

HAROLD B. LEE: AN APPRECIATION, BOTH HISTORICAL AND PERSONAL

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When I was asked by *Dialogue* to write something in memory of President Harold B. Lee, my thought immediately went in two directions: the impact President Lee had upon the Church, and the influence he had upon my personal life. Since I both revered and respected President Lee, I welcome this opportunity to express my feelings.

Harold B. Lee will be remembered in Church history for many things, but paramount in my mind is his contribution to the Welfare program and his work in Correlation. In 1930 he became President of Pioneer Stake, and at age 31 he was the youngest stake president in the Church. America was in the depths of its most serious economic depression, and Pioneer Stake was particularly hard hit. Of the 7,300 stake members, 4,800 were either completely or partially dependent upon some kind of relief. But President Lee and his counselors were creative and soon initiated an imaginative and far-reaching new program for relief. Believing in the principle that work should be contributed in return for relief rendered, they obtained a warehouse which unemployed workers soon renovated for work and storage projects. This warehouse was transformed into a beehive of enterprise which provided hundreds of Saints with work, food, and goods to sustain them. Special drives were instituted to collect clothing, furniture, and fruit bottles; and sewing, reconditioning and canning projects were carried out to provide both work and goods for the needy.

But the First Presidency of the Church were concerned that many other members were suffering the effects of the depression, and large numbers were receiving public aid. They saw the need for a Church-wide program of relief, and the success of Elder Lee in Pioneer Stake caught their attention. In April, 1935, the Presidency asked Elder Lee to organize and take charge of a Church Welfare program. Here, in his own words, is the way he recalled it many years later:

There I was, just a young man in my thirties. My experience had been limited. I was born in a little country town in Idaho. I had hardly been outside the boundaries of the states of Utah and Idaho. And now to put me in a position where I was to reach out to the entire membership of the Church, worldwide, was one of the most staggering contemplations that I could imagine. How could I do it with my limited understanding?

With the weight of this new burden pressing heavily upon him, the young stake president sought solitude and inspiration in a walk, and then a fervent prayer, in Rotary Park:

As I kneeled down, my petition was, "What kind of an organization should be set up in order to accomplish what the Presidency has assigned?" And there came to me on that glorious morning one of the most heavenly realizations of the power of the priesthood of God. It was as though something were saying to me, "There is no new organization necessary to take care of the needs of this people. All that is necessary is to put the priesthood of God to work. There is nothing else that you need as a substitute."

Elder Lee resigned his job as city commissioner and became the prime mover in creating the Church Security Program, later called the Church Welfare Program. This new movement soon improved the economic well-being and personal morale of thousands of needy Latter-day Saints, and in addition caught the imagination of journalists all over the nation.

In beginning the Welfare program, President Lee relied upon the organization of the Priesthood, and it was the need to use the Priesthood to its fullest capacity that made him so interested in "Correlation." In Welfare work he demonstrated a penchant for organization and administration. In the late 1940s, as a member of the Council of the Twelve, he presented to the First Presidency a special committee report on the organization of the Church. The First Presidency had asked for the study in order to find ways to simplify the programs of the Church and at the same time improve the effectiveness of their work. In 1960 the First Presidency made a similar request to the General Priesthood Committee, of which Elder Lee was chairman. In addition, the committee was asked to work out a correlated system of gospel study for the entire priesthood and auxiliary program of the Church. From then until his death, President Lee was best known among the general membership of the Church for his leadership in helping to develop the Correlation program.

And when the Church Correlation Committee was organized in 1961, Elder Lee was appointed chairman and he held that responsibility until January, 1972. In this capacity he employed all of his talents and knowledge to help refine Church administration so that a systematic program for teaching the gospel to children, youth and adults could be implemented. In addition, he led out in inaugurating and perfecting a system for better communications between Church leaders at all levels of administration. At the heart of his philosophy was the idea that all programs of the Church should be placed more fully under the direction of the priesthood, and this objective found place in many of his sermons, particularly in his later years.

Grand as his contributions to the organization and administration of the Church may have been, however, they were no more important than the personal impact he had upon the lives of individual members. My own experience is only one example. I am sure he influenced different members in different ways, but for me three memories have special significance. In each case I was part of a group, and Elder Lee had no idea that I was there, or even who I was. Maybe it was because I was looking for something special at the time—but whatever it was, his ideas found place in my heart and became highly personal and spiritual to me.

The first came twenty years ago—in the summer of 1954 when I was a young seminary teacher attending the BYU summer session for all teachers in the Church School System. This was a special summer, because for five weeks Elder Harold B. Lee was our instructor. I don't know how his instruction affected others, or what they remember from it, but as a young teacher I was particularly concerned with the fact that there were so many differing points of view within the Church on so many issues. The differences as such did not bother me, for I had already been reconciled to the fact that the Lord did not expect complete uniformity among His Saints on everything. But I badly wanted to hear a Church leader say that not everything written in so-called "church books" had to be accepted as scripture. Maybe that was why I was impressed with what happened on June 22, the day

our instructor talked about the creation of the earth. My notes from that day are filled with statements such as these: "God has not revealed *how* the world was created—all the ideas we have presented are *theories*, and must be accepted as such." The idea that the first chapter of Genesis is the story of the spiritual creation, and the next is physical "is *theory*—some learned men in the Church are not in accord." The idea that a day in the story of creation "is a thousand years, etc., is a theory." Then, and most important, because this was really his message to the teachers that day, "Don't present theories as though they were facts. We criticize scientists who teach theories as facts. It is just as dangerous for religion teachers to do so." But what, someone asked, about all the books that are written on various subjects, often by prominent men in the Church—what if we disagree? His answer? "Where an idea is in complete accord with scripture, then accept it—but if not, then write the name of the author in the margin—it is his theory." To most of us today such things may seem commonplace, but as a guide for helping students realize that all the answers to all the problems are not in, and that even the most learned men in the Church may still disagree, it was soul satisfying indeed.

A similar, though more deeply spiritual, experience came in 1967, when B. West Belnap, former Dean of the College of Religious Instruction, passed away, and Elder Harold B. Lee was the major speaker at the funeral. I remember that he had caught, and tried to portray, one of the deepest concerns of Brother Belnap, and the way he portrayed it was of special importance to me, a teacher of both history and religion at BYU. Elder Lee described one of his last visits with Brother Belnap in the hospital—when Brother Belnap knew he probably would not live. I can't remember the exact words, but the idea went something like this as he reported Brother Belnap's final message: "I have been thinking as I lay here about all the people I know, and about all the disagreements they often have over points of doctrine, and this and that. But as I contemplate my fate, I realize now more than ever that these things, in the long run, really make no difference. What matters is that we love one another—all other things are transient and passing, for it is only really getting to know and love each other for the good that is within us all that will matter in our eternal relationships." Again, what a powerful message to those of us who were often caught up in the endless, often meaningless, debates over this and that fine point of doctrine.

But there were some things that President Lee knew beyond a doubt, and the experience which affected me most, and has been the most long-lasting came on an occasion when he was fervently declaring such knowledge.

It was in the Spring of 1961—I remember it well because that year I was teaching an Institute of Religion class in the New Testament to a group of Southern California college students. Somehow, we found ourselves discussing for two days the question of the role of the apostle in the early Church, and were asking just what an apostle's responsibility really was. I had pointed out that after the fall of Judas, the New Testament apostles had chosen another, Matthias, to be a witness with them of the resurrection of Christ (Acts 1:22-26), and I had taught my class that one of the basic responsibilities of modern apostles was also to bear witness of the living Christ. But I had not heard such a testimony from a living apostle for quite some time—at least not that I remembered.

So it was that I attended a quarterly conference in the Los Angeles Stake, and Harold B. Lee was conference visitor. On that particular morning I was in anything

but the ideal mood to receive inspiration. My wife and I were late arriving at the meeting, and had to sit in the cultural hall, where it was noisy. And our three children, ages six, five and four, were anything but soothing in their behavior as they squirmed, wiggled, whispered, crawled, and climbed over us. By the time Elder Lee got up to speak, my wife and I were both tired, and we were discussing which of us would attend conference that afternoon while the other took care of the children in the city park. As I remember it, I won. I would get to take care of the children. Then Elder Lee began to speak, and at his first statement my mental reservations about the inspiration of the conference went even deeper. He announced that all the Primary presidents in the stake were to contact all the Primary teachers, who were to call all the parents in the stake between conference meetings (and the stake covered almost half of Los Angeles), and have them bring their Primary children to conference that afternoon—for he wanted the children to sing two certain songs. “Elder Lee,” I remember thinking, “what are you trying to do? Not only is this an impossible task for the Primary ladies, who have to feed their own families and get back in less than two hours, but I don’t think that many people who aren’t here now will even want to come.” I was sure (well, at least fearful) that his plan would fail. As my wife and I looked at each other with some dismay at the thought of another session of squirming, crawling children, I was in a frame of mind in which inspiration is not usually said to come. (But we did return that afternoon, and the Primary children did sing, and the whole experience was beautiful—I wouldn’t have missed it for the world.) Then Harold B. Lee, in his role as an Apostle of the Lord, began one of the most memorable sermons I have ever heard. As he recounted a recent trip to the Holy Land, he told of his deep and spiritual feelings as he walked where Jesus walked, and renewed again his own communion with the Master. It almost seemed as if the message were just for me, partly because of what I was doing in the Institutes, for seldom before or since have the chills gone up and down my spine, or has the Spirit touched my soul, as on that day. Elder Lee knew—and because Elder Lee knew, I knew, and because I knew, hopefully other people, too, would know.

Welfare? Yes. Correlation? Yes. Administrative skill? Yes. But the most valuable contribution of any man is in the uplifting influence he has on the lives of others. If my experience was any example, the influence of Harold B. Lee will be lasting and profound.