

Spencer W. Kimball, Apostle of Love

Leonard J. Arrington



Although I had heard his addresses in general conference and in at least one stake conference, I was first impressed with Spencer Kimball as a spiritual leader on 6 April 1954, when he spoke in general conference on "The Evil of Intolerance." Speaking on behalf of Japanese and Chinese, Hawaiians and Indians, Mexicans and many others, he declared, "O intolerance, thou art an ugly creature! What crimes have been committed under thy influence, what injustices under thy Satanic spell!" Speaking of the American Indians, whom he knew best of all the minority groups, he said:

I present to you a people who, according to prophecies, have been scattered and driven, defrauded and deprived, who are a "branch of the tree of Israel — lost from its body — wanderers in a strange land" — their own land. I give you nations who have gone through the deep waters of the rivers of sorrow and anguish and pain; a people who have had visited upon their heads the sins of their fathers not unto the third and fourth generation but through a hundred generations. I bring to you a multitude who have asked for bread and have received a stone and who have asked for fish and have been given a serpent. . . .

It is a people who, unable to raise themselves by their own bootstraps, call for assistance from those who can push and lift and open doors. It is a people who pray for mercy, ask forgiveness, beg for membership in the kingdom with its opportunities to learn and do. It is a good folk who ask for fraternity, a handclasp of friendship, a word of encouragement; it is a group of nations who cry for warm acceptance and sincere brotherhood. . . .

Let us not spurn these Nephite-Lamanites until we are assured that we, too, have the love of the Savior as did their people when the Lord stood in their midst and ordained them with his own hands, blessed them with his own voice, forgave them with his own great heart.

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This powerful sermon inspired me to write to Elder Kimball to thank him for such a strong endorsement of the need of sharing the love of Christ. I told him how much the talk had meant to me personally, to my family, to my university colleagues, and to the Church. Elder Kimball replied with a friendly letter in which he reaffirmed that if we are to be true followers of Christ we must cease to pre-judge people because of race, religion, nationality, or previous beliefs and lifestyle. He concluded with typical humility, "I pray the Lord will bless my remarks that they may be beneficial to the cause." I was proud that he was serving on the Council of the Twelve.

In the following years, Elder Kimball and I shared some common experiences. We sat by each other on the stand at the Brigham Young University Commencement in May 1969 when he received his honorary doctorate. He was very modest, could not understand why they were awarding the degree to *him*, and refused to allow any fuss and fanfare in connection with the honor.

When I was appointed Church Historian in 1972, Elder Kimball was asked to be an advisor to the Council of the Twelve on historical matters. He saw this as an opportunity to inform the Twelve of the importance of the Historical Department's task and the need for Church support and encouragement. He always stressed our spirit of service and regarded himself as our advocate with the Twelve.

Within two weeks of my call to the Historical Department, Elder Kimball telephoned and invited me to his office. I went immediately and found that he wanted to show me his journals. He opened the first one, which he had begun when he was notified of his appointment to the Twelve and read aloud from the title page: "To My Family: Upon my death I want you to present this to the Church Historian. This is a record of my service in the cause of the Lord's Kingdom, and should be made a part of the Church records and archives." He then said, "Brother Arrington, I hope you have a few hours available; I want you to read in my journals so that you will be fully familiar with them; they will be in the Church Archives some day; and if you have suggestions to make to improve them, I want you to let me know." I spent the rest of the day in his office, reading selections from these journals. They had full, informative, honest entries. I reported to my colleagues: "Three great diaries have chronicled the history of the Church. The first is the diary of President Wilford Woodruff, which provides a day-by-day record of the Church from 1834 until his death in 1898. The second is the diary of President Heber J. Grant, which supplies a daily history of the Church from 1882 until 1944. The third is the diary of Elder Spencer W. Kimball, which carries the history of the Church, in painstaking detail, from 1942 until this very day."

President Kimball's diary is a marvelous record, and we have already benefited from it in the noteworthy biography by Edward and Andrew Kimball, *Spencer W. Kimball: Twelfth President of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, published in 1977. It is one of the great books in the history of the Restoration.

It was inevitable that the Church historians would have some problems. I sometimes felt like a football coach deciding to punt instead of trying for a

first down; or a basketball coach fouling in hopes of getting a rebound. There were always people in the stands who felt they understood the situation more clearly and were eager to express their dissatisfaction. President Kimball, particularly after he became our Prophet, went out of his way to let us know that *he* supported us and appreciated our efforts. He was willing to acknowledge that he thought we were valiant servants who should not be deterred by uninformed criticism.

Once I shared a platform with President Kimball. I gave a historical talk, then he presented an incisive message on honoring the pioneers by cultivating such qualities as compassion, faithfulness, and integrity. Following the program, he embraced me, saying that he was fully aware of the complaints being made about the Historical Department, and urged us to continue to work faithfully. Then he kissed me on the cheek to affirm his feeling of personal warmth. Imperfect and inadequate as our efforts may have been, I was proud that the Prophet wanted us to continue doing the best we knew how.

In 1975, my wife and I were privileged to join President Kimball and his party on a three-week tour of the Far East. Included in the group were some of the Twelve, some Seventies and their wives, the Church's Ambassador and his wife, the director of public communications, the President's personal physician, photographers, the president of the Relief Society, and security personnel. I was assigned to make a complete "history" of our tour, which I did in ninety-eight pages which were duly placed in the Church Archives for future reference.

President Kimball was concerned about everyone in the party. Each morning, he boarded our bus, shook hands with us, inquired about our health, and gave us a personalized greeting. Before we parted each evening, he did the same. He was a good traveler — always cheerful and witty — and he was tireless. While the rest of us were resting in our rooms before an important meeting, he would scurry off to meet with the local missionaries, ward or branch leaders, or reporters and political leaders. His doctor cautioned him to "take it easy." President Kimball replied: "I honor and respect your training, doctor, but you don't know everything. The Lord wants me to do this, and I expect to follow his instructions as long as he wishes it."

President Kimball was a marvelous leader, untiring in carrying out "the Lord's work" and enthusiastic about doing favors for other people. He was a prophet in his official calling; he was also a great human being.