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REVELATION

REVELATION IS COMMUNICATION FROM GOD to man. It can occur in many different ways. Some prophets, like Moses and Joseph Smith, have talked with God face to face. Some persons have had personal communication with angels. Other revelations have come, as Elder James E. Talmage described it, “through the dreams of sleep or in waking visions of the mind.”¹

In its more familiar forms, revelation or inspiration comes by means of words or thoughts communicated to the mind (see D&C 8:2–3; Enos 1:10), by sudden enlightenment (see D&C 6:14–15), by positive or negative feelings about proposed courses of action, or even by inspiring performances, as in the performing arts. As President Boyd K. Packer has stated, “Inspiration comes more as a feeling than as a sound.”²

Assuming you are familiar with these different forms of revelation or inspiration, I have chosen to discuss this subject in terms of a different classification—the purpose of the communication. I can identify eight different purposes served by communication from God: (1) to testify, (2) to prophesy, (3) to comfort, (4) to uplift, (5) to inform, (6) to restrain, (7) to confirm, and (8) to impel. I will describe each of these in that order, giving examples.

My purpose in suggesting this classification and in giving these examples is to persuade each of you to search your own experience and to conclude that you have already received revelations and that you can

receive more revelations, because communication from God to men and women is a reality. President Lorenzo Snow declared that it is “the grand privilege of every Latter-day Saint . . . to have the manifestations of the spirit every day of our lives.”³

President Harold B. Lee taught that “every man has the privilege to exercise these gifts and these privileges in the conduct of his own affairs; in bringing up his children in the way they should go; in the management of his business, or whatever he does. It is his right to enjoy the spirit of revelation and of inspiration to do the right thing, to be wise and prudent, just and good, in everything that he does.”⁴

As I review the following eight purposes of revelation, I hope you will recognize the extent to which you have already received revelation or inspiration and resolve to cultivate this spiritual gift for more frequent use in the future.

1. THE HOLY GHOST *TESTIFIES* OR REVEALS THAT JESUS
IS THE CHRIST AND THAT THE GOSPEL IS TRUE.

When the Apostle Peter affirmed that Jesus Christ was the Son of the living God, the Savior called him blessed, “for flesh and blood hath not revealed it unto thee, but my Father which is in heaven” (Matthew 16:17). This precious revelation can be part of the personal experience of every seeker after truth and, once received, becomes a polestar to guide in all the activities of life.

2. *PROPHECY* IS ANOTHER PURPOSE OR
FUNCTION OF REVELATION.

Speaking under the influence of the Holy Ghost and within the limits of his or her responsibility, a person may be inspired to predict what will come to pass in the future.

The one who holds the office of the prophet, seer, and revelator prophesies for the Church, as when Joseph Smith prophesied concerning the Civil War (see D&C 87) and foretold that the Saints would become a mighty people in the Rocky Mountains. Prophecy is part of the calling of a patriarch. Each of us is also privileged occasionally to receive prophetic revelation illuminating future events in our lives,

like a Church calling we are to receive. To cite another example, after our fifth child was born, my wife and I did not have any more children. After more than ten years, we concluded that our family would not be any larger, which grieved us. Then one day, while my wife was in the temple, the Spirit whispered to her that she would have another child. That prophetic revelation was fulfilled about a year and a half later with the birth of our sixth child, for whom we had waited thirteen years.

3. A THIRD PURPOSE OF REVELATION IS TO GIVE COMFORT.

Such a revelation came to the Prophet Joseph Smith in Liberty Jail. After many months in deplorable conditions, he cried out in agony and loneliness, pleading for the Lord to remember him and the persecuted Saints. The comforting answer came:

“My son, peace be unto thy soul; thine adversity and thine afflictions shall be but a small moment; and then, if thou endure it well, God shall exalt thee on high; thou shalt triumph over all thy foes” (D&C 121:7–8).

In that same revelation the Lord declared that no matter what tragedies or injustices should befall the Prophet, “Know thou, my son, that all these things shall give thee experience, and shall be for thy good” (D&C 122:7).

Each of us knows of other examples of revelations of comfort. Some have been comforted by visions of departed loved ones or by feeling their presence. The widow of a good friend told me that she had felt the presence of her departed husband, giving her assurance of his love and concern for her. Others have been comforted in adjusting to the loss of a job or a business advantage or even a marriage. A revelation of comfort can also come in connection with a blessing of the priesthood, either from the words spoken or simply from the feeling communicated in connection with the blessing.

Another type of comforting revelation is the assurance received that a sin has been forgiven. After praying fervently for an entire day and night, a Book of Mormon prophet recorded that he heard a voice, which said, “Thy sins are forgiven thee, and thou shalt be blessed.



Liz Lemon Swindle, *Joseph Smith in Liberty Jail*. Used by permission.

“Wherefore,” Enos wrote, “my guilt was swept away” (see Enos 1:5–6; see also D&C 61:2). This assurance, which comes when a person has completed all the steps of repentance, gives assurance that the price has been paid, that God has heard the repentant sinner, and that his or her sins are forgiven. Alma described that moment as a time when

he was no longer “harrowed up by the memory” of his sins. “And oh, what joy, and what marvelous light I did behold; yea, my soul was filled with joy. . . . There can be nothing so exquisite and sweet as was my joy” (Alma 36:19–21).

4. CLOSELY RELATED TO THE FEELING OF COMFORT IS THE FOURTH PURPOSE OR FUNCTION OF REVELATION, TO *UPLIFT*.

At some time in our lives each of us needs to be lifted up from a depression, from a sense of foreboding or inadequacy, or just from a plateau of spiritual mediocrity. Because it raises our spirits and helps us resist evil and seek good, I believe that the feeling of uplift that is communicated by reading the scriptures or by enjoying wholesome music, art, or literature is a distinct purpose of revelation.

5. THE FIFTH PURPOSE OF REVELATION IS TO *INFORM*.

This may consist of inspiration giving a person the words to speak on a particular occasion, such as in the blessings pronounced by a patriarch or in sermons or other words spoken under the influence of the Holy Ghost. The Lord commanded Joseph Smith and Sidney Rigdon to lift up their voices and speak the thoughts that would be put into their hearts, “for it shall be given you in the very hour, yea, in the very moment, what ye shall say” (D&C 100:5–6; see also D&C 84:85; D&C 124:97).

On some sacred occasions, information has been given by face-to-face conversations with heavenly personages, such as in the visions related in ancient and modern scripture. In other circumstances, needed information is communicated by the quiet whisperings of the Spirit. A child loses a treasured possession, prays for help, and is inspired to find it; an adult has a problem at work, at home, or in genealogical research, prays, and is led to the information necessary to resolve it; a Church leader prays to know who the Lord would have him call to fill a position, and the Spirit whispers a name. In all of these examples—familiar to each of us—the Holy Ghost acts in His office as a teacher and revelator, communicating information and truths for the edification and guidance of the recipient.

Revelation from God serves all five of these purposes: testimony, prophecy, comfort, uplift, and information. I have spoken of these only briefly, giving examples principally from the scriptures. I will speak at greater length about the remaining three purposes of revelation, giving examples from my personal experience.

6. THE SIXTH TYPE OR PURPOSE OF REVELATION IS TO RESTRAIN US FROM DOING SOMETHING.

Thus, in the midst of a great sermon explaining the power of the Holy Ghost, Nephi suddenly declares, “And now I . . . cannot say more; the Spirit stoppeth mine utterance” (2 Nephi 32:7). The revelation that restrains is one of the most common forms of revelation. It often comes by surprise, when we have not asked for revelation or guidance on a particular subject. But if we are keeping the commandments of God and living in tune with His Spirit, a restraining force will steer us away from things we should not do.

One of my first experiences in being restrained by the Spirit came soon after I was called as a counselor in a stake presidency in Chicago. In one of our first stake presidency meetings, our stake president made a proposal that our new stake center be built in a particular location. I immediately saw four or five good reasons why that was the wrong location. When asked for my counsel, I opposed the proposal, giving each of those reasons. The stake president wisely proposed that each of us consider the matter prayerfully for a week and discuss it further in our next meeting. Almost perfunctorily I prayed about the subject and immediately received a strong impression that I was wrong, that I was standing in the way of the Lord’s will, and that I should remove myself from opposition to it. Needless to say, I was restrained and promptly gave my approval to the proposed construction. Incidentally, the wisdom of constructing the stake center at that location was soon evident, even to me. My reasons to the contrary turned out to be short-sighted, and I was soon grateful to have been restrained from relying on them.

Several years ago I picked up the desk pen in my office at Brigham Young University (BYU) to sign a paper that had been prepared for my signature, something I did at least a dozen times each day. That

document committed the university to a particular course of action we had decided to follow. All the staff work had been done, and all appeared to be in order. But as I went to sign the document, I was filled with such negative thoughts and forebodings that I put it to one side and asked for the entire matter to be reviewed again. It was, and within a few days additional facts came to light which showed that the proposed course of action would have caused the university serious problems in the future.

On another occasion the Spirit came to my assistance as I was editing a casebook on a legal subject. A casebook consists of several hundred court opinions, together with explanatory material and text written by the editor. My assistant and I had finished almost all of the work on the book, including the necessary research to assure that these court opinions had not been reversed or overruled. Just before sending it to the publisher, I was leafing through the manuscript and a particular court opinion caught my attention. As I looked at it, I had a profoundly uneasy feeling. I asked my assistant to check that opinion again to see if everything was in order. He reported that it was. In a subsequent check of the completed manuscript, I was again stopped at that case, again with great feelings of uneasiness. This time I went to the law library myself. There, in some newly received publications, I discovered that this case had just been reversed on appeal. If that opinion had been published in my casebook, it would have been a serious professional embarrassment. I was saved by the restraining power of revelation.

7. A COMMON WAY TO SEEK REVELATION IS TO
PROPOSE A PARTICULAR COURSE OF ACTION AND
THEN TO PRAY FOR INSPIRATION TO *CONFIRM* IT.

The Lord explained the confirming type of revelation when Oliver Cowdery failed in his efforts to translate the Book of Mormon: “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” (D&C 9:7–8).

Similarly, the prophet Alma likens the word of God to a seed and tells persons studying the gospel that if they will give place for the seed to be planted in their heart, the seed will enlarge their souls and enlighten their understanding and begin to be delicious to them (see Alma 32). That feeling is the Holy Ghost's confirming revelation of the truth of the word.

When he spoke on the BYU campus some years ago on the subject "Agency or Inspiration," Elder Bruce R. McConkie stressed our responsibility to do all that we can before we seek a revelation. He gave a very personal example. When he set out to choose a companion for eternity, he did not go to the Lord and ask whom he ought to marry. "I went out and found the girl I wanted," he said. "She suited me; . . . it just seemed . . . as though this ought to be. . . . [Then] all I did was pray to the Lord and ask for some guidance and direction in connection with the decision that I'd reached."⁵

Elder McConkie summarized his counsel on the balance between agency and inspiration as follows: "We're expected to use the gifts and talents and abilities, the sense and judgment and agency with which we are endowed. . . . Implicit in asking in faith is the precedent requirement that we do everything in our power to accomplish the goal that we seek. . . . We're expected to do everything in our power that we can, and then to seek an answer from the Lord, a confirming seal that we've reached the right conclusion."⁶

As a regional representative I was privileged to work with four different members of the Quorum of the Twelve and with other General Authorities as they sought revelation in the calling of stake presidents. All proceeded in the same manner. They interviewed persons residing in the stake—counselors in the stake presidency, members of the high council, bishops, and others who had gained special experience in Church administration—asking them questions and hearing their counsel. As these interviews were conducted, the servants of the Lord gave prayerful consideration to each person interviewed and mentioned. Finally, they reached a tentative decision on the new stake president. This proposal was then prayerfully submitted to the Lord. If confirmed, the call was issued. If not confirmed, or if restrained, that proposal was

tabled and the process continued until a new proposal was formed and the confirming revelation was received.

Sometimes confirming and restraining revelations are combined. For example, during my service at BYU I was invited to give a speech before a national association of attorneys. Because it would require many days to prepare, this was the kind of speaking invitation I had routinely declined. But as I began to dictate a letter declining this particular invitation, I felt restrained. I paused and reconsidered my action. I then considered how I might accept the invitation, and as I came to consider it in that light, I felt the confirming assurance of the Spirit and knew that this was what I must do.

The speech that resulted, “A Private University Looks at Government Regulation,” opened the door to a host of important opportunities. I was invited to repeat that same speech before several other nationally prominent groups. It was published in *Vital Speeches*, in a professional journal, and in several other periodicals and books, from which it was used as a leading statement of the private university’s interest in freedom from government regulation. This speech led to BYU’s being consulted by various church groups on the proper relationship between government and a church-related college. These consultations in turn contributed to the formation of a national organization of church-related colleges and universities that has provided a significant coalition to oppose unlawful or unwise government regulation in the future. I have no doubt, as I look back on the event, that this speaking invitation I almost declined was one of those occasions when a seemingly insignificant act made a great deal of difference.

Those are the times when it is vital for us to receive the guidance of the Lord, and those are the times when revelation will come to aid us if we will hear and heed it.

8. THE EIGHTH PURPOSE OR TYPE OF REVELATION CONSISTS OF THOSE INSTANCES WHERE THE SPIRIT *IMPELS* A PERSON TO ACTION.

This is not a case where a person proposes to take a particular action and the Spirit either confirms or restrains. This is a case where

revelation comes when it is not being sought and impels some action not proposed. This type of revelation is obviously less common than other types, but its rarity makes it all the more significant.

A scriptural example is recorded in the first book of Nephi. After Nephi obtained the precious records from the treasury in Jerusalem, the Spirit of the Lord directed him to kill Laban as he lay drunk in the street. This act was so far from Nephi's heart that he recoiled and wrestled with the Spirit, but he was again directed to slay Laban, and he finally followed that revelation (see 1 Nephi 4).

Students of Church history will recall Wilford Woodruff's account of an impression that came to him in the night telling him to move his carriage and mules away from a large tree. He did so, and his family and livestock were saved when the tree crashed to the ground in a tornado that struck thirty minutes later.⁷

As a young girl, my grandmother Chasty Olsen Harris had a similar experience. She was tending some children who were playing in a dry riverbed near their home in Castle Dale, Utah. Suddenly she heard a voice that called her by name and directed her to get the children out of the riverbed and up on the bank. It was a clear day, and there was no sign of rain. She saw no reason to heed the voice and continued to play. The voice spoke to her again, urgently. This time she heeded the warning. Quickly gathering the children, she made a run for the bank. Just as they reached it, an enormous wall of water, originating with a cloudburst in the mountains many miles away, swept down the canyon and roared across where the children had played. Except for this impelling revelation, she and the children would have been lost.

For nine years Professor Marvin Hill and I had worked on the book *Carthage Conspiracy*, which concerns the 1845 court trial of the murderers of Joseph Smith. We had several different sources of minutes on the trial, some bearing their author's name and others unsigned. The fullest set of minutes was unsigned, but because we had located them in the Church Historian's Office, we were sure they were the minutes kept by George Watt, the Church's official scribe who was sent to record the proceedings of the trial. We so stated in seven drafts of our manuscript and analyzed all of our sources on that assumption.

Finally, the book was completed, and within a few weeks the final manuscript would be sent to the publisher. As I sat in my office at BYU one Saturday afternoon, I felt impelled to go through the pile of unexamined books and pamphlets accumulated on the table behind my desk. At the very bottom of a pile of fifty or sixty publications, I found a printed catalog of the contents of the Wilford C. Wood Museum, which Professor LaMar C. Berrett, the author, had sent to me a year and a half earlier. As I quickly flipped through the pages of this catalog of Church history manuscripts, my eyes fell on a page describing the manuscript of the trial minutes we had attributed to George Watt. This catalog page told how Wilford Wood had purchased the original of that set of minutes in Illinois and had given the Church the typewritten version we had obtained from the Church historian.

We immediately visited the Wilford Wood Museum in Woods Cross, Utah, and obtained additional information which enabled us to determine that the minutes we had thought were the official Church source had been prepared by one of the lawyers for the defense. With this knowledge we returned to the Church Historian's Office and were able to locate for the first time George Watt's official and highly authentic set of minutes on the trial. This discovery saved us from a grievous error in the identification of one of our major sources and also permitted us to enrich the contents of our book significantly. The impression I received that day in my office is a cherished example of the way the Lord will help us in our righteous professional pursuits when we qualify for the impressions of His Spirit.

I had another choice experience with impelling revelation a few months after I began my service at BYU. As a new and inexperienced president, I had many problems to analyze and many decisions to reach. I was very dependent on the Lord. One day in October I drove up Provo Canyon to ponder a particular problem. Although alone and without any interruption, I found myself unable to think of the problem at hand. Another pending issue I was not yet ready to consider kept thrusting itself into my mind: should we modify BYU's academic calendar to complete the fall semester before Christmas?

After ten or fifteen minutes of unsuccessful efforts to exclude thoughts of this subject, I realized what was happening. The issue of

the calendar did not seem timely to me, and I was certainly not seeking any guidance on it, but the Spirit was trying to communicate on that subject. I immediately turned my full attention to that question and began to record my thoughts on a piece of paper. Within a few minutes I had recorded the details of a three-semester calendar, with all of its powerful advantages.

Hurrying back to the campus, I reviewed this with my colleagues and found them enthusiastic. A few days later the Board of Trustees approved our proposed new calendar, and we published its dates, barely in time to make them effective in the fall of 1972. Since that time I have reread these words of the Prophet Joseph Smith and realized that I had had the experience he described: “A person may profit by noticing the first intimation of the spirit of revelation; for instance, when you feel pure intelligence flowing into you, it may give you sudden strokes of ideas . . . and thus by learning the Spirit of God and understanding it, you may grow into the principle of revelation.”⁸

I have now described eight different purposes or types of revelation: (1) testifying, (2) prophesying, (3) comforting, (4) uplifting, (5) informing, (6) restraining, (7) confirming, and (8) impelling. Each of these refers to revelations that are received. Before concluding, I will suggest a few ideas about revelations that are not received.

First, we should understand what can be called the principle of “responsibility in revelation.” Our Heavenly Father’s house is a house of order, where His servants are commanded to “act in the office in which [they are] appointed” (D&C 107:99). This principle applies to revelation. Only the President of the Church receives revelation to guide the entire Church. Only the stake president receives revelation for the special guidance of the stake. The person who receives revelation for the ward is the bishop. For a family, it is the priesthood leadership of the family. Leaders receive revelation for their own areas of responsibility. Individuals can receive revelation to guide their own lives.

But when one person purports to receive revelation for another person outside his or her own area of responsibility—such as a Church member who claims to have revelation to guide the entire Church or a person who claims to have a revelation to guide another person over

whom he or she has no presiding authority according to the order of the Church—you can be sure that such revelations are not from the Lord. “There are counterfeit signals.”⁹ Satan is a great deceiver, and he is the source of some of these spurious revelations. Others are imagined.

If a revelation is outside the limits of your specific responsibility, you know it is not from the Lord and you are not bound by it. I have heard of cases where a young man told a young woman she should marry him because he had received a revelation that she was to be his eternal companion. If this is a true revelation, it will be confirmed directly to the woman if she seeks to know. In the meantime, she is under no obligation to heed it. She should seek her own guidance and make up her own mind. The man can receive revelation to guide his own actions, but he cannot properly receive revelation to direct hers. She is outside his jurisdiction.

What about those times when we seek revelation and do not receive it? We do not always receive inspiration or revelation when we request it. Sometimes we are delayed in the receipt of revelation, and sometimes we are left to our own judgment. We cannot force spiritual things. It must be so. Our life’s purpose to obtain experience and to develop faith would be frustrated if our Heavenly Father directed us in every act, even in every important act. We must make decisions and experience the consequences in order to develop self-reliance and faith.

Even in decisions we think very important, we sometimes receive no answer to our prayers. This does not mean that our prayers have not been heard. It only means that we have prayed about a decision which, for one reason or another, we should make without guidance by revelation. Perhaps we have asked for guidance in choosing between alternatives that are equally acceptable or equally unacceptable. I suggest that there is not a right and wrong to every question. To many questions, there are only two wrong answers or two right answers. Thus, a person who seeks guidance on which of two different ways he should pursue to get even with a person who has wronged him is not likely to receive a revelation. Neither is a person who seeks guidance on a choice he will never have to make because some future event will intervene, such as a third alternative that is clearly preferable. On one

occasion, my wife and I prayed earnestly for guidance on a decision that seemed very important. No answer came. We were left to proceed on our own best judgment. We could not imagine why the Lord had not aided us with a confirming or restraining impression. But it was not long before we learned that we did not have to make a decision on that question because something else happened that made a decision unnecessary. The Lord would not guide us in a selection that made no difference.

No answer is likely to come to a person who seeks guidance in choosing between two alternatives that are equally acceptable to the Lord. Thus, there are times when we can serve productively in two different fields of labor. Either answer is right. Similarly, the Spirit of the Lord is not likely to give us revelations on matters that are trivial. I once heard a young woman in testimony meeting praise the spirituality of her husband, indicating that he submitted every question to the Lord. She told how he accompanied her shopping and would not even choose between different brands of canned vegetables without making his selection a matter of prayer. That strikes me as improper. I believe the Lord expects us to use the intelligence and experience He has given us to make these kinds of choices. When a member asked the Prophet Joseph Smith for advice on a particular matter, the Prophet stated: "It is a great thing to inquire at the hands of God, or to come into His presence: and we feel fearful to approach Him on subjects that are of little or no consequence."¹⁰

Of course, we are not always able to judge what is trivial. If a matter appears of little or no consequence, we should proceed on the basis of our own judgment. If the choice is important for reasons unknown to us, such as the speaking invitation I mentioned earlier or a choice between two cans of vegetables when one contains a hidden poison, the Lord will intervene and give us guidance. Where a choice will make a real difference in our lives—obvious or not—and where we are living in tune with the Spirit and seeking its guidance, we can be sure that we will receive the guidance we need to attain our goal. The Lord will not leave us unassisted when a choice is important to our eternal welfare.

NOTES

1. James E. Talmage, *Articles of Faith*, 12th ed. (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1924), 229.
2. Boyd K. Packer, “Prayers and Answers,” *Ensign*, November 1979, 19–20.
3. Lorenzo Snow, in Conference Report, April 1899, 52.
4. Harold B. Lee, *Stand Ye in Holy Places* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1974), 141–42.
5. Bruce R. McConkie, “Agency or Inspiration—Which?” in *Speeches of the Year: BYU Devotional Addresses 1972–1973* (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University Press, 1973), 107, 111.
6. See McConkie, “Agency and Inspiration—Which?” 108, 110, 113.
7. See Matthias F. Cowley, *Wilford Woodruff: History of His Life and Labors* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1964), 31–32.
8. *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, comp. Joseph Fielding Smith (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1976), 151.
9. Packer, “Prayers and Answers,” 19–20.
10. *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, ed. B. H. Roberts, 2nd ed. rev. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1957), 1:339