

Agency and Inspiration



Bruce R. McConkie was born on July 29, 1915, in Michigan, USA. He was sustained to the First Council of the Seventy in 1946 and ordained an Apostle in 1972. He died on April 19, 1985. This address was given at Brigham Young University on February 27, 1973.

By Elder Bruce R. McConkie (1915–85)
Of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles

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.

When we dwelt in the presence of God our Heavenly Father, we were endowed with agency. This gave us the opportunity, the privilege, to choose what we would do—to make a free, untrammled choice. . . . We're expected to use the gifts and talents and abilities, the sense and judgment and agency with which we are endowed.

But on the other hand, we're commanded to seek the Lord, to desire His Spirit, to get the spirit of revelation and inspiration in our lives. We come unto the Church and a legal administrator places his hands upon our head and says, "Receive the Holy Ghost." This gives us the gift of the Holy Ghost, which is the right to the constant companionship of that member of the Godhead, based on faithfulness.

And so we're faced with two propositions. One is that we ought to be guided by the spirit of inspiration, the spirit of revelation. The other is that we're here under a direction to use our agency, to determine what we ought to do on our own; and we need to strike a fine balance between these two. . . .

Well, I'd like, if I may, to present three case studies, out of which, perhaps, we can draw some very realistic and sound conclusions as to what ought to be in our lives. I'll take these illustrations out of the revelations that the Lord has given us.

"You Have Not Understood"

Case study number 1: There was a man named Oliver Cowdery. . . . He wrote down the words that the Prophet dictated while the Spirit rested upon him in the translation processes (the Book of Mormon was then being translated). Brother Cowdery was relatively spiritually immature at that time, and he sought and desired to do something beyond his then present spiritual capacity. He himself wanted to translate. And so he [asked] the Prophet, the Prophet took the matter up with the Lord, and they got a revelation. The Lord said, "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." And then one thing he might receive is defined as "a knowledge concerning the engravings of old records, which are ancient, which contain those parts



of my scripture of which has been spoken by the manifestation of my Spirit.”

Having thus dealt with the specific problem, then the Lord revealed a principle that applies to it and all other like situations: “Yea, behold, 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). . . .

. . . And so he asked. And as you know, he failed; he was totally unable to translate. . . . The matter was referred back to the Lord, whose promise they had been attempting to conform to; and the answer came, the reason came, why he couldn’t translate: “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” (D&C 9:7).

Now, seemingly, that’s all he’d been instructed to do, to ask in faith; but implicit in asking in faith is the precedent requirement that we do everything in our power to accomplish the goal that we seek. We use the agency with which we have been endowed. We use every faculty and capacity and ability that we possess to bring about the eventuality that may be involved. Now, this is translating the Book of Mormon, it’s choosing a wife, it’s choosing employment, it’s doing any one of 10,000 important things that arise in our lives. . . .

“Why Are You Asking Me?”

Now, case study number 2: . . . [The Jaredites] got to the waters that they were going to cross, and the Lord said to [the

As we become spiritually mature, we learn to strike a balance between using our agency to decide what we should do and being guided by the spirit of inspiration.

brother of Jared], “Build some barges.” . . .

[The barges] were going to be used under some peculiar and difficult circumstances, and [the brother of Jared] needed something more than was now present in them: he needed some air. And this was a problem that was beyond him. So he took that matter up with the Lord, and because it was totally beyond his capacity to solve, the Lord solved it for him and said, “Do thus and so and you’ll have air.”

But then the brother of Jared—having confidence because he was talking to the Lord, because he was communing and getting answers—asked another question: . . . “What will we do for light in the vessels?”

And the Lord talked to him about it a little, and then He said this: “What will ye that I should do that ye may have light in your vessels?” (Ether 2:23). In other words, “. . . I’ve given you your agency; you are endowed with capacity and ability. Get out and solve the problem.”

Well, the brother of Jared got the message. He went up into a mount called Shelem, and the record says he “did molten out of a rock sixteen small stones; and they were white and clear, even as transparent glass” (Ether 3:1). . . .

And the Lord did what the brother of Jared asked, and this is the occasion when he then saw the finger of the Lord; and, while he was in tune, he received revelation that exceeded anything that any prophet had ever gained up to that moment. The Lord revealed more to him about His nature and personality than ever theretofore had come forth, and it all came about because

he’d done everything that he could do and because he counseled with the Lord.

There’s a fine balance between agency and inspiration. 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; and sometimes, happily, in addition, we get added truths and knowledge that we hadn’t even supposed.

“They Shall Counsel between Themselves and Me”

Now, case study number 3: In the early history of the Church, the Lord commanded the Saints to assemble in a certain place in Missouri. . . . Now notice what happened. The Lord is talking:

“As I spake concerning my servant Edward Partridge, this land is the land of his residence, and those whom he has appointed for his counselors; and also the land of the residence of him whom I have appointed to keep my storehouse;

“Wherefore, let them bring their families to this land, [and here’s the point] as they shall counsel between themselves and me” [D&C 58:24–25; emphasis added]. . . .

You see, the Lord said “assemble” to Zion. The details and the arrangements, however, the *how* and the *when* and the *circumstances*, are to be determined by the agency of those who are called to assemble, but they are to counsel with the Lord. . . .

Now, after the Lord had said this to the Presiding Bishopric of the Church, He gave the principle that governed in that situation, and it governs in all situations. And this is

one of our glorious revealed truths.

He said:

“For behold, it is not meet that I should command in all things; for he that is compelled in all things, the same is a slothful and not a wise servant; wherefore he receiveth no reward.

“Verily I say, men should be anxiously engaged in a good cause, and do many things of their own free will, and bring to pass much righteousness” [D&C 58:26, 27; emphasis added]. . . .

Now, those are the three case studies; let us come to the revealed conclusion. . . .

. . . If you learn how to use the agency that God has given you, and if you try to make your own decisions, and if you reach conclusions that are sound and right, and you counsel with the Lord and get His ratifying seal of approval upon the conclusions you’ve reached, then you’ve received revelation, for one thing; and for another thing, you’re going to have the great reward of eternal life, be lifted up at the last day. . . .

God grant us wisdom in these things. God grant us the courage and the ability to stand on our own feet and use our agency and the abilities and capacities we possess; then let’s be sufficiently humble and amenable to the Spirit to bow our will to His will, to get His ratifying, confirming seal of approval, to get in our lives, in that way, the spirit of revelation. And if we so do, there’s no question about the result: it’s peace in this life; it’s glory and honor and dignity in the life to come. ■

Spelling, punctuation, and capitalization standardized.

