

A 1945 Perspective

This 1945 ward teachers' message on the obedience apparently required of Church members, the response it sparked from a concerned Salt Lake City Unitarian minister, and the response of Church President George Albert Smith to both documents seem appropriate accompaniments to the Newell essay. Typographical errors have been corrected in brackets. All italics appear as underlining in the original. The Cope and Smith letters are in Special Collections, Marriott Library, University of Utah, Salt Lake City, Utah — the J. Raymond Cope Collection (Association no. 691) and the George A. Smith Papers (Manuscript no. 36, Box 63-8A), respectively.

WARD TEACHERS' MESSAGE FOR JUNE, 1945

"SUSTAINING THE GENERAL AUTHORITIES OF THE CHURCH"

No Latter-day Saint is compelled to sustain the General Authorities of the Church. When given the opportunity to vote on the proposition in any of the several conferences held throughout the Church, he may indicate his willingness to sustain them by raising his right hand; he may manifest his opposition in like manner; or he may ignore the opportunity entirely. There is no element of coercion or force in this or any other Church procedure.

However, there is the principle of honor involved in the member's choice. When a person raises his hand to sustain Church leaders as "prophets, seers, and revelators," it is the same as a promise and a covenant to follow their leadership and to abide by their counsel as the living oracles of God. Consequently, any subsequent act or word of mouth which is at variance with the will of the Lord as taught by the leaders of the Church places the sincerity of such person in serious doubt. One could scarcely have claim upon complete integrity, if he raises his hand to sustain the Authorities of the Church and then proceeds in opposition to their counsel.

Any Latter-day Saint who denounces or opposes, whether actively or otherwise, any plan or doctrine advocated by the “prophets, seers, and revelators” of the Church is cultivating the spirit of apostasy. One cannot speak evil of the Lord’s anointed and retain the Holy Spirit in his heart.

It should be remembered that Lucifer has a very cunning way of convincing unsuspecting souls that the General Authorities of the Church are as likely to be wrong as they are to be right. This sort of game is Satan’s favorite pastime, and he has practiced it on believing souls since Adam. He wins a great victory when he can get members of the Church to speak out against their leaders and to “do their own thinking.” He specializes in suggesting that our leaders are in error while he plays the blinding rays of apostasy in the eyes of those whom he thus beguiles. What cunning! And to think that some of our members are deceived by this trickery.

The following words of the Prophet Joseph Smith should be memorized by every Latter-day Saint and repeated often enough to insure their never being forgotten:

I will give you one of the Keys of the mysteries of the Kingdom. It is an eternal principle, that has existed with God from all eternity: That man who rises up to condemn others, finding fault with the Church, saying that they are out of the way, while he himself is righteous, then know assuredly, that that man is in the high road to apostasy; and if he does not repent, will apostatize, as God lives (*Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, pp. 156-57).

When our leaders speak, the thinking has been done. When they propose a plan — it is God’s plan. When they point the way, there is no other which is safe. When they give direction, it should mark the end of controversy. God works in no other way. To think otherwise, without immediate repentance, may cost one his faith, may destroy his testimony, and leave him a stranger to the kingdom of God.

— *Improvement Era*, June 1945, p. 354.

LETTER OF REVEREND J. RAYMOND COPE

FIRST UNITARIAN SOCIETY
13TH EAST AT SIXTH SOUTH STREET
SALT LAKE CITY 2, UTAH

J. RAYMOND COPE, PH.D.
MINISTER

November 16, 1945

President George Albert Smith
Church of Jesus Christ of L.D.S.,
Office of the President,
Salt Lake City.

Dear President Smith:

It has been one of the great privilege[s] of my life to have lived for the past four years in Salt Lake City, and to have become personally acquainted with many of the leaders of the L.D.S. Church. From them I have learned many

things, and the spirit of friendliness which is found in our relationships is a source of unending delight to me. It is because I have found you and the other leaders so very charitable and sympathetic that I make so bold as to write you this letter.

May I first assure you of my good will; that there is not one note of hostility in attitude. I am confident that you will understand why I write, and that we have a common interest in the problem.

Last June there was delivered to my door a short religious editorial, prepared by one of your leaders, entitled "Sustaining the General Authorities of the Church." Its message amazed me a great deal, and with the passing of weeks my distur[b]ance became very acute. It might have passed, except that several members of your Church have come to me to discuss the subject. The most recent was a prominent doctor, who, because of this tract, he affirms, is losing [sic] his religious faith. He is a large man, and I became impressed with his deep sincerity as he broke down and wept like a boy. I am convinced that he is undergoing a very dangerous experience.

Permit me to quote the passages which seem to be brought most in question:

"He (Lucifer) wins a great victory when he can get members of the Church to speak against their leaders and to 'do their own thinking[.]'"

"When our leaders speak, the thinking has been done. When they propose a plan — it is God's plan. When they point the way, there is no other which is safe. When they give direction, it should mark the end of controversy. . . ."

I do not know who is responsible for this statement, but I am sure it is doing inestimable harm to many who have no other reason to question the integrity of the Church leaders. Many people are suffering because of this. My reply to each of those who have spoken to me is "please do not become disturbed [sic], for this cannot be the position of the true leaders. And, from my knowledge of the early writings of your leaders, I must assume this to be non-representative [sic]."

Several years ago, when I first became acquainted with the L.D.S. Church, I read extensively in the texts, and there are many passages which may be used to give a better expression to the vision and genius of your Faith. I cite but one, although there are many others which are familiar to you.

Quoting from the *Discourses of Brigham Young*, as Selected and Arranged by John A. Widtsoe, in the Chapter on "The Priesthood":

"I am more afraid that this people have so much confidence in their leaders that they will not inquire for themselves of God whether they are led by him. I am fearful that they settle down in a state of blind self-security, trusting their eternal destiny in the hands of their leaders with a reckless confidence that in itself would thwa[r]t the purposes of God in their salvation, and weaken that influence they could give their leaders, did they know for themselves, by the revelations of Jesus, that they are led in the right way. Let every man and woman know, by the whisperings of the Spirit of God to themselves, whether their leaders are walking in the path the Lord dictates, or not."

This quotation from Brigham Young is a wonderful passage, and it has been on the basis of such freedom that persons like myself have grown to have

a deep feeling of kinship with the L.D.S. Church. It is in keeping with the high traditions of my Unitarian background that the gains made by my fellow workers are seen as gains for us all. It is a source of regret to all of us when one stone is discovered to bar the way to deeper faith within any soul.

With an assurance of my continued good-will and friendliness,

Most cordially yours,
J. Raymond Cope. [typed]

LETTER OF PRESIDENT GEORGE ALBERT SMITH

CHURCH OF JESUS CHRIST OF LATTER DAY SAINTS
OFFICE OF THE FIRST PRESIDENCY
SALT LAKE CITY, UTAH

December 7, 1945

Dr. J. Raymond Cope
First Unitarian Society
13th East at 6th South Street
Salt Lake City, Utah

My dear Dr. Cope:

I have read with interest and deep concern your letter of November 16, 1945, in which you make special comment on "a short religious editorial prepared by one of your (our) leaders entitled "Sustaining the General Authorities of the Church' ". You say that you read the message with amazement, and that you have since been disturbed because of its effect upon members of the Church.

I am gratified with the spirit of friendliness that pervades your letter, and thank you for having taken the time to write to me.

The leaflet to which you refer, and from which you quote in your letter, was not "prepared" by "one of our leaders." However, one or more of them inadvertently permitted the paragraph to pass uncensored. By their so doing, not a few members of the Church have been upset in their feelings, and General Authorities have been embarrassed.

I am pleased to assure you that you are right in your attitude that the passage quoted *does not express* the true position of the Church. Even to imply that members of the Church are not to do their own thinking is grossly to misrepresent the true ideal of the Church, which is that *every individual must obtain for himself a testimony of the truth of the Gospel*, must, through the redemption of Jesus Christ, *work out his own salvation*, and is *personally responsible to His Maker for his individual acts*. The Lord Himself does not attempt coercion in His desire and effort to give peace and salvation to His children. He gives the principles of life and true progress, but leaves every person free to choose or to reject His teachings. This plan the Authorities of the Church try to follow.

The Prophet Joseph Smith once said: "I want liberty of thinking and believing as I please." This liberty he and his successors in the leadership of the Church have granted to every other member thereof.

On one occasion in answer to the question by a prominent visitor how he governed his people, the Prophet answered: "I teach them correct principles, and they govern themselves."

Again, as recorded in the History of the Church (Volume 5, page 498 [499]) Joseph Smith said further: "If I esteem mankind to be in error, shall I bear them down? No. I will lift them up, and in their own way too, if I cannot persuade them my way is better; and *I will not seek to compel any man to believe as I do, only by the force of reasoning*, for truth will cut its own way."

I cite these few quotations, from many that might be given, merely to confirm your good and true opinion that the Church gives to every man his free agency, and admonishes him always to use the reason and good judgment with which God has blessed him.

In the advocacy of this principle leaders of the Church not only join congregations in singing but quote frequently the following:

"Know this, that every soul is free
To choose his life and what he'll be,
For this eternal truth is given
That God will force no man to heaven."

Again I thank you for your manifest friendliness and for your expressed willingness to cooperate in every way to establish good will and harmony among the people with whom we are jointly laboring to bring brotherhood and tolerance.

Faithfully yours,
Geo. Albert Smith [signed]