
FROM THE EDITOR

GIFTS OF PROPHECY



By Elbert Eugene Peck

I LOVE general conference! There, God calls me to live a truer Christian life, and I feel him sustaining the Church. There is goodness and strength when these yokefellows gather. Through the prophetic words of our leaders, the Spirit quietly, but firmly and justly, calls me to quit some actions and begin others. It is good that one's religious life is lived in dialogue with a believing community, which constantly asks you to compare, explain, and change your thoughts, beliefs, acts, and priorities to the norms of others similarly committed. Sometimes you defer, other times you dissent, reconsider, accept, or learn. But in all these ways, you root the grand conversation that engages your whole life in the household of faith. General conference affords such primal tête-à-têtes.

For example, Apostle Marvin J. Ashton's call for Church service to "strengthen the feeble knees" of fellow Saints thankfully assaulted my recent slippage in Church attendance (a pattern single adults too easily adopt) and anewed my soul in an on going conversation. His and others' concerns about the weakening effects on the community of relentless criticism, controversy, and unorthodox ideas prompted serious ponderings. "Constant criticism can wear one down and weaken knees," Elder Ashton said. "As we look closely at family members, friends, and leaders, we will see their human limitations." He's right about the cancer of skeptical criticism, but upon reflection it seems to me that such toxic criticism is not necessarily the same thing as observing human failings in Church policies and policymakers. As with family and friends, knowing leaders' humanness allows me to be more understanding, forgiving, and helpful. When I regard general authorities as I do bishops and stake presidents I am less judgmental—seeing them as flawed humans doing the best with what God gives them to accomplish the incredible things he asks of them. But down-scaling expectations can also result not only in char-

ity but in a doubting cynicism. To be constructive, this human knowledge requires that honest evaluation happen concurrently with the celebration of the divine in the work; that combination is a sophisticated task, but not impossible. Hence, in the local Church, it is easy to shake your head at some silly thing your bishop does and later in the same day seek his counsel or be fed by his inspired sacrament meeting talk. In fact, knowing a bishop's limitations allows one to truly sustain him by compensating for his shortfalls, as ward members charitably do weekly. Similarly, many aspects of general Church administration require an acknowledgement of the human and political aspects in order to prevent dismissing the divine along with the mortal. This omnipresent humanness recommends a more open and participative leadership style as a check for Church policies and programs.

But at general conference our leaders preach more than they administrate. There, they are prophets more than presidents, and God is in their exhortations. The role of prophets is usually not to foretell events but to call the current generation to repentance. They take the received covenant and make it fresh for their time. With one hand they present God's standards, with the other a mirror of our society, and with their mouths they compare and call us—and themselves—to change. Conference, of course, is not unique. Every Sunday in classes and over the pulpit, women and men speak with this same prophetic voice. I felt it in good measure this October. There the Spirit called me to pray more deeply, to abandon material pursuits (including brand-name jeans) in order to aid "the homeless, the hungry, and the destitute," to mend an old friendship, to marry intellectual analysis with spirituality, and to come unto Christ by listening *and* feeling in still meditation his piercing whispers. I was challenged and rebuked, but I felt refreshed and liberated, leaving with a desire to be better

and with a hope that I could be.

Counseling the local congregations of his day, the Apostle Paul said that if a member at church "prophesies, he is talking to men and women, and his words have power to build; they stimulate and they encourage. . . . [I]t is prophecy that builds up the Christian community." (1 Corinthians 14:3-4, Revised English Bible for all scripture quotes.) I was encouraged and built up when our prophets and one visionary prophetess called us to be more Christlike. Interestingly, this same chapter also requires latter-day readers to confront the human limitations of prophets, because blended in with that beautiful and expansive definition of prophecy is also Paul's famous and very culture-bound statement about women:

As in all congregations of God's people, women should keep silent at the meeting. They have no permission to talk, but should keep their place as the law directs. If there is something they want to know, they can ask their husbands at home. It is a shocking thing for a woman to talk at the meeting. (1 Corinthians 14:33-35.)

After hearing Sister Aileen Clyde's deeply moving address on Christian love and the suffering it requires—which was obviously partially informed by her human *female* experience—what is shocking is not that a woman spoke, but that only one with that background blessed our conversation. Sadly, the prophetic visions and perspectives women share each Sunday are not similarly reflected in our all-Church gatherings. Mormons proudly quote these futuristic and democratic scriptures: "I wish that all the LORD's people were prophets and that the LORD would bestow his spirit on them all!" (Numbers 11:29), and "The days are coming, says the LORD when I shall . . . set my law within them. . . . No longer need they teach one another, neighbour or brother, to know the LORD; all of them, high and low alike, will know me." (Jeremiah 31:31-34.) With such a theology where everyone can speak prophetically, even if limited by their humanness, Paul's counsel for us to deliberate about prophecy makes a lot of sense: "Of the prophets, two or three may speak, while the rest exercise their judgement upon what is said" (1 Corinthians 14:29).

And so my conversation with our community of prophet-leaders and prophet-followers goes on daily. My life is richer for those who with piquing regularity call me to journey beyond my current station. Thank thee, O God, for prophets and prophetesses. ☞