

CHAPTER FOUR

“THIS GENERATION
SHALL HAVE MY WORD
THROUGH YOU”

ELDER BRUCE R. MCCONKIE

In 1829 the Lord gave information of unsurpassed importance to the people of our time when He said to Joseph Smith, His latter-day seer, “This generation shall have my word through you” (D&C 5:10).

It is my desire to show that this statement truly describes conditions as they are. It is also my desire to describe these conditions in a manner that bears testimony of the great work of the Prophet Joseph Smith in restoring the gospel of our Savior and Master, the Lord Jesus Christ.

“This generation shall have my word through you.” The word is the gospel of salvation; the word is the plan of salvation; the word is the mind and will and purposes of the Lord as pertaining to His children on earth; the word is all the truths and rights and powers and doctrines and principles that are needed by men so they can take the souls they possess and transform them into the kind of souls that can go where God and Christ are.

And the generation of which we speak is this era or period of time. It is the dispensation in which we live; it is the time from the opening of our dispensation down to the second coming of the Son of Man; and for that allotted period of the earth’s history, the word of the Lord, the word of salvation, the word of light and truth are going

Elder Bruce R. McConkie (1915–85) was a member of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles.

to the world through Joseph Smith, and in no other way and through no one else.

THE WORD AND THE DISPENSATION

Some background is essential to our understanding of what is involved. We all know that salvation is in Christ. He is the Firstborn of the Father. He was like unto God in the premortal life, and He became, under the Father, the Creator of all things. We look to Him; our faith centers in Him, and in the Father through Him.

Second to Christ stands that great spirit person Michael, who led the armies and hosts of heaven when there was war and rebellion in heaven, and who, being foreordained so to do, came here as the first man of all men and became the presiding high priest over the earth. The next person in this hierarchy is Gabriel, who came into this life as Noah. After that, we do not know the order of priority, except that singled out from among the hosts of heaven were certain men who were foreordained to be the heads of dispensations.

Dispensations are those periods of time when the plan of salvation, the word—the eternal word—is dispensed to men on earth. How many there have been we do not know. I suppose there have been ten; maybe there have been twenty; there could have been more. I am speaking now not of what sometimes are called dispensations in the sense that John the Baptist and Paul and some of the other prophets had special appointments. I am speaking of those great eras or periods, of those designated portions of the earth's history, when the Lord, through one man, gives His word to the whole world and makes all the prophets, and all the seers, and all the administrators, and all the Apostles of that period subject to, and exponents of, what came through that individual. What this means is that the head of a gospel dispensation stands as one of the ten or twenty greatest spirits who have so far been born on earth.

We know very little about the caliber of men who will be born during the Millennium. Many great spirits will come then. It seems reasonable to suppose, however, that the Lord has singled out certain ones who had special spiritual talents and capabilities to come to earth in periods of turmoil and wickedness and rebellion and evil, to be lights and guides to the world. This gives us a little perspective of

"This Generation Shall Have My Word through You

37

what is involved in the life and in the status and position of Joseph Smith.

You start out with the Lord Jesus, and then you have Adam and Noah. Thereafter come the dispensation heads. Then you come to the prophets, to Apostles, to the elders of Israel, and to wise and good and sagacious men who have the spirit of light and understanding. Every dispensation head is a revealer of Christ for his day; every prophet is a witness of Christ; and every other prophet or apostle who comes is a reflection and an echo and an exponent of the dispensation head. All such come to echo to the world and to expound and unfold what God has revealed through the man who was appointed to give His eternal word to the world for that era. Such is the dispensation concept.

THE WORD COMING THROUGH JOSEPH SMITH

We come now to our dispensation. We shall not deal in minutia. We are not concerned with small or insignificant things. We need to get under this head an overall concept of what is involved in giving the word to the world through a particular prophet.

Joseph Smith gave three great truths to the world. These truths override all others; they take precedence over all things; they have more of an influence on the salvation of men than any others, and without the knowledge of them, men cannot be saved. The first great truth is that God, our Heavenly Father, is the Creator, Upholder, and Preserver of all things and that He ordained and established the plan of salvation. It is His gospel, "the gospel of God, . . . concerning his Son Jesus Christ our Lord, which was made of the seed of David according to the flesh," as Paul expressed it (Romans 1:1, 3).

As we look for the word, both in the Doctrine and Covenants and elsewhere, the first thing we look for is the knowledge of God as it was revealed through Joseph Smith. Knowledge of God is the greatest truth in all eternity. But there must needs be an opposition in all things, and the opposite of the knowledge of God that has come through Joseph Smith is the greatest heresy in the sectarian world. That heresy is that God is a spirit nothingness that fills the immensity of space, and that creation came through evolutionary processes. In truth and in fact, Joseph Smith came to reveal God, in a day of

almost total spiritual darkness, in a day when men no longer knew the nature and kind of Being whom they should worship.

The second great truth is that Jesus Christ is the Savior and Redeemer of the world, that salvation comes through His atoning sacrifice, and that the Atonement is the foundation whereon we can build so that by obedience to the laws and ordinances of the everlasting gospel we can be saved. That is the number-two truth in all eternity. There is nothing more important to us—having first discovered who God our Father is—than to know about Christ and the salvation that is in Him. The heresy and perversion of this truth is the common sectarian concept that people are saved by grace alone, without works.

The third most important thing in all eternity is a knowledge of God the Testator, who is the Holy Ghost. The Holy Spirit of God is a revealer who reveals truth; He is a sanctifier who cleanses and perfects human souls; and it is through Him that the gifts of the Spirit are available to the faithful, so that they can have in their lives what apostles and prophets and great men of all ages have had in theirs. The heresy that exists in the sectarian world in this field is that the heavens are sealed, that there is no revelation, that there are no miracles, and that there are no gifts of the Spirit. These three great truths are what we look for with reference to the word coming through the Prophet Joseph Smith.

Now, just a word or two from our revelations relative to Joseph Smith's prophetic position: "I the Lord, knowing the calamity which should come upon the inhabitants of the earth, called upon my servant Joseph Smith, Jun., and spake unto him from heaven, and gave him commandments" (D&C 1:17). Such is the revealed statement in the Lord's preface to His book of commandments.

In section 21 we read this: "Behold, there shall be a record kept among you; and in it thou shalt be called a seer, a translator, a prophet, an apostle of Jesus Christ, an elder of the church through the will of God the Father, and the grace of your Lord Jesus Christ, being inspired of the Holy Ghost to lay the foundation thereof, and to build it up unto the most holy faith. . . . Wherefore, meaning the church, thou shalt give heed unto all his words and commandments which he shall give unto you as he receiveth them, walking in all holiness before me" (D&C 21:1-2, 4).

"This Generation Shall Have My Word through You

39

Then comes this proclamation, which in the full sense of the word applies more completely to a dispensation head: "For his word ye shall receive, as if from mine own mouth, in all patience and faith" (D&C 21:5). When Joseph Smith spoke by the power of the Holy Ghost, it was as though the Lord Jesus Himself was saying the words. The Prophet's voice was the voice of the Lord; he was not perfect; only Christ was free from sin and evil. But the Prophet was as near perfection as mortals can get without being translated. He was a man of such spiritual stature that he reflected the image of the Lord Jesus to the people. His voice was the voice of the Lord.

"For by doing these things"—that is, by giving heed to the words of Joseph Smith as though Jesus Himself had spoken them—"the gates of hell shall not prevail against you; yea, and the Lord God will disperse the powers of darkness from before you, and cause the heavens to shake for your good, and his name's glory" (D&C 21:6). In some measure, we have seen a fulfillment of this in the explosive, dynamic, progressive enlargement of the Church in our day. "For thus saith the Lord God: Him have I inspired to move the cause of Zion in mighty power for good, and his diligence I know, and his prayers I have heard. Yea, his weeping for Zion I have seen, and I will cause that he shall mourn for her no longer; for his days of rejoicing are come unto the remission of his sins, and the manifestations of my blessings upon his works" (D&C 21:7–8).

There is one more verse we should note particularly; we can take it as a test to measure personal discipleship: "For, behold, I will bless all those who labor in my vineyard with a mighty blessing"—this applies to all of us—"and they shall believe on his words [those of Joseph Smith], which are given him through me by the Comforter, which manifesteth that Jesus was crucified by sinful men for the sins of the world, yea, for the remission of sins unto the contrite heart" (D&C 21:9). The test of discipleship is how totally and completely and fully we believe the word that was revealed through Joseph Smith, and how effectively we echo or proclaim that word to the world.

WHERE THE WORD IS FOUND

The word is found in the visions and revelations and inspired utterances of Joseph Smith. Many of these are recorded in the *History*

of the Church. The account of the First Vision is also in the Pearl of Great Price. The Wentworth letter is the equal and equivalent of what is already in the Pearl of Great Price; it is scripture, except that we have not presented it to the Church and bound ourselves to accept it and proclaim it to the world. There are many things of equal validity, truth, and literary excellence to those that have formally been placed in our scriptural accounts.

This is the statement the Prophet made when he and his associates formally adopted what we now call the Doctrine and Covenants: "After deliberate consideration, in consequence of the book of revelations, now to be printed, being the foundation of the Church in these last days, and a benefit to the world, showing that the keys of the mysteries of the kingdom of our Savior are again entrusted to man; and the riches of eternity within the compass of those who are willing to live by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God—therefore the conference voted that they prize the revelations to be worth to the Church the riches of the whole earth, speaking temporally."¹ Such is our vision and view of the Doctrine and Covenants.

The word given through Joseph Smith is also found in the records he translated. The chief of these is the Book of Mormon. This book is a new witness for Christ; it is comparable to the Holy Bible; it is a record of God's dealings with people in the Old World. Of the Book of Mormon, Joseph Smith said, "I told the brethren," referring to a discussion with the Quorum of the Twelve, "that the Book of Mormon was the most correct of any book on earth, and the keystone of our religion, and a man would get nearer to God by abiding by its precepts, than by any other book"² The Book of Mormon contains that portion of the Lord's word which is needed to prove the divinity of His great latter-day work, and which is needed to teach the basic doctrines of salvation to mankind generally. It is the basic, fundamental, standard work of the latter days.

Some of the other translations made by the Prophet are found in the Pearl of Great Price. He translated the book of Abraham and what is called the Joseph Smith Translation of the Bible. This latter is a marvelously inspired work; it is one of the great evidences of the divine mission of the Prophet. By pure revelation, he inserted many new concepts and views, such as the material in the fourteenth chap-

"This Generation Shall Have My Word through You

41

ter of Genesis about Melchizedek. Some chapters he rewrote and realigned so that the things said in them take on a new perspective and meaning, such as the twenty-fourth chapter of Matthew and the first chapter in the gospel of John.

Another source of the Prophet's material is his sermons and his teachings. We have what is in the standard works, but there is something more—that which he spoke and which was then recorded. When the Lord revealed what we should teach, He said in that revelation known as the law of the Church (D&C 42): "The elders, priests and teachers of this church," and all other officers, "shall teach the principles of my gospel, which are in the Bible and the Book of Mormon, in the which is the fulness of the gospel" (D&C 42:12). They did not then have our other scriptures. "And they shall observe the covenants and church articles to do them, and these shall be their teachings, as they shall be directed by the Spirit" (D&C 42:13). So our obligation is to teach out of the standard works by the power of the Holy Ghost. "And the Spirit shall be given unto you by the prayer of faith; and if ye receive not the Spirit ye shall not teach. And all this ye shall observe to do as I have commanded concerning your teaching, until the fulness of my scriptures is given" (D&C 42:14–15).

We have more now, though we do not have that fulness which one day shall be ours. "And as ye shall lift up your voices by the Comforter, ye shall speak and prophesy as seemeth me good; for, behold, the Comforter knoweth all things, and beareth record of the Father and of the Son" (D&C 42:16–17).

Now, as I said, we are to do more than teach out of the standard works. The Lord's servants are to go forth "preaching the word, . . . saying none other things than that which the prophets and apostles have written, *and that which is taught them by the Comforter through the prayer of faith*" (D&C 52:9; emphasis added).

Joseph Smith had, as no other man in our dispensation, the ability to be in tune with the Comforter and to speak forth things that were the mind and voice of the Lord, including things that are not in the standard works. I suppose that most notable of all that he did in this respect was the King Follett sermon, said to be the greatest sermon of his entire ministry. I suppose there is not anything that surpasses the sermon he gave on the Second Comforter. It was as though God spoke when the Prophet spoke.

Those things that have come through the revelations and sermons of others of the brethren who have lived since Joseph Smith, as, for instance, the vision of the redemption of the dead that President Joseph F. Smith received, or what any inspired person in the Church says, these things are a reflection, an explanation, an amplification of what originated with the Prophet Joseph Smith.

THE WORD AND THE DOCTRINE AND COVENANTS

The Doctrine and Covenants presents the word in a variety of ways. There are appearances of holy beings. The Lord Himself came, as is recorded in section 110. The first part of section 27 was recited by an angel who met the Prophet and gave the instructions to him. The word came by the voice of God, as in the revelation that is now section 137 in the Doctrine and Covenants (the vision of Alvin in the celestial kingdom). The word came by visions, as in section 76. The word came by the power of the Holy Ghost, primarily. Most of the revelations came in that way.

If the Holy Ghost rests upon a person, that person speaks what the Lord would speak and that person's voice becomes the voice of the Lord. Notice this verse of scripture: "In that day the Holy Ghost fell upon Adam, which beareth record of the Father and the Son, saying"—now notice who is speaking and notice the message given by the Holy Ghost—"I am the Only Begotten of the Father from the beginning, henceforth and forever, that as thou hast fallen thou mayest be redeemed, and all mankind, even as many as will" (Moses 5:9). The Holy Ghost speaks in the first person as though He were the Son of God, dramatizing the fact that when we speak by the power of the Holy Ghost, the words spoken are the words of Christ. We are familiar with Nephi's expression that angels speak by the power of the Holy Ghost, and hence they speak the words of Christ (see 2 Nephi 32:3). Prophets who speak by the power of the Holy Ghost speak the word of Christ. Every elder in the Church, as he is moved upon by the Holy Ghost, gives forth words that are scripture and they are just as true and just as binding in their central truthful import as any words ever uttered by any prophet. We may not segregate them out, and vote on them, and decide that we, formally and officially, will be bound by them in our conduct. But they are scripture, and they are the voice and word of the Lord. This is what is

"This Generation Shall Have My Word through You

43

involved in the sermons of the Prophet. The Father and the Son and the Holy Ghost are one; no matter which one of them says something, it is always the same word. If a man says by inspiration what they would have said, it is scripture.

Some of the revelations came by spiritual confirmation, meaning that the Prophet worked out the problem in his mind, using his agency as he was obligated to do, and then took the matter to the Lord and got a spiritual confirmation that his conclusions were right. He then wrote them down, in the name of the Lord, and we publish them as revelation.

There are also some epistles, such as sections 127 and 128; there are some inspired writings, such as sections 121, 122, and 123; and there are some items of instruction, such as section 131.

HOW TO KNOW IT IS THE WORD OF GOD

This statement is taken from the testimony of the Twelve, given on the occasion of the formal adoption of the revelations: "We, therefore, feel willing to bear testimony to all the world of mankind, to every creature upon the face of all the earth, that the Lord has borne record to our souls, through the Holy Ghost shed forth upon us, that these commandments were given by inspiration of God, and are profitable for all men and are verily true" (Introduction to the Doctrine and Covenants).

Now, there is not any way in heaven or on earth for anyone to know of the truth and validity of a revelation except to have the same Spirit rest upon him that rested upon the revelator who received it. We are dealing with the things of the Spirit. We cannot weigh and evaluate and judge and handle them in a laboratory, unless we are speaking of a spiritual laboratory. There is no private interpretation to scripture. The scripture "came not in old time by the will of man: but holy men of God spake as they were moved by the Holy Ghost" (2 Peter 1:21). And so when the Twelve bear record, as here we read, that the revelations in the Doctrine and Covenants are true, that means that the Holy Spirit of God had spoken to the spirit within each individual, and to all of them collectively, and certified that the revelations received by Joseph Smith were true. There is no other way to know of the truth and divinity of a spiritual thing than by receiving a spiritual revelation.

THE WORD YET TO COME

We have not received, by any means, all of the word of the Lord. I think we have received most of the word of the Lord that is required until the Second Coming. The Lord has given all that people in the world have the spiritual capacity to receive at this time. There is going to be another great dispensation—that is, another great period of enlightenment—when He comes. At that time He will reveal all things, such as the sealed portion of the Book of Mormon. But He will not reveal the sealed portion of the Book of Mormon now, or let us publish it to the world because what it contains is so far beyond the spiritual capacity of men that it would drive people away from the truth rather than lead them to the truth. Actually, it is an act of mercy for the Lord to limit, to a particular people, the amount of revelation they receive.

We are now in a glorious dispensation in which we have received substantially all of the revelations we are able to bear; it is true, however, that if we were able to unite and have faith, we would get more. That is one of the things that was involved in 1978 when President Kimball received the revelation that the gospel and all of its blessings (the priesthood and the ordinances of the house of the Lord) were now to go to those of every race and kindred and tongue without any reservation except that people live in righteousness and be worthy to receive what is offered to them. That new revelation came in large measure because the prophet of God and those associated with him united in faith and in prayer and in desire, and sought for an answer from the Lord. There are added revelations we could receive, and I hope we will receive, as we manage to get in tune with the Spirit. But the great reservoir of revelation for our dispensation—meaning the things that we need to know to govern our conduct in order to gain an eternal life—these things have already been given. And there will not be great added reservoirs of substantive revelation that will come before the Second Coming because of the wickedness of the world. Some of that wickedness spills over and prevails among the Latter-day Saints. But eventually, there will be a day of great added revelation.

THE REAFFIRMATION OF THE WORD IN OUR HEARTS

This reaffirmation is what brings this subject down to us as individuals. Every man is supposed to be a prophet for himself. Every

"This Generation Shall Have My Word through You

45

head of a house should be the revelator for his family. Joseph Smith said these glorious words as he talked about the Second Comforter: "God hath not revealed anything to Joseph, but what He will make known unto the Twelve, and even the least Saint may know all things as fast as he is able to bear them."³ The initial verses in section 76 announce this glorious concept: "Thus saith the Lord—I, the Lord, am merciful and gracious unto those who fear me, and delight to honor those who serve me in righteousness and in truth unto the end" (D&C 76:5).

We are not talking now about apostles and prophets alone; we are talking about the whole body of faithful members: "Great shall be their reward and eternal shall be their glory.

"And to them will I reveal all mysteries, yea, all the hidden mysteries of my kingdom from days of old, and for ages to come, will I make known unto them the good pleasure of my will concerning all things pertaining to my kingdom.

"Yea, even the wonders of eternity shall they know, and things to come will I show them, even the things of many generations.

"And their wisdom shall be great, and their understanding reach to heaven; and before them the wisdom of the wise shall perish, and the understanding of the prudent shall come to naught.

"For by my Spirit will I enlighten them, and by my power will I make known unto them the secrets of my will—yea, even those things which eye has not seen, nor ear heard, nor yet entered into the heart of man" (D&C 76:6–10).

Those words introduce the vision that the Prophet and Sidney Rigdon received of three degrees of glory. When the vision had been duly recorded, and while the Spirit still rested upon them, by way of conclusion and summary the Prophet wrote: "But great and marvelous are the works of the Lord, and the mysteries of his kingdom which he showed unto us, which surpass all understanding in glory, and in might, and in dominion" (D&C 76:114).

Such things could not be written. They cannot be written because they can only be understood and felt. They do not come through the intellect. They come through the power of the Spirit. They are things "which he commanded us we should not write while we were yet in the Spirit, and are not lawful for man to utter;

"Neither is man capable to make them known, for they are only

to be seen and understood by the power of the Holy Spirit, which God bestows on those who love him, and purify themselves before him;

“To whom he grants this privilege of seeing and knowing for themselves;

“That through the power and manifestation of the Spirit, while in the flesh, they may be able to bear his presence in the world of glory.

“And to God and the Lamb be glory, and honor, and dominion forever and ever” (D&C 76:115–119).

The reaffirmation of the word through us is such a glorious thing that we do not have words to express it. We cannot explain the wonder and the marvel of living in a day when God has sent a revealer to speak His word to the whole world, and when He sent supplemental prophets to echo the message and proclaim the truth and get as much into the hearts of men as they are able to receive.

“This generation shall have my word through you” (D&C 5:10). Joseph Smith has given the word, and we echo the message, and a great part of the message is that every one of us—equally precious—has power to get in tune with the Holy Spirit and learn personally what the prophet receives. There is going to be a day—it is millennial, the ancient prophets (Jeremiah, for one) foretold it—“when no man need say to his neighbor, Know ye the Lord; for all shall know Him . . . from the least to the greatest.”⁴ The Prophet Joseph Smith said that this promise has reference to personal revelation, to a visitation of the Lord to an individual.⁵ It is within our capability, if we adhere as we ought to the standards of righteousness that we have received, to have a total, complete reaffirmation of the word to us, the word the Lord gave first through Joseph Smith. We begin to get that reaffirmation when we get in our hearts the spirit of testimony, and the Holy Spirit of God tells us the work is true.

What I am saying is that the ultimate end of spiritual progression is not only to know that the revelations are true, but also to see visions and feel the Spirit and get the added light and knowledge which it is not lawful to utter and which was not recorded in the revealed record. What a glorious dispensation we live in. We live in a day when the Lord desires to confirm His word in the hearts of all who will heed His voice, and it is our privilege so to obtain.

The most glorious thing about this whole system of revealed reli-

"This Generation Shall Have My Word through You

47

gion that we have received is that the word is true. You cannot think of anything in connection with our whole system of revealed religion that in any way compares in importance to the simple fact that it is true. And because it is true, it works. Because it is true, we will triumph. Because it is true, if we do what we already know we ought to do, we shall have peace and joy and happiness in this life and be inheritors of eternal life in our Father's kingdom hereafter. God grant that it may be so for all of us.

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), 1:235.
2. Joseph Smith, *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, comp. Joseph Fielding Smith (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1976), 194.
3. Smith, *History of the Church*, 3:380.
4. Smith, *History of the Church*, 3:380.
5. See Smith, *History of the Church*, 3:381.