he approached the conclusion of his medical school training. He was a very able and fine prospective physician. He was a faithful returned missionary, married to a beautiful and devoted young wife, and had much experience in receiving clear answers to his prayers. He came from a faithful family with a name many of you would recognize, where he had been taught to make all important decisions prayerfully and to delay acting until confirmation was received.

His problem was not a rare one, and he had forgotten, in his intense desire to avoid a serious mistake, the lesson Oliver Cowdery learned for himself and for all of us as he assisted the Prophet Joseph in the translation of the Book of Mormon. Oliver wanted to translate

and his desire was granted by the Lord but then soon revoked. Listen to these words of reproof and counsel: “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 feelings, but you shall have a stupor of thought that shall cause you to forget the thing which is wrong” (D&C 9:7–9).

After reading and discussing these verses, as well as the various merits of a career in surgery or internal medicine, my young friend quickly realized the need he had to make a decision himself and then take it to the Lord. He followed the revealed pattern and quickly got the answer he sought and needed. Now, twenty-five years later, he is an internationally recognized expert in his field.

Let me mention another potential mistake that you and I might make on occasion. I call it the prayer of faith when we already know the answer. Please forgive a personal example. Many years ago when I was finally near completion of my academic training at Duke University, which had gone on for a number years, I received a job offer to join the faculty and assume a position in the administration of my alma mater. I was flattered with the invitation, and Sharon and I both felt that eventually we wanted to return to the West and be closer to our families. The problem we encountered was that we did not feel the timing was quite right. My professional career was developing nicely in a very prestigious program, we held callings in a ward that was not blessed with excessive strength, we had developed close and special friendships, and we loved the beauty and the ambiance of the area. While we prayed over the matter, I at least was quite sure of the answer and therefore declined the offer from my own medical school with the hope that it might be tendered again in a few years.

Happily, the dean of the college making the offer was not only tenacious but a man of faith and, as a former bishop, understood the workings of the Spirit. When I rejected his offer the second time he called, he said simply, “If you can assure me that you have gone about this matter in exactly the right way, I’ll not bother you again. If you haven’t, please call me within a few days.”

You can imagine that I didn’t sleep too well that night. We determined to go about the matter “in exactly the right way” and listen to, rather than instruct, the Lord. For reasons that became much clearer over the years, the decision to return then was exactly the right one. Without

the inspired help of Dr. John A. Dixon, I likely would have made a serious mistake and perhaps never have known it. It would have not been bad to stay in the East, and maybe it would have even been a wonderful experience to do so. It would have meant that other special and perhaps essential opportunities and blessings would not have been ours as they have been as a result of the decision to leave Duke when we did.

We must remember that the gift of the Holy Ghost includes not only receiving necessary and vital warning and instruction that many times we have not requested and also answers to our prayers that have been properly expressed, but also the gift and requirement of careful listening that cannot occur when we are already sure that we have the answer.

I am grateful for all of the gifts of the Spirit and particularly for the gift of the Holy Ghost, which is usually the vehicle through which the other gifts are made manifest. As one who has been “given by the Holy Ghost [the gift] to know that Jesus Christ is the Son of God, and that he was crucified for the sins of the world” (D&C 46:13), I bear testimony of Him that He lives. I also bear my witness of the reality of the Father and of the Holy Ghost as well as of the Restoration of the gospel in our day. I bear testimony of our living prophet, President Gordon B. Hinckley, of his noble counselors, President Monson and President Faust, and of those called to serve with them. That we may all be able to appreciate fully in every sense of the word the gifts of the Spirit, I pray in the name of Jesus Christ, amen. **RE**

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Notes

1. Joseph Smith, *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, ed. B. H. Roberts, 2nd ed. rev. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1957), 4:42.
2. Joseph Smith, *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, comp. Joseph Fielding Smith (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1976), 242.
3. Smith, *History of the Church*, 4:555.