Leadership and the Ethics of Prophecy

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LET ME BEGIN WITH A PARABLE. In the early '50s, my friends and neighbors sent me to Korea to "contain communism." Shortly after my arrival, I developed a terrible toothache. Soon pain, the great motivator, led me to leave the peace and security of the line for what was laughingly called "division rear." And from there to a remnant of man's inhumanity to man* identified as a field dentist. After a fleeting examination, the dentist pointed to a chair with an attached foot treadle. The treadle was connected by direct drive to a drill. He commanded: "Pedal."

Thus I found myself in the position of having to generate the energy for my own salvation in the full knowledge that to do so would become increasingly painful. It was a matter of commitment. But more than that it was a matter of participation in the process of my becoming whole, both because of, and despite the discomfort. I was not an observer. I was not waiting for results from others. I was called to act in my commitment.

The role of leadership within the Mormon community is vastly interrelated, and thus often confused, with management. This much is obvious — more to observers than participants — and has been the subject of comment by no less an insider than Hugh Nibley. "Leaders are movers and shakers," he writes, "original, inventive, unpredictable, imaginative, full of surprises that discomfit the enemy in war and the main office in peace. For the managers are safe, conservative, predictable, conforming organizational men and team players, dedicated to the establishment" (1983, 15).

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* I have tried to use nonsexist language in this essay; but because of my view that prophecy is intensely personal, I feel the use of a plural pronoun is counterproductive. Thus, I have alternated the pronouns *he* and *she* in the hope of dispelling any assumed sexism in the role of prophecy.

An even more pronounced distinction can be made, however, between leader and prophet, though it is often the case that they share the same voice and sit at the same desk. The ethics of leadership relate to the use and misuse of a position where one is called to lead, whereas the ethics of prophecy relates to the degree of divine fulfillment within the act or statement seen as prophetic. The leader, much like the field dentist, provides means and ability to lead those who would follow. The prophet assumes more the role of the participant-patient, determinedly pursuing understanding, accepting involvement, and seeking a sense of transcendence in the immediate, even at the cost of great risk and pain. The dentist takes little risk. She is involved in the immediate, making few decisions in terms of pain-value orientation. Her mission is clear, her evaluation simple. The prophet, however, succeeds or fails in both the process and the outcome, knowing through involvement that honest expression in any activity is impossible without reaffirming the continual meaning of the activity, without putting past and present into new light, without sensing fulfillment.

Prophecy is the finite expression of an inner understanding which in its insightfulness illuminates our history and confronts our anxieties. It brings past understanding and present confusions into new understandings and provides disclosures of the presentness of God. It should not be confused with policy for it is a *sense* of the perennial as well as the limited. It is ethical only when it is able to speak of God's transcendence as it is seen and felt in those immanent moments by those persons who have found their immanent home in his transcendence. He who speaks in the words, the mood, and the expectations of prophecy and does not speak from transcendent participations, violates the role of leader and the ethics of prophecy.

There is a necessary paradox inherent in any expression of religious experience. Religious language is designed to express information about a subject which is eternal in nature yet must try to be meaningful in a particular time and space. Such communication is poetic, making precise, finite, and literal language impossible. But it does not deliver him from the requirement that such an experience *must* be communicated or the prophetic leadership fails. The language of prophecy must somehow move beyond what Karl Barth describes as "the establishment and transmission of the results already achieved" — where we simply express the same spiritual understandings over and over again, as if from the beginning (in Harnack 1948, ix).

For what is "commanded by God is commanded anew in every moment for that moment, though the faithfulness of the will binds all the moments together and gives abiding direction amid the novelties of changing days" (Niebuhr 1970, 122).

When we use religious language, we describe God, whose transcendence keeps him apart from the common experience, even while the language itself requires us to speak of God in the present tense and in our commonly shared world. This dualism concerning God creates a special problem for the prophet. It calls her to walk the fine line between reason and imagination. We tend to make reason the abitrator of outward life and to assign imagination to the inner being. Thus, we are likely to regard imagination as a kind of fantasy,

failing to note that imagination is very different from fantasy. Fantasy is the means by which we use imaging to give objective character to abstract or paradoxical realities, as in fairy tales; but imagination is the use of our unlimitedness in forming relationships and is not akin to objective, as much as to subjective, knowledge.

To walk this line, a prophet requires the freedom of skepticism. She must be free from too much devotion to means or to ends; allowing the existence of serious doubt opens the mind and heart to constant conversion. Real skepticism, of course, does not exist within primitive societies, primarily because they have only one explanation, usually based on a recurring observable phenomena. Skepticism is a product of our intellectual and spiritual sophistication. Before we had the insight and the courage to doubt what appeared to be the truth, we were subject to every unexplained or overexplained phenomena. If the only source of knowledge about the sun is to watch it rise from the eastern hills, what doubts will occur in the established belief that the mountains give birth to its power? The simple flexing of nature in its natural state gave us centuries of unconquered anxieties. In effect, we lacked the ability, the cultural experience, the education, and the knowledge, to rise above our immediate environment and find meaning in the chaos and confusion which is symptomatic of thinking in abstract terms.

Such pre-skeptical persons lived in the nonrational eternity of a perennial present. Relying on instinct and living as creatures of response rather than analogy, their tie was with the past and was nostalgic rather than epistemological. Their response relied on remembering what was to be done — what ritual would appease this immediate god — rather than seeking to challenge, to analyze, and to react. Reluctant to live in other than their recurring animal drama, they looked for inspiration to the stones and, being uninhibited by past or future, relied on the shortness of the day for hope. In so doing, they were deprived of the most fundamental and supreme freedom, that of knowing.

Living epistemologically, if apprehensively, in the future as well as in the past, the questing prophet must rely on skeptical freedom, faith, and personal confidence to both question and assimilate inspiration. Here, living amid the chronic civil war of reason and response, she must seek the significant ground between the passion of egotism and dawning spirituality.

The message of Jesus Christ called persons to rise above the spiritual restrictions of superstition and to seek specific responses rather than hiding in demonic vagueness; as well, he called his people to free themselves from the limitations brought on by the dominance of obedience to unquestioned law. Young Joseph Smith's response to the denominations that knew too much was part of a new assumption for persons — an assumption that the universe's purpose is reflected in order and assurance, but that human understanding goes beyond order to participation. These principles serve as controls on the arbitrariness of decisions, on the injustice of laws, on the use of authority that is only heritage, and on beliefs turned into creeds.

The ethical prophet is not primarily concerned with solving the problems generated from institutions or traditions. Rather he seeks to fashion a new

synthesis which draws the whole from that which is, from that which is not yet, and from that which must of necessity be. This is the perilous occupation of the prophet. It will leave many awaiting instructions, some seeking signs of leadership, and many frustrated and confused over the indirectness.

It seems to me that the prophet can never be inside an institution in the manner in which leader or manager must be. For the prophet is by nature an outsider — a cosmic outsider I have called him — and any institution that tries to make him other than that denies the method and the message of his gift. The prophet, standing outside the mainstream of human thought, will live in the discrepancy between achievement and waste — between a life of "quiet desperation" and one of vitality. His despair arises from his vision, for he is aware of the alarming mediocrity that encompasses his world — and his deep concern at being so much a part of it. In his immense confusion he knows he sees too deep, and too much. And yet it is he whom, in a phrase I recall Yeates applying to Swift, the "blood sodden beast has dragged down into mankind."

Such a person sees the unexpected and lives in bewilderment before the awesome mystery of listening. Being alien to rational expectation and living in the dangerous but productive land of the assumed, she walks the tightrope between knowing and feeling. Such a person encompasses rather than seeks knowledge of God. So isolated, the prophet finds her home only in the shadows of the reality. Here she may well mimic the confused and distorted versions of the world. But living on the fringe of use-directed images, she discovers that what she is thinking and feeling is not practical. It has no usefulness because it is so universal. Thus she continually deals with the personal confrontation between what she knows to be meaningful and what her environment assumes is worthwhile. The need is that she can somehow retain her concern about draining the swamp while her followers insist she pay attention to the alligators snapping at their heels.

Living in the confrontation of the immediate and the perennial, the outsider discovers that he cannot accept life as it is, that he cannot consider his own existence beyond that of another nor his necessity inherent in the structure of the world. He realizes that his travel through the hell of his inner being raises questions about his own self-worth. He understands that he is sick, in a civilization that does not know of its own sickness (Wilson 1956, 14). This concern burns within because it cannot be understood without. Denied the opportunity to speak about the sense of meaning that sits restlessly upon his soul, the prophetic utterance will burst forth at those critical moments when the community, through its own struggles and despair, arrives at a point where the prophet and the people touch. The rest of the time, the outside is unexpressed. His comments are served up as bonbons and chocolate eclairs of the spirit when what he and his world desperately need is a meal.

The prophets find themselves without a pattern of life other than the compulsion to live at the very edge of experience, trembling in risk and secure only in belief. For when the prophet reemerges to communicate, she must be obviously different — significantly changed by her experience. If not, persons will question her message ("it is just Freda acting strange"). The frailty of her

personal integrity is so obvious (Slater 1974, 73). Her danger goes beyond where humans have gone. It is the realization that too much space smothers us more than if there were not enough and that, from the babble of voices, a mind must mediate the ethical balance between management and cosmic madness.

Such madness is described as the "image of immensity." I borrow this term from Gaston Bachelard to suggest that in order to understand the flow of prophetic image we need not wait for the phenomena to be stabilized. Immensity is not an object but rather a phenomenology of imagining. The events, the objects, and the words of our expression are the by-product of this existential experience, not the results of them. When we speak of the immensity of prophecy we refer to that deep involvement that opens us to the "otherness" that is there to be experienced. Instead of losing oneself in the descriptions, we feel the presence of the essential. We seek to understand the message, and the necessity of the vision, rather than simply striving to describe the messengers. Here the "poet continues this love duet between dreamer and the world, making people and the world into two wedded creatures that are paradoxically united in the dialogue of their solitude," the "doublet of resonance-reverberation" in which we are sensitized (Bachelard 1964, 189). It is in resonance that we experience prophecy. It is in reverberations that we extend prophecy so that it becomes our own. It possesses us by the impact of our acceptance and the power of its reaffirmation in us. Being deafened by the reverberations, we can no longer hear or consider it as objective.

Seeing the prophet as cosmic outsider I suggest that he or she is not in the real sense a leader but a navigator. When she generates response, she does so with every possibility of unethical presentation. Let me conclude, then, by suggesting that these cosmic expressions are very frail.

Part of our dilemma is that within Mormonism we have not decided on our response to Joseph Smith: do we do what he said, or what he did? What he did was to operate as if the almost daily workings of the Church were a matter of prophetic response. From my perspective, it seems that the LDS have been more inclined to do what he said and the RLDS to do what he did. But neither has come to grips with this paradox. On the one hand, we still hold on to what he said, the vocal and written expressions of his religious and organizational beliefs. And, on the other hand, we defend this attitude against conflicting concepts expressed by Joseph's action.

In this paradox we have compromised a new view, seeking new guidance and light as a management tool. This prophetic mode puts the Church on the cutting edge and yet, at the same time, makes the Church very insecure and vulnerable. To seek new guidance on each and every subject may well express the concept of doing what Joseph did, but we have not freed ourselves to do that. Until we restrict our current ideas to the immediate and free them from being permanent and untouchable things, we will not see change in the expressions of God's will. Caught between the timelessness of our affirmations and the immediacy of power in behavior, we have not dealt with the conflict nor seen the limitations. In this confusion, the prophetic timelessness is attributed to administrative action and policy. But of even more concern, to management

tools and administrative convenience is attributed the power of prophecy. This conflict is the cause of many of our dispersions which grow like wild asparagus, paying tribute to a return to the "truths of Joseph" but offended by institutions which respond to methods suggested by these truths.

While we understand that freedom imposes free will, what is not so evident is that free will can only operate when there is an understanding of the real. The freedom of choice requires that one know the choices and understand the limitations imposed by the environment in which one chooses. Such freedom also demands some comprehension of the whole so that choice reflects the macro as well as the micro view of one's world. The freedom of our prophetic voice is often limited because it does not emerge from such understanding of reality.

The outsider — the cosmic prophet — has such a sense though he recognizes that it may not reflect the popular view. He stands in opposition to our obsession with fragments, a position which has grave consequences, not the least of which is fanaticism. (Fanaticism has been beautifully defined as "redoubling one's efforts after one's aim has been forgotten.") The courage of assertion is the prophet's freedom. It is impossible to jump when you are falling; to make limp assertions about the ground on which you stand raises questions about the passion of your conviction; prophecy without assertion is unethical.

The fulfillment of the expectations of the body of Christ will occur through individual lives lived in, and related to, the human community. Thus, when prophecy emerges from institutional goals rather than from human needs, it fails. The meandering of positions, changes, and new interpretations of institutional problems is a response that lies outside understanding. Those limited to their own environment — or to immediacy — make the mistake of seeing every sorrow as the pride of person, every failure as the inadequacies of community. Such a view epitomizes the empathetic fallacy — the mistake of believing that humans, like inanimate objects or abstractions, lack feelings. We must be constantly reminded that whatever we imagine to solve our problems or to relieve our institutional confusions does not become the real world and that the powerful presence of God's world is muted when heard only in institutional and organizational expectations.

Much of our spiritual seeking is for assurance *that* God is, with little comprehension of being with God. Perhaps it is because we speak words as if words expressed the real meaning. To call contemporary prophets to the poetry of the psalms may be too much; but to call them to rise above the assumption their language communicates the source of their comments is only to ask them to speak as prophets. The ethical prophet speaks to the wholeness of the people in such a way that we "grasp the truth . . . that the beauty of the world, . . . and the mastery of evil, are all bound together — not accidentally, but by reason of this truth; that the universe exhibits a creativity with infinite freedom, and . . . infinite possibilities (Whitehead 1926, 119).

The prophetic response emerges from the milieu of the community. The people seek justification for the meaning they attach to living — not only a meaning that lies in some future life, even though this certainly helps, but a

sense that their daily bouts with pain and loss of dignity are not in vain. The manager may well define the problems, the leader may well address immediate concerns and direct people through them, but the prophet speaks to the meaning of life both in the midst of chaos and in the midst of peace.

This wisdom is neither deliberately sought nor contrived and is valid in the way that poetic justice is valid over revenge; it is evidence of a larger understanding even while accomplishing the immediate aim. This wisdom, in moments of honesty, draws us up to the conscious experience of God as present. It calls us to smells and tastes from the darkest corners of ourselves as a renewed whole, to a reality which regenerates and requires us to start life all over again.

Our prophetic view is limited when we assume that the conflict between prophet and king can be resolved, anymore than between leader and manager, by anything else than freedom from expectation. For the prophet seeks not peace, nor security, nor growth, nor acceptance at the cost of truth. The leader often compromises for peace and the king for victory. The institutional pronouncements of behavior and the rules reaffirmed through organizational rituals limit our ability to find the truth. Within Mormonism there have been so many years of limited inquiries, so many abdications of feelings and responsibilities, so many professional rituals developed that the power of prophecy is lost among necessities. Nowhere in the message of Jesus do we find instructions to submit ourselves to solemn ceremonies, to be obedient to mysterious ministrations, or to mumble maxims in a prescribed fashion. It was this very concept that we find Jesus nailed to the cross to defeat. And yet it is constantly reestablished under the guise of prophecy in his name and authority (Harnack 1948, 228–29).

This is not an argument against institutional loyalty. Organizations need leaders, even managers. But the authority of persons with God is beyond those roles and, in the final analysis, must control them. The temptation to take refuge in the institution emerges from its reflection of security. Yet prophets are never out of danger. Security dims awareness and limits the resources of involvement. To be a prophetic voice is to project the wrath of understanding and the cost of meaning. Faith is not a divine protection against destruction. The prophetic voice must surely be aware that to lead persons to God is to lead them to the risk that unceasingly awaits them.

It is well that Mormonism has a tendency to assume that prophecy follows acceptance. The prophetic utterance in its usual state will be contrary to, or ahead of, or too basic for, the contemporary fashion of ideas, thus compelling the prophet to live beyond the immediate. It was C. S. Lewis in *The Screwtape Letters* who has the devil initiate his apprentice by saying, "The use of fashions in thought is to distract the attentions of men from their real dangers." The idea, he explained, is to have all the people running around with fire extinguishers when there is a flood. The greatest triumph, however, is to elevate the "horror of the same old thing" into philosophy, so that nonsense in the intellect may reinforce corruption in the will (in Reaves 1977, 5).

Mormonism also restricts the power of prophecy when it operates under the assumption that the institutional church has no power. This encourages us

to avoid responsibility for what we are doing. Such freedom from responsibility is a violation of our giftedness and agency. God works in the organization, of that we are assured, but he does not manage it or really lead it. We do. Our failure to take responsibility and act accordingly is a byproduct of our acceptance of prophecy as cosmic policy making or personnel selection.

This nonparticipation through irresponsibility extends to our unwillingness to claim the power of consent. As members we are the final judges of the ultimacy of prophecy. If we do not deal honestly with that power, or allow ourselves to be more moved by the media than the message, or if we find ourselves confusing organizational loyalty with prophetic affirmation and do so without open evaluation of the message, we fail our God.

I find the prophetic in the homesick person. Not one without a home, not without a place, not without an identity — but grasping the fuller meaning of home and grasping to get there, struggling to tell us of the awesomeness of the journey, and — in the final analysis — to take us along.

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