

Insights on Church Leadership

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The Blessings of Good Counseling

In the previous chapters I made a couple of references specific to those called to serve in presidencies. And in those instances I used the term "members of presidencies", instead of "presidents." The reason was to avoid the erroneous belief that counselors have a secondary or subordinate role.

Let us understand the honor of serving as a counselor by reminding that "Counselor" is one of the titles attributed to Christ¹. Perhaps this is so because he is our advocate before the Father, and he constantly pleads our cause before the Father. I like to think that as counselors we act another of the Savior's roles.

In the Book of Mormon we find the allegory of the olive trees. In that superb parable the servant of the Lord of the vineyard acts as a counselor: he never makes the final decisions but throughout the parable he offers suggestions of alternative courses of action available to the Lord of the vineyard. And those suggestions saved the vineyard from immediate destruction. If we recognize the servant's actions as those of an advocate, we would understand the servant in the allegory to be a representation of Christ².

Such line of reasoning shows how counselors can represent Christ with their service. But let me stress that counseling also includes those who are not members of presidencies: other church leaders and members are an important source of insights. In fact, whenever I think of good counseling, I remember many great men and women who I observed having active roles in their callings--not all of them as members of presidencies. These individuals' opinions blessed the lives of many whom they served.

How did that happen? Knowingly or not, they followed the admonition of the Lord given to Frederick G. Williams, one of the counselors to the Prophet Joseph Smith:

"Therefore, ... I ... will bless ... thee, inasmuch as thou art faithful in counsel, in the office which I have appointed unto you, in prayer always, vocally and in thy heart, in public and in private, also in thy ministry in proclaiming the gospel in the land of the living, and among thy brethren.

¹ Isaiah 9:6; 2 Nephi 19:6

² See Jacob 5:26-28,33-34,47-51. I wrote "we would understand the servant ... to be a representation of Christ" because since parables have multiple layers of meaning, it would be unwise to make absolute statements about the possible meanings of each particular symbol. For example, in this allegory the servant could also mean a composite personage representing prophets, bishops, parents, etc.

And in doing these things thou wilt do the greatest good unto thy fellow beings, and wilt promote the glory of him who is your Lord.³"

The Role of a Counselor

Counselors are not called to have a subordinate role, but to be actively engaged with their respective presidents in performing miracles. President Harold B. Lee identified the greatest miracle we should promote:

"Today it might well be said that the greatest miracles we see are not the healings of sick bodies, but the miraculous changes that come into the lives of those who become members of the Church ...⁴"

The Lord also instructed President Frederick G. Williams that part of his calling involved the charge to "... succor the weak, lift up the hands which hang down, and strengthen the feeble knees."⁵

A good symbolic example of the role of counselors in the performance of miracles is found in the Old Testament:

"Then came Amalek, and fought with Israel in Rephidim. And it came to pass, when Moses held up his hand, that Israel prevailed: and when he let down his hand, Amalek prevailed. But Moses' hands were heavy; and they took a stone, and put it under him, and he sat thereon; and Aaron and Hur stayed up his hands, the one on the one side, and the other on the other side; and his hands were steady until the going down of the sun."⁶

In the previous chapters of this book we discussed a number of principles equally important. Anyone would find it difficult to remember all those principles, especially at those crucial hours when they would be more needed--those moments when we find ourselves under tension, and still having to make important decisions dealing that will impact the lives of others. Such are the moments when a wise counsel can be a comfort, and it can help presidents avoid mistakes that could damage the lives of the people.

This presupposes that even though presidents have the responsibility of making the final decisions, counselors should be prepared to make them in as good a manner as the presidents, by gathering pertinent facts--perhaps with a different viewpoint than that of the president, not with the intention of challenging the president, but ensuring that all aspects of the issues are discussed and treated fairly, with no biases or prejudices. In fact, in the minutes of the organization of the first high council, it was established that "... every man is to speak according to equity and justice ... But should the ... councilors ... after hearing the evidences and pleadings impartially, discover an error in the decision of the president, they can manifest

³ D&C 81:3-4

⁴ Stand Ye in Holy Places, p.288

⁵ D&C 81:5

⁶ Exodus 17:8,11-12. Our current scriptural records give few details on how Ancient Israel was organized ecclesiastically. Thus, even though it is so far unclear whether Aaron and Hur were acting as Moses' counselors, still, their performance in the incident described in this passage is an excellent symbolic representation of the role of the counselors.

it, and the case shall have a re-hearing.⁷" It becomes then necessary that counselors speak their minds freely, according to the feelings the Lord puts in their hearts⁸.

How to Receive Counsel

Presidents must look upon being assisted by counselors as a privilege and a blessing⁹. Organizations (or classes, quorums, wards or stakes) will only reap the full benefits of the service rendered by their counselors if their presidents receive counsels and opinions with open ears, minds, and hearts. Open minds are free of strict adherence to pre-conceived ideas (right or wrong ones). Open hearts are free of jealousy and pride, that do not admit either the idea of being counseled or the suggestion that one's ideas might be misguided or wrong.

"Let no man think he is ruler; but let God rule that judgeth, according to the counsel of his own will, or, in other words, him that counseleth or sitteth upon the judgment seat. ... Wherefore, ... seek not to counsel the Lord, but to take counsel from his hand. For behold, ye yourselves know that he counseleth in wisdom, and in justice, and in great mercy, over all his works.¹⁰"

A president must carefully take into consideration all counsels--especially those he or she might dislike--because the Lord will frequently speak to the president through his or her counselors. Jacob's advice "... seek ... to take counsel from his hand ..." can include those through whom the Lord will speak. So, a wise president will not inhibit his or her counselors' ideas and inspiration by trying to impose his or her (the president's) own ideas. All members of a presidency should ask the Lord to bless them so his word can be manifested through each one of them.

"Counsel with the Lord in all thy doings, and he will direct thee for good ...counsel with your elder brothers in your undertakings; for behold, thou art in thy youth, and ye stand in need to be nourished by your brothers. And give heed to their counsel.¹¹"

The Prophet Joseph Smith also pointed to the importance of receiving counsel from more experienced persons: "The way to get along in any important matter is to gather unto yourselves wise men, experienced and aged men, to assist in council in all times of trouble.¹²"

Being assisted in the process of receiving revelations by considering revelations given to others is not a new concept. The Lord rebuked his disciples because at first they didn't believe in the accounts of his resurrection--after all, they were the ones who had received the keys of the Holy Apostleship, and perhaps at that time they thought that no one else could receive revelations: "Afterward he appeared unto the eleven

⁷ D&C 102:16,20

⁸ Helaman 13:3; D&C 8:2-3; 100:5-8

⁹ D&C 102:10. Although this verse refers to the President of the Church, the same may be said to counselors serving in organizations, wards, and stakes, because they represent the presidency of the church in their respective spheres of action.

¹⁰ D&C 58:20; Jacob 4:10

¹¹ Alma 37:37; 39:10

¹² TPJS, p.299. May 14, 1843.

as they sat at meat, and upbraided [i.e. reproached severely; censured] them with their unbelief and hardness of heart, because they believed not them which had seen him after he was risen.¹³"

Later, Peter was instructed to start the preaching of the gospel among the Gentiles in part by a vision he received and in part by an angel's ministering to Cornelius, who was not even a member of the Church at the time¹⁴. Some might say: "but that doesn't mean that this could happen today; perhaps this Cornelius was already a special chosen man." To that I would respond by asking how many chosen people--men, women and children--could be wandering around at this very moment in neighborhoods and cities looking for the true Church of Jesus Christ?¹⁵ And for those who might say: "but this still does not mean that it could happen today; after all, Peter was an Apostle and I am just a" I would respond saying that the difference between us and both ancient and modern prophets is in the breadth of their callings compared to ours.

Let's be clear that presidencies do not receive revelations from the people, as the Prophet Joseph Smith explained:

"... it is contrary to the economy of God for any member of the Church, or any one, to receive instruction for those in authority, higher than themselves; therefore you will see the impropriety of giving heed to them; but if any person have a vision or a visitation from a heavenly messenger, it must be for his own benefit and instruction ...¹⁶"

My intention is to demonstrate that presidencies must listen to the voice of the people for two reasons: first, to become aware of the works the Lord is operating through his other servants; secondly, presidencies also need to receive insights on what they themselves should ask the Lord. In the early days of our dispensation the Prophet Joseph Smith received revelations on issues that had been brought before him by other individuals in the form of questions, concerns, and righteous desires. Answers to direct questions are found, for example, in sections 12, 14, and 77 of the Doctrine and Covenants; an apparently domestic matter originated the Word of Wisdom, in section 89. Even before the Prophet Joseph inquired of the Lord concerning the matter, Oliver Cowdery, David Whitmer, and Martin Harris had already been "... moved upon by an inspired desire to be the three special witnesses¹⁷" of the Book of Mormon.

We must remember President Brigham Young's statement that while in mortality we are unable to receive a revelation from God with all its perfections.¹⁸ Therefore, we need the insights provided by those who are associated with us, especially our counselors and fellow servants in our Church assignments, and our spouses in our homes. All can be instruments in leading us to learn something new. Then, through

¹³ Mark 16:14; brackets added with dictionary definition.

¹⁴ Acts 10:9-20,28-35. Notice that the two manifestations complemented each other, like a message divided in two parts in such a way that it only makes sense when the two parts are put together. Notice also that Cornelius' message did not have any direct instruction to Peter (TPJS, p.21 - see next quotation.)

¹⁵ D&C 123:12

¹⁶ TPJS, p.21. April 13, 1833.

¹⁷ D&C 17. Check the headings of all the sections I have listed.

¹⁸ Discourses of Brigham Young, p.40. July 8, 1855. See this quotation in chapter 9, as part of a discussion on the benefits of cultural diversity.

prayer, members of the presidency will obtain the confirmation from the Lord¹⁹ about the truthfulness and appropriateness²⁰ of what they have learned from the people's experiences.

A scriptural account about counseling a presiding officer can be found in the experience Moses had when he followed a suggestion given by his father-in-law, Jethro. I have seen presidencies who didn't allow dialogues of any kind, using the argument that since they had been called by revelation and "were inspired" nobody should ever question their decisions. I wonder what would have happened if Moses had used the same argument when his father-in-law taught him the principle of delegation of authority.

Moses was a Prophet of the Lord and judged the people all day long, apparently wearing himself out in the process. One day Jethro came to visit him. Probably having more years of experience in the priesthood than Moses, Jethro counseled him to delegate some of his tasks and take care only of the more serious cases²¹. Had Moses been an unwise man, he might have said something like this:

'I really appreciate your input, most honorable Jethro. Delegating some tasks is certainly an excellent idea. But since the Lord called me--not you--as his prophet, any new doctrines or new procedures must come through the appropriate channel of revelation. So, as you see, I am forced to disregard your opinion on this subject.

One more thing: Please, I am not trying to sound disrespectful towards you, but I am afraid that this type of attitude--trying to advise a prophet of the Lord--might be harmful to your soul. So please, next time, try not to criticize the work of the Lord's anointed. And by the way, most honorable Jethro, don't forget that I love you.'

What a blessing for Israel of old--and for us--that Moses was "... very meek, above all the men which were upon the face of the earth."²² Because of his meekness, he heard the counsel of his father-in-law, pondered on those words, and surely he later consulted the Lord, who then consented on an administrative change that benefitted not only Moses but also all the people.

In the New Testament we can see how the Lord Jesus Christ acted in relation to the opinions of the people: "... Jesus ... asked his disciples, ... Whom do men say that I the Son of man am?²³" I believe that Jesus knew very well what the people thought about him; however, by his questioning the disciples he could also be teaching the necessity of getting to know the people's opinions. But that is not all. Next, he asked the disciples: "... whom say ye that I am?²⁴" Using the same reasoning, we may say that presidencies should also be open to receive feedback from fellow servants.

Two other examples are once more found in the Old Testament. Note that I am quoting two passages of scripture that, at first glance, may make us overlook the important lesson on leadership.

¹⁹ D&C 9:8-9

²⁰ A principle may be true and yet its practice may be inappropriate at a certain point in time. For example, the Law of Consecration.

²¹ Exodus 18:13-24

²² Numbers 12:3

²³ Matthew 16:13

²⁴ Matthew 16:15

In the first passage, Saul, the son of Kish, was looking for his father's lost animals²⁵. At that same time, the Prophet Samuel was looking for the man that the Lord had chosen to be the first king of Israel. The Lord told Samuel that in the next day at a certain hour his chosen man would come before Samuel²⁶. However, instead of inspiring Saul to meet Samuel, the Lord inspired Saul's servant²⁷, maybe because Saul's mind was too occupied with the search for the animals. By listening to his servant, Saul received a blessing greater than finding his father's lost property; he was commanded to care for his Father in Heaven's children²⁸.

The second passage shows what happened before Daniel revealed and interpreted King Nebuchadnezzar's prophetic dream. He asked the king for some time and then went home and discussed the matter with his companions, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah²⁹, asking them to "desire mercies of the God of Heaven concerning this secret." Later, Daniel saw the dream in a vision and learned its interpretation³⁰.

Valuing the People's Opinions

President Brigham Young taught that although priesthood ordinations and callings come from the Lord, the authority in the callings comes through the sustaining vote of the people:

"... Joseph presided over the Church, by the voice of the Church. Perhaps it may make some of you stumble, were I to ask you a question—Does a man's being a Prophet in this Church prove that he shall be the President of it? I answer, no! A man may be a Prophet, Seer, and Revelator, and it may have nothing to do with his being the President of the Church. Suffice it to say, that Joseph was the President of the Church, as long as he lived: the people chose to have it so. He always filled that responsible station, by the voice of the people. Can you find any revelation appointing him the President of the Church? The keys of the Priesthood were committed to Joseph, to build up the Kingdom of God on the earth, and were not to be taken from him in time or in eternity; but when he was called to preside over the Church, it was by the voice of the people; though he held the keys of the Priesthood, independent of their voice.³¹"

This statement shows one of the main differences between leadership in the world and leadership in the kingdom of God. In the world, the leader is at the center, and exercises control over the people. In the kingdom of God a leader is a servant of others³²; he or she is chosen by God and accepted by the people to be a teacher and a motivator, not a taskmaster.

²⁵ 1 Samuel 9:3

²⁶ 1 Samuel 9:15-16

²⁷ 1 Samuel 9:5-10

²⁸ 1 Samuel 9:27; 10:1

²⁹ Doesn't this sound like a priesthood executive committee meeting?

³⁰ Daniel 2:17-18. Notice that it is not recorded how long Daniel and his companions had to wait for an answer from the Lord. They could have waited for hours, days, or even weeks until their request was finally granted. Also notice in verses 27-30 how Daniel bore his testimony before the king, publicly acknowledging the hand of the Lord in that miracle.

³¹ JD, Vol. 1, p.133-134, April 6, 1853. Part of this quotation is also found in Discourses of Brigham Young, p.137.

³² D&C 50:26

Member of presidencies must keep in mind that they are also members of a congregation of saints. Each of us is one among many, and many others could be in our place. Each of us have limitations to overcome and weaknesses to defeat, some of which may even be still unknown to us. We are not better than anyone else in a general sense. One person may not have any problems living the word of wisdom, but another member who struggles to live the word of wisdom may be more effective in forgiving and forgetting than that person, or perhaps he or she spends more time on charitable service. Can we then say that we are better than others based only in the fact that we were called to serve in a presidency? Certainly not.

Presidencies Must Exemplify Unity

Members of a presidency should strive to be one. The Lord commanded: "... be one; and if ye are not one ye are not mine."³³ This can be accomplished only through a close relationship of true friendship. The Lord implied that friendship is a higher status of relationship between him and his servants. If we are to follow the Lord's example, we also should become friends:

"Ye are my friends, if ye do whatsoever I command you. Henceforth I call you not servants; for the servant knoweth not what his lord doeth: but I have called you friends; for all things that I have heard of my Father I have made known unto you."³⁴

This statement also implies that friends will always have an open channel of communication with the Lord. We can also consider the words of President Wilford Woodruff:

"It is my duty to have fellowship with God, as weak an instrument as I am in the hands of God. It is my duty to have power with God. And when I have this, then my counselors should stand by me and with me. We should be of one heart and mind in all matters, temporal and spiritual, that come before us in the labor of the Church and kingdom of God ... with every organization in this Church ... There should be union. There should be no discord, no disunion. If there is, the Lord is not pleased with it, and we are hindered in our work."³⁵

Working together as friends must be one of the goals of any presidency. As we approach that status, we will be more confident to delegate, because we will know each other and have sufficient trust. Sometimes presidents are afraid of delegating tasks to their counselors because of that old concern with perfection, with having things done "our way". President Ezra Taft Benson identified some of the reasons why we may fail in our efforts to delegate:

"... failing to delegate enough, delegating by formula, failing to keep communication lines open, failing to define the assignment, failing to make the assignment stick, failing to delegate enough authority to do the job, being too narrow in your delegation, and failing to allow for mistakes. Theodore Roosevelt said, 'The best executive is the one who has sense enough to pick good men to do what he wants done, and self-restraint enough to keep from meddling with them while they do it.'³⁶

President Spencer W. Kimball's exhortation towards unity is also clear:

³³ D&C 38:27

³⁴ John 15:14-15

³⁵ Discourses of Wilford Woodruff, p.89. 1890.

³⁶ Teachings of Ezra Taft Benson, p.379

"Use counselors. Mission presidents and stake presidents and ward bishops, do not ever say 'I: I will do this; I'm going to do this; I've decided this.' The Lord gave you all two counselors, and it is always 'We made this decision; we decided to do this.' Recognize your counselors, give them opportunities also to develop, and if you ignore them, you are hardly worthy to be the executive.³⁷"

After All This, Are We Free From Error?

Truth is broader, more detailed, more intricate than we can imagine. Our mortal comprehension is far from fully understanding the Lord's paths. We have already mentioned what the Lord said through Isaiah, "... my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways ...³⁸", and we remember once again President Brigham Young's teaching about our inability to receive perfect revelations from God³⁹. Now, regarding this same subject the Prophet Joseph Smith taught:

"... the things of God are of deep import; and [only] time, and experience, and careful and ponderous and solemn thoughts can ... find them out. Thy mind, O man! if thou wilt lead a soul unto salvation, must stretch as high as the utmost heavens, and search into and contemplate the darkest abyss, and the broad expanse of eternity--thou must commune with God. How much more dignified and noble are the thoughts of God, than the vain imaginations of the human heart! None but fools will trifle with the souls of men.⁴⁰"

These words indicate that we cannot understand all the implications or visualize the full extent of the consequences of every decision we make as members of presidencies. The analogy of the prism⁴¹ suggests that because of our diverse backgrounds--different upbringing, different national or regional cultures, and different life experiences--each one of us will tend to see only a few aspects of a particular subject, but not all aspects. When making decisions as a presidency, the insights provided by good counselors can increase our understanding of the potential consequences of our actions.

But can we say that this is enough? Can we say that a presidency will always have enough information to make wise decisions? The answer is "No." We should therefore be open to more opinions, to more points of view; we should have an open channel to listen to what the members are saying and feeling, although at the same time not delaying our decisions to the point of paralyzing the work.

Many times I have seen instances where presidencies made mistakes because they were not sensitive to the feelings of the people. Our decisions in this mortal stage will always be somewhat imperfect because of our fallen condition. But if we honestly do our best the Lord will justify our actions and use his power to avert any potentially negative consequences, for the kingdom's sake. Doing our best involves listening and understanding the feelings and the contrary opinion of others. We were called as members of presidencies to represent the Lord, not to be the Lord. So, if a member of our stake, ward, organization or quorum didn't understand the basis of a certain decision, it is appropriate to sit down and talk about it using the scriptures. The time spent in this conversation can become a time of learning and edification for both persons.

³⁷ Teachings of Spencer W. Kimball, p.488. March 9, 1975.

³⁸ Isaiah 55:8-9

³⁹ Discourses of Brigham Young, p.40

⁴⁰ TPJS, p.137. March 25, 1839. Brackets added.

⁴¹ Mentioned in chapter 9 as part of a discussion on the benefit of diverse cultural backgrounds.

In other instances I saw individuals even sitting down to talk, but the presiding officer wouldn't use the scriptures. If one uses only earthly learning--without the Spirit of the Lord--to explain a decision, then he or she would better re-evaluate the decisions being made. Where the Spirit of the Lord is present there is edification, understanding and rejoicing⁴². Where the Spirit is not present discord, argument, backbiting, loss of spirituality, and inactivity usually follow.

We should always remember the responsibility placed on us when sitting in council, by pondering on these words of the Prophet Joseph Smith:

"... no man is capable of judging a matter, in council, unless his own heart is pure; and ... we frequently are so filled with prejudice, or have a beam in our own eye, that we are not capable of passing right decisions. ... Our acts are recorded, and at a future day they will be laid before us, and if we should fail to judge right and injure our fellow-beings, they may there, perhaps, condemn us; there they are of great consequence, and to me the consequence appears to be of force, beyond anything which I am able to express. Ask yourselves, brethren, how much you have exercised yourselves in prayer since you heard of this council; and if you are now prepared to sit in council upon the soul of your brother."⁴³

⁴² D&C 50:22-23

⁴³ TPJS, p.69. February 12, 1834.

About the Author



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Since then, brother Martins served as bishop, counselor in branch presidencies, member of stake high councils, stake and ward executive secretary, high priests group leader, ward mission leader, temple officiator, stake and ward sunday school president, and teacher in primary, sunday school, and institute of religion. In the early 1980's he also translated the “Book of Mormon: Another Testament of Jesus Christ” into Portuguese.

Brother Martins has worked over the years as a systems analyst and independent consultant for the Brazilian government and a number of private corporations. He holds a Ph.D. in Sociology of Religion, Race and Ethnic Relations, a Master's degree in Organizational Behavior, and a bachelor's in Business Management. He taught religion and sociology classes at Brigham Young University, Ricks College, and currently serves as chair of the department of religious education at Brigham Young University-Hawaii.

He and Sister Mirian Barbosa Martins, herself a native of Petrópolis, Brazil, and a returned missionary with several years of leadership experience, have four children: Flávio, Natália, Felipe, and Cristina.