

Becoming BYU: An Inaugural Response

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President and Sister Oaks, Elder and Sister Christofferson, Elder and Sister Rasband, Elder and Sister Gilbert, honored guests, and students and colleagues of Brigham Young University: my brothers and sisters, I am humbled and honored by the charge I have received today from the Church Board of Education. The board's invitation to become BYU's fourteenth president was overwhelming, but it has already proved to be a great blessing to our family. My primary qualifications for this sacred stewardship are a willingness to serve, an ability to work, and a desire to learn.

I love BYU and its mission. I love our students. They warm the world with their faith and brighten it with their light. I love my consecrated colleagues—faculty and staff alike—who labor tirelessly to make our inspired mission a reality for our students.

Today I honor the contributions of my thirteen predecessors, each of whom shaped and guided BYU toward its prophetic destiny. I am especially grateful for the mentoring and friendship of Kevin J Worthen, which began almost as soon as

I stepped onto this campus. He is a strength and an example to all of us.

A Christ-Centered, Prophetically Directed University

As we begin this new chapter in the BYU story, we recognize our unique governance. As Elder Ronald A. Rasband quoted earlier from the BYU mission statement, BYU is “founded, supported, and guided by The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.”¹ I am awed by the guidance given to this university by latter-day prophets. At BYU we regularly invoke President Spencer W. Kimball's visionary message “The Second Century of Brigham Young University,”² which articulates a powerful road map for our future. Earlier, in a remarkable companion message from 1967 titled “Education for Eternity,” President Kimball called BYU the greatest institution of learning in all the world.³ That is a soaring aspiration as well as a bold assertion.

More recently, Elder Jeffrey R. Holland taught that BYU will realize President Kimball's vision

C. Shane Reese, president of Brigham Young University, delivered this address at his inauguration on September 19, 2023.

*only to the degree it embraces its uniqueness, its singularity. . . . We must have the will to be different and to stand alone, if necessary, being a university second to none in its role primarily as an undergraduate teaching institution that is unequivocally true to the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ.*⁴

Such commitment to Jesus Christ provides the anchor for our prophetic promise.

Becoming BYU

Our task, I submit, is to claim in our day the prophecies of the past. Our task is to become the university that prophets have foretold—to become the world’s “greatest institution of learning”⁵ and “the fully anointed university of the Lord about which so much has been spoken in the past”⁶ and to become the BYU of prophecy and promise as boldly declared by President Dallin H. Oaks: “It is the destiny of Brigham Young University to become what those prophetic statements predicted it would become.”⁷ This great goal will not be obtained in exactly the same way that other universities have achieved their greatness. This, then, is our challenge during my administration: becoming BYU.

Strengthening the Student Experience

Becoming BYU will require enriching the student experience and strengthening our already student-centric approach. President Worthen helped us focus resolutely on students. He championed inspiring learning both in the classroom and through internships, study abroad programs, and research with faculty mentors.

Each student’s eternal progression must remain our foremost concern. To this end we strive for every student to have an inspiring learning experience. Bolstered by “gospel methodology,”⁸ we frame these experiences by our conviction that each student is a child of God who can be bound to Christ as a child of the covenant.

Retaining a Focus on Undergraduate Teaching

Becoming BYU will also involve increased focus on our primary teaching mission. This focus has been reinforced by recent revisions to our faculty rank and status documents. As these refined

incentives sharpen our focus on student learning, we will qualify for the inspiration needed to better fulfill our scholarship and mentoring missions. Our primary focus on high-quality teaching gains strength as professorial faculty collaborate with professional teaching-track faculty to enhance our students’ experiences.

BYU “Has a Double Heritage”

Becoming BYU will require that we embrace our religious mission even as we speak to the broader academy with credibility and strength.

President Kimball said:

*The uniqueness of Brigham Young University lies in its special role—education for eternity. . . . This means concern . . . for not only the “whole man” but for the “eternal man.” . . . This faculty has a double heritage—the preserving of the knowledge of men and the revealed truths sent from heaven.*⁹

The faculty and staff who foster this double heritage must be bilingual: They must speak with authority about their disciplines in the language of scholarship, and they must speak with power about their Christian discipleship in the language of faith. As we strive to become the BYU of prophecy, we must develop ourselves in things both secular and sacred. When secular and sacred truths reinforce one another, we must embrace both. But when secular claims conflict with revealed truth, we must mark the difference. As we move forward in this great cause of becoming the BYU of prophecy, may we recognize the purpose for our gathering as we work together to build disciple leaders.

Having the Courage to Be Different

Becoming BYU will require at times the courage to stand alone. In this respect our strength lies in our unique role as the flagship university of the Church Educational System in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Like our colleagues at other religious institutions, we exert our strength only to the extent that we embrace and enhance our religious identity. Elder Clark G. Gilbert, commissioner of Church education, emphasized this when he said:

*Religious schools across the country enjoy a huge strategic advantage, but only if they dare to continue with and strengthen their religious identity—only if they dare to be different from their peers.*¹⁰

We must differentiate ourselves within the scope of our university work, not independent of that work. President Kimball affirmed that we must be excellent in both spheres:

*“Education for eternity” is not the kind of phrase one would expect to have carved in the stone of a new secular university; it is not the kind of commitment that would be widely shared in the retreat from real religion we see around us in the world. Yet it is a task for which we do not apologize. Those who do not share this purpose, however, will respect this faculty for its genuine achievements in the world of secular scholarship. The extra missions noted previously do not excuse you from reasonable achievement in your chosen field. You can, in fact, often be more effective in the service you render students if students see you as individuals who have blended successfully things secular and things spiritual in a way that has brought to you earned respect in both realms.*¹¹

The spiritual and the secular are not opposing spheres locked in inevitable conflict. We see them instead as “paired aspirations.”¹²

Building a Covenant Community

Even more crucially, becoming BYU will require us to sharpen our students’ focus on their covenantal belonging, which Elder D. Todd Christofferson taught is distinctly marked by covenantal sacrifice and service to others.¹³ Belonging has to do with our own contributions: “Belonging comes from our service and the sacrifices we make for others and for the Lord.”¹⁴ By emphasizing their covenantal identity, we will naturally help our students to fix their gaze on the holy temple. For BYU to become the temple of learning foretold by prophets, we must rivet our focus on the house of the Lord. Fittingly, the Provo temple will be rebuilt and rededicated as an ultimate house of learning right when we are honoring our university sesquicentennial. As we build our university foundations on the rock of our Redeemer, and as

we point our students toward the house of the Lord, we will qualify for heaven’s help. This will be part of what is “left undone”¹⁵ at other institutions of higher education. The covenants formed within the walls of the Lord’s house are central to the gospel methodology that will preserve our uniqueness.

Investing in Mission-Inspired Scholarship

Becoming BYU will also require investing limited resources on strategic research initiatives. Our standard faculty contracts include some support for research, which allows faculty to pursue topics that advance their individual disciplines. Such research makes university life vibrant and refreshing as we deepen understanding of existing processes and discover new ones.

But in light of our Christ-centered mission, we should also support research that advances the Church’s purposes and blesses our Heavenly Father’s children directly. This will include strategic investments in areas in which we have natural strengths as a church and as a university, furthering recent efforts regarding the family, religion’s role in human flourishing, and constitutional government—each of which is rooted in Church doctrine and is strategically aligned with the Church’s global mission. Anchoring our work in prophetic priorities and making our scholarly resources available to the Church will amplify our scholarship and anchor it in gospel methodology. As we embrace our unique identity and strive to become the BYU of prophecy, we will invest in other areas in which we have similar doctrinal roots and natural strengths. We have recently seen a campus-wide upswell in research focused on poverty—its assessment, causes, and remedies. Other areas of natural strength might include peacemaking and education, among others. Becoming BYU will require us to strategically elevate mission-critical scholarship informed by revealed doctrine.

Focusing on Mission-Aligned Hiring

I repeat today what has been said by my predecessor: “The most important decisions that will be made in my tenure as president at BYU are the people we hire.”¹⁶ This starts with our faculty.

Faculty hiring decisions are paramount because they strengthen the greatest resource we have. These are the people we look to for examples of mentoring: people who model the successful integration of the life of the mind and the life of faith. These are the people who the Church, the academy, and the world look to for examples of faithful disciples who combine professional excellence with deep and abiding testimonies of the restored gospel of Jesus Christ. These are the people who help us to understand that the teachings and love of Jesus Christ cannot be separated from His restored Church. These are the people who anchor their lives on the teachings of prophets, seers, and revelators to help us become BYU.

As the president of BYU, I pledge my whole soul to helping us become BYU. But this personal investment will come from the entire campus community as we lean in together to recruit, hire, and develop faculty who can lead this institution to its prophetic potential.

Becoming BYU Requires Individual Reflection and Spiritual Growth from All of Us

Becoming BYU will require personal introspection. Fulfilling this challenge cannot come solely from the university administration. It will require broad-based leadership from our entire campus community. It will require each of us to regularly assess our progress in becoming BYU. In that spirit, let us look at these questions:

- Is the mission of BYU changing me or am I trying to change the mission of BYU?
- What might be preventing me from not only combining meekness with academic excellence but also cultivating meekness in a way that enhances my academic contributions through greater access to inspiration and deeper engagement with “gospel methodology, concepts, and insights”?¹⁷
- Becoming BYU will require that we have the humility to ask what we need to change and the meekness to ask, “What lack I yet?”

Becoming BYU further entails renewed emphasis on long-standing objectives. For all who enter

our doors, “a BYU education should be (1) spiritually strengthening, (2) intellectually enlarging, and (3) character building, leading to (4) lifelong learning and service.”¹⁸ This involves myriad experiences, from active participation in wards and stakes—where spiritual and social welfare is strengthened—to thrilling activities that build our students socially and emotionally and to engaged and energetic learning both inside and outside the classroom.

The Second Half of the Second Century

This is a critical time in the history of Brigham Young University. Unfortunately we work against a societal backdrop in which discussion and dialogue are being replaced by contention and monologue. President Kimball implored us to employ gospel methodology, which will not only distinguish us from other universities but also shape how we learn and improve as a community. As we embrace our unique institutional identity, we will foster at BYU a unique learning environment that will empower us to be peacemakers in an ever more divisive society. Understanding our primary identities as children of God, children of the covenant, and disciples of Jesus Christ¹⁹ will permit us to ask questions and seek answers in ways that view the world and our disciplines through the lens of the restored gospel of Jesus Christ rather than through our disciplinary lens, which offers a vision-limiting view of the gospel.

I know that Jesus is the Christ, that He is our Savior, and that He loves each of us completely, infinitely, and perfectly—even in our imperfections. It is through His atoning sacrifice that we can change and become more tomorrow than we are today. I know that all that is unfair in this life will be made right through His infinite Atonement. As I enter upon this new responsibility, I pray for the joy and peace that come by making and keeping sacred covenants and that come through His mercy and grace. We are blessed by prophets, seers, and revelators who lead and guide this Church and this university. The gospel has been restored on the earth today, and BYU is part of that ongoing and miraculous restoration. I so testify in the sacred name of Jesus Christ, amen.

Notes

1. The Mission of Brigham Young University (4 November 1981); quoted by Ronald A. Rasband, "For Such a Time as This," address given at the inauguration of C. Shane Reese as BYU president, 19 September 2023.
2. See Spencer W. Kimball, "The Second Century of Brigham Young University," BYU devotional address, 10 October 1975.
3. See Spencer W. Kimball, "Education for Eternity," address to BYU faculty and staff, 12 September 1967.
4. Jeffrey R. Holland, "The Second Half of the Second Century of Brigham Young University," BYU university conference address, 23 August 2021; emphasis in original.
5. Kimball, "Education for Eternity."
6. Kimball, "Second Century."
7. Dallin H. Oaks, "Challenges to the Mission of Brigham Young University," BYU leadership conference address, 21 April 2017; quoting his own words from "It Hasn't Been Easy and It Won't Get Easier," BYU leadership conference address, 25 August 2014.
8. Kimball, "Second Century."
9. Kimball, "Education for Eternity."
10. Clark G. Gilbert, "Dare to Be Different," *Deseret News*, 14 September 2022.
11. Kimball, "Education for Eternity."
12. See James R. Rasband, "Paired Aspirations," BYU university conference faculty session address, 28 August 2017; see also Kevin J Worthen, "BYU: A Unique Kind of Education," BYU university conference address, 28 August 2017.
13. See D. Todd Christofferson, "The Doctrine of Belonging," *Liahona*, November 2022.
14. Christofferson, "The Doctrine of Belonging."
15. Kimball, "Second Century."
16. Kevin J Worthen, quoted in C. Shane Reese, "On the Uniqueness of BYU," BYU university conference faculty session address, 23 August 2021.
17. Kimball, "Second Century."
18. The Aims of a BYU Education (1 March 1995).
19. See Russell M. Nelson, "Choices for Eternity," worldwide devotional for young adults, 15 May 2022. See also Nelson, "Children of the Covenant," *Ensign*, May 1995; Nelson, "Covenants," *Ensign*, November 2011.