



**E**lijah was a man, yet he had such power with God that in answer to his prayers, the heavens withheld or gave rain and the earth gave forth fruit. Today the First Presidency and Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, though men, are also prophets with power from on high.



# Ordinary Men, Extraordinary Callings

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(1915–85)

Of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles

**A**re General Authorities human?" I suppose this is a question that is in many minds and has been from the very beginning. It arises, in the very nature of things, because of the high regard in which we hold the offices that these Brethren are called to fill.

I recall an incident from early Church history, from the days of persecutions and difficulties. Heber C. Kimball, then a member of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, found himself in circumstances where he sought hospitality from a member of the Church, a widow woman. She offered him what she had—bread and milk—and provided a room with a bed for him. He went to retire. She thought: "Here's my opportunity. I would like to find out [and this is, in effect, the same old question: Are General Authorities human?] I would like to find out what an Apostle says when he prays to the Lord." So after the door was closed, she crept quietly up to it to listen. She heard Brother Kimball sit down on the bed. She heard each of his

shoes fall to the floor. She heard him lean back on the bed and then utter these words: "Oh Lord, bless Heber; he is so tired."

... This is a subject about which people often have incorrect concepts. Many people had this same question in their minds during the time of Joseph Smith. He said: "I was this morning introduced to a man from the east. After hearing my name, he remarked that I was nothing but a man, indicating by this expression, that he had supposed that a person to whom the Lord should see fit to reveal His will, must be something more than a man. He seemed to have forgotten the saying that fell from the lips of St. James, that [Elijah] was a man subject to like passions as we are, yet he had such power with God, that He, in answer to his prayers, shut the heavens that they gave no rain for the space of three years and six months; and again, in answer to his prayer, the heavens gave forth rain, and the earth gave forth fruit [see James 5:17–18]. Indeed, such is the darkness and ignorance of this generation, that they look upon it as incredible that a man should [speak] with his Maker."<sup>1</sup>

This is the view of the world generally:



*Elder McConkie answered the question "Are General Authorities human?" by talking about the high regard we have for their callings.*





**J**oseph Smith met a person who supposed that a prophet must be something more than a man. But Joseph Smith, like Brigham Young and the other prophets who followed, knew that even though he was inspired, he was also mortal.



“If there is such a thing as a prophet, he is so ennobled and exalted that he is different from the general run of men.” They may think of John the Baptist out in the desert eating locust and wild honey or of someone like Enoch of whom the people said, “A wild man has come among us” [see Moses 6:38].

There is somewhat this same concept in the Church today. We think of the dignity and glory and greatness of the office. Then some of that feeling spills over and is applied to the individual who holds the office.

There might be a way to put this subject in better perspective. Instead of asking, “Are the General Authorities human?” let me ask you, “Is your bishop human?” What would the answer be? Or if I say to you, “Are the missionaries human?” would the answer be yes or no? It depends entirely on what we are talking about. Certainly they are human in the sense that every foible and frailty and difficulty common to the human race attends all of them and all of us. But on the other hand, the General Authorities and the bishops and the missionaries—and this extends out and includes every member of the Church—ought not to be human in the sense of worldliness or carnal pursuits. None of us should be “human” if by that is meant living as carnal men live.

When we come into the Church, we say that we forsake the world. We are supposed to overcome the world. The Book of Mormon language is that we put off the natural man and become a saint through the Atonement of Christ the Lord (see Mosiah 3:19). Well, if we, all of us, lived up to our potential and raised ourselves to the standards that we ought to have, then none of us would be human in the worldly or the

carnal sense. Yet with it all we would be so in the sense that we are mortal and all that's related to it.

Under the heading "General Authorities" in my book *Mormon Doctrine*, I wrote: "Some General Authorities are empowered to do one thing and some another. All are subject to the strict discipline the Lord always imposes upon his saints and those who preside over them. The positions they occupy are high and exalted, but the individuals who hold these offices are humble men like their brethren in the Church. So well qualified and trained are the members of the Church that there are many brethren who could—if called, sustained, and set apart—serve effectively in nearly every important position in the Church."<sup>2</sup>

Further along in the book under the heading of "Prophets" is another statement: "With all their inspiration and greatness, prophets are yet mortal men with imperfections common to mankind in general. They have their opinions and prejudices and are left to work out their problems without inspiration in many instances. Joseph Smith recorded that he 'visited with a brother and sister from Michigan, who thought that "a prophet is always a prophet"; but I told them that a prophet was a prophet only when he was acting as such."<sup>3</sup>

Thus the opinions and views, even of a prophet, may contain error, unless those opinions and views were inspired by the Spirit. Inspired scripture or statements should be accepted as such. We have this problem, however. Paul was one of the greatest theologian-prophets of all the ages, but he had some opinions that weren't in complete accord with the Lord's feelings, and he wrote some of them down in his epistles. But being wise and discreet, he

labeled them as such. He said, "This is what I think." When he got through telling that, he said, "Now this is what the Lord thinks." Paul's views, his private opinions, were not as perfect as they might have been.

Prophets are men, and when they act by the Spirit of inspiration, what they say is the voice of God; but still they are mortal and they are entitled to and do have private opinions. Because of the great wisdom and judgment of

these men, their views may be as good as mortal men can have, but unless they are inspired, unless they are in accordance with the revelations, they are subject to error on the same basis as the views of anyone else in the Church.

We need not wonder vainly if the General Authorities are speaking by the Spirit of inspiration or not—we can discover for certain. I remind you that one of Joseph Smith's famous statements is to this effect: "The Lord will not reveal anything to Joseph that he will not reveal to the Twelve or to the least and last member of the Church as soon as he is able to bear it."<sup>4</sup>

That's perfect. That's the same doctrine that Paul taught. Paul said, "Ye may all prophesy." He said, "Covet to prophesy" (1 Corinthians 14:31, 39). The whole membership of the Church, the whole body of the Church is supposed to receive revelation. It's not reserved for a select few, the missionaries, or the bishops. We ought to get revelation. We all ought to be as the apostles and prophets. ■

*From an article printed in the January 1973 New Era; punctuation and capitalization modernized.*

#### NOTES

1. *History of the Church*, 2:302.
2. *Mormon Doctrine*, 2nd ed. (1966), 309.
3. *Mormon Doctrine*, 608.
4. See *History of the Church*, 3:380.



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