
FROM THE PULPIT

On “Praying with Your Feet”

Geoff Nelson

Editor’s Note: This is a transcription of extemporaneous remarks of President Russell Hancock of the Menlo Park, California Stake Presidency, to the Valparaiso Ward Elders’ Quorum on May 6, 2012. They were recorded and transcribed by Geoff Nelson, and are printed here by permission.

I’m grateful for this invitation to speak to your quorum.

My objective today is to tell you about my faith journey and offer up some observations and possible conclusions. I’m going to speak the only way I know how: honestly and with complete candor. It means making myself vulnerable in front of group I don’t know well (yet), but we think you have a right to know your new stake presidency. If you sustain us as your leaders, then it seems you have a right to know exactly what it is you are sustaining.

So here, for what it’s worth, is my story.

But allow me to preface all of it with this observation: it would appear there are two types of Mormons, or at least two paths to conversion.

One set of members bases their testimony on some sort of sensory encounter which they describe as a burning in the bosom, a witness of the spirit, or some sort of infallible encounter with the Holy Ghost. They might hear a voice, or have a tingling sensation, or find themselves in tears, or some other such sensory experience. Many, many people that I trust and admire describe their witness in these terms, and I believe them. Now, if I’m being completely truthful I will also tell you there are others who speak of this, and I wonder if they are confusing the Holy Ghost with something else, something emotional or intentional or otherwise overwrought. But I have decided never to judge, to accept their claims at face value, and I do not doubt the possibility of such experiences.

The scriptures of course describe this. The most famous instance of it is the promise in the Book of Moroni where we're told to test the gospel and seek a manifestation of the spirit. We're also taught that the manifestation of the spirit will be the Holy Ghost revealing truth to us.

So that is one way of ascertaining truth.

Now here comes the true confession: I've never had it. It has never come to me. That is not how I've obtained my conviction.

Now, for much of my life, especially while praying, this shortcoming of mine was something that led to the sense that I was alone, and led me to feel like I was a second-class Mormon—second-rate because I couldn't accomplish this sensory, infallible encounter with the Holy Ghost. I thought that there was something wrong with me.

It came to a head for me when I was in high school and began asking the big question that looms over the life of any young Mormon male: am I going to serve a mission? And by the way, I was born in the church, born of goodly parents, and raised to have faith. Not only that, I *loved* the church—loved everything about it! So as that crucial milestone came in my life where I had to decide whether to go on a mission, I wanted more than anything to serve! I *wanted* to do this, and yet when I was honest with myself I had to confess I didn't actually know for myself that the Church was true. I was following my parents' religion and way of life, and living on the borrowed testimony of family, friends, and ward members.

Here is the next confession that I need to make: I did something I'm not proud of. I was immature then, but now in my maturity I am ashamed to tell you I began to speak more loudly and in a voice that was more shrill. I would actually testify to a truth I didn't possess. I would stand up in church meetings and say things I had no right to say, that I didn't yet know for my own self. I was actually drawn to the pulpit, eager to say these things, anxious to please the community. And I thought that in the act of saying them—and saying them more loudly—the testimony would come.

So there's another confession for you.

Well, my public speaking notwithstanding, I did what Moroni challenged me to do. I think I was quite sincere. I spent significant time on my knees and approached my Heavenly Father in that prescribed way, asking for a manifestation of the Holy Spirit. And

brethren, it didn't come. I knew that if I was being honest with myself I had to admit I wasn't feeling any palpable sense of the Holy Spirit. I got up off my knees feeling foolish, defeated, and distressed.

So what was I to do?

Well brethren, here's the next confession: I submitted missionary papers, received a call to Japan, and departed for the field. You could say I caved, that this was a form of dishonesty. I'm inclined to look back on it more charitably. I *wanted* to serve. I think my motivation was pure, though I should also tell you I felt like a mission was an important rite of passage. I certainly felt the pressure young men feel to serve missions, and understood the opportunities I would be foreclosing if I didn't.

I arrived in Japan, where it started to trouble me. I was saying things to investigators I thought were true—hoped were true—but didn't *know* were true. So I thought it was crucial to continue this effort to obtain a personal witness, the kind Moroni describes, but because I was ashamed to be in this position I took my efforts underground. I would wait for my companion to fall asleep every night, and when I heard his heavy rhythmic breathing I would get up again and spend the night trying to induce this thing.

Well brethren, it didn't happen. That manifestation promised by scripture and witnessed by others positively eluded me.

After some months of this it reached a crisis point for me. Now despondent, I felt like if I was going to have integrity then I should confess these things to my leadership, to my mission president, and also to my parents. So I actually wrote a letter home to my parents confessing and lamenting my inability to cultivate a personal relationship with divinity.

Instantly, back comes a letter from my mother. You have to know Mom to fully appreciate this, but this is a woman who doesn't suffer fools. She can be very stern. So back comes her letter, which says "enough of this nonsense! This is pure foolishness—stop this at once! Stop praying with your knees, start praying with your feet instead."

Brethren, that letter came as revelation to me. What sweet relief it brought! It was complete and total liberation. I took her advice and decided "I'm going to stop doing this thing. I'm going to

stop holding a gun to the Lord's head and insisting on a sign. I'm just going to live my life as if the gospel is true."

So you must understand: upon reading that letter, I made a wager. *I decided to bet my entire life that the gospel was true.* From that point forward, that is what I have done and what I continue to do. I have wagered my entire life.

Now here's the kicker: the kicker is that in the course of serving my family and fulfilling priesthood duty, knowledge does in fact come. In the years since my mission, the witness I sought has arrived, completely unbidden, and never once on cue. For me it has come in ways I can barely describe, and never on command, and I'm not even sure that they're sensory or palpable. But I can tell you that I have somehow crossed a threshold into a very serious area, one I would describe as akin to knowledge, to the point where I would lay everything I am on the altar in its defense. Brethren, when I speak with conviction about the gospel it's not merely with hope and with faith but with something that is approaching knowledge. That I can tell you. But it has never come on my terms and never come to me on my timetable.

Now here's what's so striking: every time I have shared this experience I have been assailed by people who say "me too!" "That's my experience too!" So I'm starting to draw conclusions, that there really do seem to be two sets of Latter-day Saints: people for whom these experiences are forthcoming, and people for whom they are not. It's a curious outcome, but there it is. I think we can observe it empirically throughout the church.

Now, there is a passage in the Doctrine & Covenants that speaks to this, and for some reason it doesn't get the press it deserves, certainly not as much press as Moroni's promise. It's section 46, verses 11–14, and it says:

For all have not every gift given unto them; for there are many gifts . . . To some it is given by the Holy Ghost to know that Jesus Christ is the Son of God . . . to others it is given to believe on their words.

That's me, okay? I think it is significant that believing on the words of another is described as a spiritual gift—a legitimate spiritual gift in and of itself, one that we might even seek after. This is *me*. And I don't think that makes me less of a Latter-day Saint, or less of a disciple.

Furthermore, I encountered the writings and the talks given by a number of general authorities in the church that speak directly to this, and if only I could have digested them at the time of my mission! It would have saved me so much consternation, so much self-doubt and recrimination!

I want to share some of these with you. First, I want to share with you the story of President David O. McKay, which I had never heard! But he stood up in the 1968 General Conference and told a story that turns out to be just like mine. I had *never* heard this from a church leader. This is President McKay:

I am going to tell you what happened to me as a boy upon the hillside near my home in Huntsville. I was yearning, just as you boys are yearning, to know that the vision given to the Prophet Joseph Smith was true, and that this Church was really founded by revelation, as he claimed. I thought that the only way a person could get to know the truth was by having a revelation or experiencing some miraculous event . . . So one day I was hunting cattle. While climbing a steep hill, I stopped to let my horse rest, and there, once again, an intense desire came over me to receive a manifestation of the truth of the restored gospel. I dismounted, threw my reins over my horse's head, and there, under a bush, I prayed that God would declare to me the truth of his revelation to Joseph Smith. I am sure that I prayed fervently and sincerely and with as much faith as a young boy could muster.

At the conclusion of the prayer, I arose from my knees, threw the reins over my faithful pony's head, and got into the saddle. As I started along the trail again, I remember saying to myself: "No spiritual manifestation has come to me. If I am true to myself, I must say I am just the same boy that I was before I prayed." I prayed again when I crossed Spring Creek, near Huntsville, and again in the evening to milk our cows.

The Lord did not see fit to give me an answer on that occasion, it wasn't until I had been appointed president of the Scottish Mission, that the spiritual manifestation for which I had prayed as a boy came. And it simply came as a natural sequence to the performance of duty.¹

So that is President McKay. That's interesting, right? And I want to read to you this from Elder Dallin Oaks, which is also interesting:

I have met persons who told me they have never had a witness from the Holy Ghost because they have never felt their bosom "burn

within them.” What does a “burning in the bosom” mean? Does it need to be a feeling of caloric heat, like the burning produced by combustion? If that is the meaning, then I have never had a burning in the bosom.²

That was Elder Oaks. Interesting, right? Now here’s Elder Packer:

Some have been misled by expecting revelations too frequently. I have learned that strong, impressive spiritual experiences do not come to us very frequently. Revelations from God—the teachings and directions of the Spirit—are not constant. We believe in continuing revelation, not continuous revelation. We are often left to work out problems without the dictation or specific direction of the Spirit. That is part of the experience we must have in mortality. The people I have found most confused in this Church are those who seek personal revelations on everything.³

Let me read you another one, this from Elder McConkie:

Some people postpone acknowledging their testimony until they have experienced a miraculous event. They fail to realize that with most people—especially those raised in the Church—gaining a testimony is not an event but a process. Being born again is a gradual thing, except in a few isolated instances that are so miraculous that they get written up in the scriptures. As far as the generality of the members of the Church are concerned, conversion is a process; and it goes step by step, degree by degree, level by level, from a lower state to a higher, from grace to grace, until the time that the individual is wholly turned to the cause of righteousness.⁴

Brethren, that is *me!* It describes my experience precisely!

So I wanted to share all of this, for what it’s worth.

But there’s something else I want to tell you, something very important. I want to point out that the Book of Mormon actually proposes *two* different models for obtaining faith and testimony.

This is *so* important! Somehow we forget this.

The one model we’ve covered already and everybody knows it because it gets all the press, and that model is laid out in Moroni 10, verse 4: ask and have a witness be delivered unto you. That’s a legitimate model; it’s scriptural, I believe it is possible, and that it can take place exactly as described.

And yet there’s another model laid out very clearly in the same book, which we must also take as scripture and therefore literal and therefore equally valid. This model or paradigm de-

scribes an entirely different path to faith and testimony and it is found in Alma 32, where the gospel is likened unto a seed. It uses an agricultural analogy, one that really resonates with me. It describes my own life experience.

According to this model we're not asked to have this dramatic confrontation with Deity, to seek out something bordering on mystical and to have it delivered on command. Instead, we're asked to do something altogether different, which is to cultivate a seed, to nurture it through our actions. It's a horticultural metaphor, where a testimony is a thing to be carefully planted, cultivated, watered, grown over a period of time, and thereupon tested.

And what do you test? You test the fruits, right? To me the fruits of the gospel are delicious. They pass my taste test.

Now, I find it a curiosity why our missionaries don't actually lead with *that*. I would *lead* with that if I had it to do over again! This is what I would be asking my investigators to do. I would merely say "plant this seed I am giving you. Test it. You might have to try it over a lifetime, but take a look at this seed and then make your own decision on the merits, whether it is good or not." That has been my experience. To me the fruits are so beautiful and so good that I've been willing to bet my entire life upon it.

So brethren, there's my story, and we your stake presidency feel that you have a right to know us in this way. You have a right to understand our spiritual journeys, how we come by the things that we say. And I will make you a promise right here, that you will never hear me say anything over the pulpit or in a church setting that is beyond my ability to know. If you listen carefully you will hear me choosing words like "believe" as in "I believe this is true" or "I trust this is true" or "I have accumulated enough evidence to persuade me this is the better path." I'll be using words very carefully.

Now having shared my story, I would like to make five observations for all of us here in the Menlo Park Stake, each on our own faith journeys. Will you indulge me in these five observations?

Here they are:

First, and I want to say this very clearly: if you happen to be somebody who wonders; if you happen to be somebody who is ex-

periencing doubt about the church or about the gospel or any of the great existential questions; to you we say: this is your home! You belong here with us, and you are badly wanted. Your stake presidency wants a community of saints who are probing, who are discovering, who are testing, and who are making a serious and systematic investigation. We're not trying to cultivate a stake of passive believers mouthing platitudes. We are trying to cultivate active believers and genuine seekers. That is the kind of stake that we seek to lead. If you are finding doubts or asking questions, this is a safe and appropriate place to do that. And I can say that because my own Hosannas have passed through the crucible of doubt.

The scriptures make it perfectly clear there is a place for doubt and for skepticism and that this is part of the journey. Remember in the book of Mark when the man seizes upon the Savior and says "Lord, I believe, help thou mine unbelief," and how the Savior looked especially kindly upon him. Count me as one of those.

My second observation is to issue a challenge to those who are feeling either smug or complacent in the faith. We want to root this out. Forgive me, but I think there are a few too many Mormons who have decided that because the church is true, we therefore have all the answers to every question, all of the theological questions that have plagued scholars and theologians for centuries. Disciples have been breaking their heads open over these questions for centuries, but because we have the gospel, we know every answer and there's nothing left for us to do but to be perfunctory Mormons, mouthing the words we learned in Primary. In my view, nobody is excused from the work of probing and questioning. All of us have a duty to examine the great questions our theology poses. I fear too many of us confuse faith with depth. This we must never do. An unexamined faith is not worth having.

Not only that, there is so much truth that is yet to be revealed! Remember we believe in continuing revelation. Will it come without any effort on our part as a Church?

This leads to the third observation I would like to make: the church is a dynamic organization. By dynamic I mean it changes. The gospel is timeless but the Church is not. I have lived long enough to witness the Church make many great and significant

changes in my lifetime—things pertaining to doctrine, or to our policies and practices. This includes things about women, about priesthood, about the garments we wear, and more. So this is significant. We should all understand that the Church is a dynamic thing, and one that will grow and change and develop as circumstances warrant, and we will witness it in our lifetimes.

My fourth observation is to suggest we have a role to play in that evolution. We should be agents in helping discover truth, agents in helping the church grow and increase and improve as an institution. Now we make distinctions of course between the gospel and the church, right? There was a marvelous talk in this past General Conference about that, the difference between the Church and the gospel. I urge you to read that and apply it to our stake as well. Over the nine years of our stake presidency, I'm sure you'll see many things come and go, and important changes made. We want you to be enlisted in the change. We want you to feel like you are agents in this, vital stakeholders. We want you to be innovative with us, and entrepreneurial and creative. We want you to bring your best thinking and we want you to help us.

Here's the last observation I would like to make: it is an invitation to the members of our stake. We hope that you'll pray with your knees and also pray with your feet. We of course counsel you to pray fervently upon your knees. We seek those prayers, join with you in those prayers, and we rejoice in those prayers. But we also envision a stake full of people who are caught up in the work. It's a work of compassion. It's a work of saving, one person at a time. It's a work of toil and sweat in this place where we're trying to build a portion of the kingdom. And it's our experience (it's certainly my experience) that in the act of service, in the act of fulfilling our duty, this is where the greater knowledge comes, the greater light and knowledge. So we want to encourage that spirit of active learning among all of us.

It is a privilege speaking to you in this way, and I thank you for looking on me and my confessions with acceptance. I look forward to dialogue on these subjects, but for now I will close my remarks, invoking the sacred name of our Savior, Jesus Christ, amen.

Notes

1. David O. McKay, *Report of the Semi-Annual Conference of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, October 1968 (Salt Lake City: Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, semi-annual), 84–87.
2. Dallin H. Oaks, “Teaching and Learning by the Spirit,” *Ensign*, March 1997.
3. Boyd K. Packer, *That All May Be Edified* (Bookcraft, 1982), 337.
4. Bruce R. McConkie, “Be Ye Converted” (address given at the BYU First Stake Quarterly Conference, February 11, 1968), 12.