

Insights on Church Leadership

Marcus H. Martins, Ph.D.
Brigham Young University - Hawaii

Copyright © 1993, 1999, 2001 (web edition)
by Marcus H. Martins
All Rights Reserved

This text may be printed or copied for incidental home or Church use
This is not an official publication of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints

*Serving the Lord
in the Latter Days*

A glorious prophecy about the last days conceals an important insight on the responsibility of all those serving in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints:

"But in the last days it shall come to pass, that the mountain of the house of the Lord shall be established in the top of the mountains, and it shall be exalted above the hills; and people shall flow unto it. And many nations shall come, and say, Come, and let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, and to the house of the God of Jacob; and he will teach us of his ways, and we will walk in his paths: for the law shall go forth of Zion, and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem. And he shall judge among many people, and rebuke strong nations afar off; and they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruninghooks: nation shall not lift up a sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more.¹"

The idea in these verses is simple, but one question remains: When, in all the history of humankind, did the Lord himself come down to earth to teach the people of many nations? Before you answer, "during Christ's mortal ministry, in the meridian of times", let me remind you that at that time he came to teach only the Israelites², leaving the remaining nations to be taught by his disciples³. From the scriptures now available to us we see that the pattern of his actions was to come and introduce a new dispensation himself, and then appoint those who would represent him in carrying the work forward⁴. We can safely conclude that the same is going to happen when those scriptures recorded by Isaiah and Micah are fulfilled.

Church leaders are some of the Lord's legitimate representatives because of the authority they received when set apart to serve. These latter-day Elders and Sisters are the persons whom the nations of the world will seek to learn the Lord's ways--by learning His true doctrine--and to walk in the Lord's paths--by obeying His commandments and receiving His ordinances. These representatives are the ones who will

¹ Micah 4:1-3; Isaiah 2:2-4

² Matthew 15:24

³ 3 Nephi 15:22-23

⁴ Exodus 3:8,10; Isaiah 6:8; D&C 138:28-30

"judge among many people," perhaps by helping them resolve their sometimes centuries-old feuds. And they may "rebuke strong nations" by proclaiming repentance from their sins and from any improper practices.

To fulfill our duties as the Lord's representatives we have to become an educated people, not only in spiritual and eternal matters, but also in temporal matters⁵. Above all, we have to emulate the Lord at all times and in all circumstances--in and out of the Church. To do so we must strive to know the Lord--to really understand his personality, his character, and his attributes⁶. Is that difficult? Yes, but not impossible; and if we can feel this difficulty we probably understand what the Lord meant when he said: "... behold how great is your calling ..."⁷

Representing the Lord

If we are to represent the Lord before the people we must start by trying to do what the Lord would do if he were among us. When the Lord gave the Prophet Joseph Smith instructions regarding the operation of the School of the Prophets, he listed a number of actions that presidents and teachers should perform:

"And this shall be the order of the house of the presidency of the school: He that is appointed to be president, or teacher, shall be found standing in his place ... he shall be first in the house of God, in a place that the congregation in the house may hear his words carefully and distinctly, not with loud speech. And when he cometh into the house of God, for he should be first in the house--behold, this is beautiful, that he may be an example--Let him offer himself in prayer upon his knees before God ... And when any shall come in after him, let the teacher arise, and ... salute his brother or brethren ..."⁸

Although some of the actions prescribed in this passage are not applicable outside the School of the Prophets, we can still properly follow part of this standard in our stakes, wards, organizations and quorums. As church leaders we can arrive early in our meetinghouses and offer a prayer perhaps asking the Lord for the blessings of forgiveness, wisdom, spirituality, and asking for some specific blessings⁹ to be bestowed that day--those miracles that would bless the lives of others and help them draw closer to the Lord. We can take the time to greet our brothers and sisters and spend some time with them--instead of locking ourselves in a room. We can use these moments to learn some important things by listening to the experiences of others. And since the world in the latter days is full of confusion, we can also use these conversations in the foyers to convey faith in the Lord, hope, confidence, and the recognition of the blessings received. "Therefore, strengthen your brethren in all your conversation, in all your prayers, in all your exhortations, and in all your doings"¹⁰

The requirements for service in the kingdom of God are many, and we sometimes may feel overwhelmed by them. However, we should never get discouraged. The opportunity to serve the Lord, especially in a leadership capacity, is an opportunity to be molded by the Lord.

⁵ See chapter 12 for a discussion on the kinds of knowledge to be acquired.

⁶ See chapter 12 for a discussion on the knowledge of God.

⁷ D&C 112:33

⁸ D&C 88:128-132

⁹ See chapter 2 for a discussion on the use of the prayer of faith in the performance of assignments.

¹⁰ D&C 108:7

To render service is to sacrifice time, talents and other temporal means. An analysis of how sacrifices were offered in ancient days may give us an idea on how we should sacrifice (or serve) today¹¹. Although these specific sacrifices prescribed in the Mosaic Law have been discontinued¹², we are still commanded to live the law of sacrifice by offering as sacrifice broken hearts and contrite spirits¹³.

In the instructions given to Moses¹⁴, animals without blemish were to be offered as sacrifice. With the end of those types of sacrifices we are required to offer our souls to God¹⁵. And the manner we ought to make this offer should follow those same ancient symbolic requirements. So, we offer our feelings, our devotion, and our service. Just like in ancient times these must also be without blemish, or in other words, they must be sound, whole, with no defects; we must offer a firm resolution to love and serve the Lord, the best service we can render, using all the capacity and talents we have been blessed with¹⁶.

Righteous Desires and Attentive Service

If our desires are not righteous our offering of the best of our capacity will not be accepted by the Lord¹⁷. Those who received powers and spiritual gifts in the past received those blessings because their desire was to do the will of the Lord, not to satisfy any selfish desire. Such was the case with Nephi¹⁸, three of the Nephite-Lamanite disciples¹⁹, and John, the Beloved Disciple²⁰. We may remember the example of Ammon and his brethren, who preached the gospel but neither to gain a reward nor to simply keep a commandment. They did so because "... they were desirous that salvation should be declared to every creature, for they could not bear that any human soul should perish; yea, even the very thoughts that any soul should endure endless torment did cause them to quake and tremble."²¹

¹¹ A full analysis of the symbols involved in the ancient law of sacrifice is beyond the scope of this study. Many scholars have discussed this subject in detail, and the study guides of the Old Testament published by the Church Educational System have excellent quotes from many of these authors. The Bible Dictionary in the appendix of the LDS edition of the Bible is also a very good source.

¹² 3 Nephi 15:4-5,8-10; 9:18-20

¹³ 3 Nephi 9:20; D&C 64:22,34

¹⁴ Leviticus 1:2-3,10; 2:1,4,11,13

¹⁵ Omni 1:26

¹⁶ Extending this analogy a little further, we would perform this service accompanied with bread made with fine flour (the bread being a symbol of Christ, his law and truth, and the fine flour suggesting to us purity, refinement, and superior quality); a service blended with oil (a symbol of the Holy Spirit or of spiritual strength), salt (a symbol of a covenant of friendship between the Lord and us, and of the preservation of our eternal life through that covenant), frankincense (a symbol of prayer), without leaven (a symbolism for worldly contamination). See Matthew 16:6,12; Matthew 25:1-4,8-9; John 6:35,48-50; Revelation 5:8; 8:3-4; D&C 45:56-57.

¹⁷ D&C 4:2; 137:9

¹⁸ Helaman 10:4-12

¹⁹ 3 Nephi 28:6-10. We don't know whether these brethren were Nephites or Lamanites. Mormon and Moroni call them "three disciples."

²⁰ John 21:20-23; D&C 7

²¹ Mosiah 28:3

The formula to obtain this pure desire resides in having our eyes "single to the glory of God"²² or in other words, in not seek our own glory (praise, promotion, or potential temporal or spiritual rewards), but seek our Heavenly Father's glory²³. We must be particularly careful with those who approach us with flattery²⁴. Those engaged in obeying the will of the Lord don't need to flatter others.

After obtaining this desire we should be extremely attentive. Many times we will be near those who will be screaming for help in a way that we may tend to misunderstand. One of my favorite passages in the New Testament tells how blind Bartimaeus was healed by the Savior. This passage may help us understand the concept of being attentive:

"... as [Jesus] went out of Jericho with his disciples and a great number of people, blind Bartimaeus ... sat by the highway side begging. ... And hearing the multitude pass by, he asked what it meant. ... And when he heard that it was Jesus of Nazareth, he began to cry out, and say, Jesus, Thou son of David, have mercy on me. ... And they which went before rebuked him, that he should hold his peace: but he cried so much the more, Thou son of David, have mercy on me. And Jesus stood still ... and commanded him to be brought unto him: ... And they call the blind man, saying unto him, Be of good comfort, rise; he calleth thee. And he, casting away his garment, rose, and came to Jesus. ... and when he was come near ... Jesus ... asked him ... What wilt thou that I should do unto thee? The blind man said unto him, Lord, that I might receive my sight. And Jesus said unto him, ... Receive thy sight: ... thy faith hath made thee whole. And immediately he received his sight, and followed Jesus in the way ... glorifying God: and all the people, when they saw it, gave praise unto God.²⁵"

Some individuals in need of a "friendly shoulder" sometimes don't look for those who have been assigned as their servant-leaders because they think these leaders are already "too busy." Others may be rejected by unwise servant-leaders because at first glance their conduct (or their appearance or their clothing) seems inappropriate²⁶. Bartimaeus could have lost the opportunity to receive his sight because some individuals seemed to be telling him: "You can't call him 'Jesus'; you must call him 'Lord' or 'Rabbi'." Or perhaps they were saying "What an irreverent man, screaming like a drunkard! The Lord will never answer the call of someone with such a despicable behavior."

These are the times when we must be alert and sensitive. These are the times when we must look beyond the behavior per se and perceive a precious child of God who might be in extreme pain and anguish. Those are the times to use the gifts that belong to the mantle we have received and bring comfort to such individuals. In some cases, a person will need "... the pleasing word of God ... the word which healeth the wounded soul."²⁷ In other cases, a blessing of counsel and comfort, or simply attentive and patient ears.

Many of us we may face tough circumstances that may leave us either a little depressed, or bitter towards others, or perhaps a little doubtful of whether the Lord really answers our prayers. This is the time

²² D&C 4:5; 82:19; 88:67

²³ Moses 1:39

²⁴ See chapter 10 for a short discussion on how to avoid being influenced by flattery.

²⁵ Mark 10:46-52; Luke 18:35-43; brackets added.

²⁶ Matthew 9:10-13; Alma 32:2-5

²⁷ Jacob 2:8

when an alert and sensitive church leader will make all the difference in the world. President Joseph F. Smith, speaking about the responsibilities of the Bishops, taught a lesson that can be extended to all leaders:

"It is expected of a bishop to know all the people in his ward, not only those who are faithful members of the Church, diligent in the performance of their duties and prominent by their good acts, but to know those who are cold and indifferent, those who are lukewarm, those who are inclined to err and to make mistakes; and not only these, but it is expected that the bishops, through their aides in their wards, will become acquainted, not only with their members, male and female, but that they will know also the stranger that is within their gates and be prepared to minister solace, comfort, good counsel, wisdom and every other aid possible to be rendered to those who are in need, whether they are of the household of faith or are strangers to the truth."²⁸

About the Author



Marcus Helvécio Tourinho de Assis Martins is a native of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, and joined The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in July, 1972. In August of 1978 he became the first black member to serve as a full-time missionary for the Church in the 20th century, serving in the Brazil São Paulo North Mission.

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.