

The Testament of Bruce R. McConkie

JOHN K. CARMACK

For where a testament is, there must also of necessity be the death of the testator.

For a testament is of force after men are dead: otherwise it is of no strength at all while the testator liveth. [Hebrews 9:16, 17]

Elder Bruce R. McConkie's life was a testament, which is to say his life was an expression of his conviction of Christ as well as a tangible proof of the reality of Christ. Rarely has a man's life been so completely intertwined with his powerful message that his death, though natural, almost seemed to seal that testimony with his blood. The testator is dead. His testament will become even more powerful in the years to come.

Elder McConkie's life seemed so welded to Christ that one would expect that He was there to welcome him with the words, "Bruce, Bruce, not once were you ashamed of me, not once! Enter thou into my rest."

Wherefore, holy brethren, partakers of the heavenly calling, consider the Apostle and High Priest of our profession, Christ Jesus;

Who was faithful to him that appointed him, as also Moses was faithful in all his house.

For this man was counted worthy of more glory than Moses, inasmuch as he who hath builded the house hath more honour than the house.

For every house is builded by some man; but he that built all things is God.

And Moses verily was faithful in all his house, as a servant, for a testimony of those things which were to be spoken after;

But Christ as a son over his own house; whose house are we, if we hold fast the confidence and the rejoicing of the hope firm unto the end. [Hebrews 3:1–6]

As Moses was faithful in his house, and his life of faithfulness became a testimony to Christ, so has Elder McConkie been faithful in his house and has held fast the confidence and rejoicing of the hope firm unto the end.

I believe with all my heart that Elder McConkie stepped from his own bed at home

John K. Carmack was a member of the First Quorum of the Seventy of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints when this fireside address was given at Brigham Young University on 5 May 1985.

with his family, who at his request on his deathbed prayed for his release the very moment he passed to the other world, into the mansion of Jesus Christ in a glory and peace which passeth all understanding.

But he left with us his ringing testimony and his firm example which we should never forget. May I tonight capsulize and recall to our minds the keys of that testimony. Our loss is the gain of another and holier sphere.

*Oh strong soul, by what shore
Tarriest thou now? For that force,
Surely, has not been left vain!
Somewhere, surely, afar,
In the sounding labor-house vast
Of being, is practised that strength.*
[Parley A. Christensen, *All in a Teacher's Day*
(Salt Lake City: Stevens and Wallis, Inc., 1948),
p. 251]

Our loss will be the less if we remember and do as he taught by precept and practice. These remarks are dedicated to the proposition that a grateful church will not forget.

"I Want to Be Worthy of Rest"

I remember this conversation between a fictitious father and son from Potok's *The Chosen*.

*"Reuven, do you know what the rabbis tell us
God said to Moses when he was about to die?"
I stared at him. "No," I heard myself say.
"He said to Moses, 'You have toiled and labored,
now you are worthy of rest.'"
I stared at him and didn't say anything.
"You are no longer a child, Reuven," my father
went on. "It is almost possible to see the way your
mind is growing. And your heart, too. Inductive
logic, Freud, experimental psychology, mathematizing
hypotheses, scientific study of the Talmud.
Three years ago, you were still a child. You have
become a small giant since the day Danny's ball
struck your eye. You do not see it. But I see it. And
it is a beautiful thing to see. So listen to what I am*

*going to tell you. " He paused for a moment, as if
considering his next words carefully, then contin-
ued. "Human beings do not live forever, Reuven.
We live less than the time it takes to blink an eye, if
we measure our lives against eternity. So it may be
asked what value is there to a human life. There is
so much pain in the world. What does it mean to
have to suffer so much if our lives are nothing more
than the blink of an eye?" He paused again, his eyes
misty now, then went on. "I learned a long time
ago, Reuven, that a blink of an eye in itself is noth-
ing. But the eye that blinks, that is something. A
span of life is nothing. But the man who lives that
span, he is something. He can fill that time span
with meaning, so its quality is immeasurable
though its quantity may be insignificant. Do you
understand what I am saying? A man must fill his
life with meaning, meaning is not automatically
given to life. It is hard work to fill one's life with
meaning. That I do not think you understand yet.
A life filled with meaning is worthy of rest. I want
to be worthy of rest when I am no longer here.
Do you understand what I am saying?" [Chaim
Potok, *The Chosen* (New York: Simon and
Schuster, 1967), pp. 216–17]*

Elder McConkie's life was filled with mean-
ing. Years of toil late into the night and in the
early morning hours filled it with meaning.

What was that meaning? It will be a per-
sonal or individual meaning for all who knew
him either in person or through the written or
spoken word. But for me, that meaning will
now be summarized. If you will make a note of
my major points, I will teach you an interesting
point by my method of presentation.

Bruce R. McConkie, The Testator

First, he traveled the full length of the path
of his mortal life giving his all to the Lord, and
thus he taught us what it means to truly
endure to the end.

Once he wrote,

To gain the promised inheritance in the celestial world it is necessary to travel the length of the path, a course of travel which consists in obedience to the laws and principles of the gospel. This process is called enduring to the end, meaning the end of mortal life. [MD, p. 228]

Elder McConkie and Elder Haight were assigned to the twelve-stake conference in Santa Barbara, California. We met to plan the conference in Elder Haight's office. I was the junior member of the team. Elder McConkie's only request was that we do what would be most convenient for the people of the twelve stakes. So we planned two four-hour leadership meetings on Saturday, one in Chatsworth and one in Santa Barbara, one hundred miles away. Sunday would find us doing two two-hour meetings on the University of California, Santa Barbara, campus. We would return the one hundred miles to Los Angeles and arrive home about midnight. Elder Haight, ever solicitous of Elder McConkie, protested, but bowed to the senior apostle.

I saw him that week in the General Authority dining room. "John, let's go preach the gospel," he said with obvious enthusiasm. He anticipated the chance to once more teach and exhort the Saints.

On the Friday night before the conference, Shirley and I met Bruce and Amelia McConkie and David Haight at the Burbank airport. Elder McConkie was completely exhausted. He had just had his chemotherapy shot. (Incidentally, Sister McConkie says that his doctor, who was not a member of the Church, did not quite know how to take Bruce. She said he would walk in on Friday for his shot, roll up his sleeve, and say, "Seven more days of life, Doc!")

After we met at the airport that night, Elder McConkie went straight to bed without dinner. Over dinner, Amelia shared with us his cooperative disdain for the illness which was obviously consuming him. I think it was she

that bore the brunt of his pending date with the Savior. For him, this is the way he would describe it, "It makes not a particle of difference whether I preach the gospel here or in the world to come. I will preach the gospel."

Many felt he was never more powerful than he was at that conference, nor was there a finer regional conference than that on Saturday and Sunday in Chatsworth and Santa Barbara. He was back where his father Oscar McConkie had presided in such power, which I remember well because I was one of the young people who was greatly influenced by his father. The stake president in Santa Barbara, Gerald Haws, was one he had installed, and Jerry's father had been a district president in the same area serving with Oscar McConkie.

Experiencing some difficulty with the sound on Sunday, he grasped the microphone on the podium and pulled it close to his mouth. "I didn't come all this way not to be heard," he announced. Everyone heard and everyone understood his message of salvation.

We drove back to Los Angeles and awaited the late arrival of our flight to Salt Lake City. In the airport many recognized him and Elder Haight and spoke to both of them. He could travel to no location in the world without being recognized. He and all of the rest of us were tired as we arrived in Salt Lake City at midnight.

On Tuesday following that exhausting weekend, I saw him at the office. "How are you feeling?" I asked. He jumped instantly into the air, clicked his heels, and exclaimed, "Great!"

You saw and heard him at general conference. You saw a man as close to having one foot on the earth and another in paradise as you are likely to see. Once more he raised his voice to proclaim his testimony of and allegiance to Jesus the Christ. Soon he would join his Savior, but he must endure to the end. This he did with courage and power beyond anything I have witnessed. He never returned to his ministry after that talk.

A man who endures to the end is worthy of rest. Elder McConkie has earned a great respite from the battles of mortality. But he loved every minute of his term here. What lessons he taught us by both precept and example!

Second, as a latter-day apostle with authority and power from on high, he spoke as one having authority and not as the scribes.

Matthew told us that the people who heard Jesus were astonished, “For he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes” (Matthew 7:29).

The scribes or lawyers of Jesus’ day never taught on their own authority, but on the authority of ancient wise men.

Using the power of the holy priesthood and the office of apostleship, Elder McConkie raised a powerful authoritative voice from countless pulpits wherever his worldwide travels took him.

While Elder McConkie was on assignment to change the stake presidency during Christmas of 1983, I was the mission president visiting that stake conference. I introduced him to my traveling companion, Pastor Wally Cooper, an ordained Baptist minister in Ammon, Idaho. On Sunday after conference, Elder McConkie greeted Pastor Cooper and me with these words: “Pastor Cooper, why don’t you be baptized by a legal administrator?” Pastor Cooper replied, “That is a good idea.” Elder McConkie continued. Sticking his finger in my chest, he said, “Why don’t you let President Carmack, who is a legal administrator, baptize you?” Then, turning to me, he said, “Can’t you find a font open somewhere today, John?”

I think some of our missionaries here today could quote verbatim his talk to new mission presidents. “The Lord wants convert baptisms. The Lord wants people to join his Church.”

His voice was one of authority, knowledge, and power, a powerful special witness of Christ. “For if the trumpet give an uncertain sound, who shall prepare himself to the battle?”

(1 Corinthians 14:8). The trumpet of Elder McConkie had a certain sound.

As a young missionary in Montana in 1952, I remember his word’s spoken as a touring General Authority as clearly as though it was yesterday. “A missionary day starts at 6:00 a.m. And if you don’t get up by training and habit and practice, you get an alarm clock and set it at six o’clock, and when it goes off you turn it off and get up.” One could not misunderstand this man.

During a meeting of the Butte District priesthood leaders, which he held as part of that mission tour, he opened the meeting for questions. Young Russell Taylor, now a General Authority, was the resident gospel expert and scripturalist in Butte. He asked Elder McConkie how Joseph and Oliver could be elders *in the Church* since they were ordained by Peter, James, and John *before* the Church was organized in 1829, the Church not being organized until April 6, 1830. Elder McConkie answered, “Well, they presented them to the Saints after the Church was organized and ordained them again as elders in the Church. Next question?”

Elder Taylor persisted, “That sounds logical, Elder McConkie, but what is your authority?” “Well, you can quote me. Next question?”

Yes, firm and unshakable as the mountains around us, stalwart and brave he stood. He spoke as one with authority, certain of the ground he stood on.

Yet, on one occasion, he stated an opinion which was found not to be true concerning the time the priesthood would be extended to all men. His answer was simply, “I was wrong.” A prophet may have a wrong opinion and a man of God with great confidence in his place in life simply admits it, quickly and firmly, and moves on unruffled and secure.

He spoke as one having authority.

Third, and of highest importance, his central message was of Christ, His center~stage place in the universe and His atoning sacrifice.

He summarized:

Nothing in the entire plan of salvation compares in any way in importance with that most transcendent of all events, the atoning sacrifice of our Lord. It is the most important single thing that has ever occurred in the entire history of created things; it is the rock foundation upon which the gospel and all other things rest. Indeed, all "things which pertain to our religion are only appendages to it." [MD, p. 60]

He staked out his position on Christ and his mission. He made it central and returned to this theme over and over. When I was a missionary, he spent two weeks with Sister McConkie touring our mission. He gave over twenty major sermons, each over an hour in length and none on the same subject. Not a note was in sight. Over and over he turned to Christ and aspects of His ministry.

Truly, the testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy (see Revelation 19:10). If John was correct in his declaration of the spirit of prophecy, the theme of Christ in Elder McConkie's ministry was evidence that he was one of the Lord's prophets.

After years of service as a General Authority, he became an apostle. In his own words he declared: "Since the Lord laid his hands upon me, on October 12, 1972, by the hands of his servant, President Harold B. Lee, and ordained me to the holy apostleship, I have had but one desire—to testify of our Lord's divine Sonship and to teach, in purity and perfection, the truths of his everlasting gospel" (*The Promised Messiah*, [Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1978], Preface).

How did he ever find time to be a busy member of the Council of the Twelve and also write those six large volumes on the life and ministry of Christ! Undoubtedly, early morning and late night lamps burned brightly in his study. The Spirit rested upon him as he wrote and testified of Christ.

Who in Idaho Falls could ever forget his hour sermon on the doctrine of Christmas delivered in December of 1983. His emotions were tied to Christ. On this subject he, a man of great control, was tender. To his last breath he testified of Him.

Fourth, the power and authority of the latter-day gospel restoration was closely tied to the Book of Mormon as a second witness of Christ and the keystone of religion in the dispensation of the fulness of times.

How often he returned to Joseph Smith's diary statement that the Book of Mormon was the "keystone of our religion" and that we would "get nearer to God by abiding its precepts, than by any other book" (*HC*, vol. 4, p. 461).

He loved to cite the Lord's revelation to Joseph Smith in which the Lord told Joseph that "this generation shall have my word through you" (D&C 5:10). The Book of Mormon, then, would be our great source of knowledge and power during this great gospel dispensation.

Another favorite citation of Elder McConkie's was the advice of the Lord that "the elders, priests and teachers of this church shall teach the principles of my gospel, which are in the Bible and the Book of Mormon, in the which is the fulness of the gospel" (D&C 42:12).

Elder McConkie was a master of the scriptures—all of them. But he saw the Book of Mormon as our keystone scripture because it was held back and sent to us to restore the fullness of gospel truths lost in the Bible through a history of centuries and centuries of carelessness. He loved the Bible, but the Book of Mormon was crucial to religious understanding in our day.

He explained:

Almost all of the doctrines of the gospel are taught in the Book of Mormon with much greater clarity and perfection than those same doctrines are revealed in the Bible. Anyone who will place in

parallel columns the teachings of these two great books on such subjects as the atonement, plan of salvation, gathering of Israel, baptism, gifts of the Spirit, miracles, revelation, faith, charity, (or any of a hundred other subjects), will find conclusive proof of the superiority of the Book of Mormon teachings. [MD, p. 99]

Fifth, as an expression of his confidence in the Church, and as a seer whose words light the pathway we must travel as we endure to the end of that path, Elder McConkie saw the road ahead and the kingdom as a moving caravan triumphantly moving to its destiny.

In October conference of 1984, Elder McConkie spoke in an eloquence worthy of a great latter-day seer:

The Church is like a great caravan—organized, prepared, following an appointed course, with its captains of tens and captains of hundreds all in place.

What does it matter if a few barking dogs snap at the heels of the weary travellers? Or that predators claim those few who fall by the way? The caravan moves on.

Is there a ravine to cross, a miry mud hole to pull through, a steep grade to climb? So be it. The oxen are strong and the teamsters wise. The caravan moves on.

Are there storms that rage along the way, floods that wash away the bridges, deserts to cross, and rivers to ford? Such is life in this fallen sphere. The caravan moves on.

*Ahead is the celestial city, the eternal Zion of our God, where all who maintain their position in the caravan shall find food and drink and rest. Thank God that the caravan moves on! [Bruce R. McConkie, “The Caravan Moves On,” *Ensign*, Nov. 1984, p. 85]*

Here is a torch to light the way of the weary traveler who must endure to the end.

Summary

Now, I promised to teach the diligent among you an interesting point by the order and substance of my presentation on the testament of Bruce R. McConkie.

My summary in brief was:

1. We must follow the path to the very end and thus endure to the end.
2. As a latter-day apostle with power and authority from on high, Elder McConkie spoke as one having authority.
3. His central message was of Christ and His atoning sacrifice, which belonged in center stage.
4. The latter-day restoration of the gospel rests on the special and unique authority and power of the Book of Mormon, the keystone of religion in this great gospel dispensation.
5. The pathway we must travel to endure to the end was lighted by his seership as he likened our journey and the special role of the Church to a caravan which will reach its glorious destination despite trials on the way.

If you will think about it you will see that I have roughly used the ancient form of literary structure known as *chiasmus* or an “inverted type of parallelism” (John W. Welch, “Chiasmus in the Book of Mormon,” in *Book of Mormon Authorship: New Light on Ancient Origins*, ed. Noel B. Reynolds, vol. 7, *Religious Studies Monograph Series* [Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, BYU, 1982], p. 35).

There are five parts to the organization. First and fifth are repeats of the theme of enduring to the end. Second and fourth are repeats of the theme of authority and power in the latter-day dispensation of the gospel. In the center is Elder McConkie’s central theme of Christ.

So, I have emphasized the central theme by placing it in the center. I have emphasized other major points by repeating them in inverse order. This enables me to dramatize my points and also share with you the provocative and

stunning findings of John Welch, Noel Reynolds, and others that this ancient literary form, used so extensively in the Bible (for example, Isaiah 55:8) is found by recent studies to be used abundantly in the Book of Mormon. This book is becoming more powerful as the years of study bear fruit. Elder McConkie loved the book and read it over and over during his life.

Finally, there is the rest of the story. Here was a man who was serious, even sometimes stern, and always a commanding person in public, but the easiest of humans to work with privately. When a knotty problem arose in a difficult committee assignment at Church headquarters, it was often said, "Let's take it to Bruce. We can find out if we're on the right track without any risk of criticism."

He was the possessor, as humble men often are, of immense goodwill and a marvelous sense of humor.

I remember well in American Falls, Idaho, in stake conference just as the general session was beginning, he spotted me way up in the back on the stand with my elders. He walked over to me and said, "John, it's good to see you in church."

In Los Angeles many years ago, while speaking to the single adults, he put his size fifteen shoes on the railing of the Hollywood Ward and said, "I used to be the tallest General Authority, but now the only thing I have to commend me is that I have the largest feet of all the Brethren."

The stories got around our mission of his distracting the attention of Sister McConkie during meals while he stole a bit of her dessert. She told the missionaries, "I think sometimes the only reason Bruce married me was so he could talk to Dad." (Her father was Joseph Fielding Smith.) "When we went to see Dad, he and Bruce were soon in the study deep in discussion about the gospel."

After his last speech to the fifteen-stake fire-side at BYU, which was as always profound

and great, he said to Elder Haight and me, "That was the worst talk I ever gave. I talked about things which the students were not interested in."

Conclusion

Well, such is my personal glimpse of the man, Bruce R. McConkie. I haven't seen his equal, except perhaps in his children and in his father and father-in-law.

I propose that we assembled here tonight resolve that:

1. We will endure well in our mortal probation and serve our fellowmen faithfully and in humility and good cheer to the very end of our lives.

2. We will seek to know and magnify our callings so we may speak as one having authority and not as the scribes.

3. At the very center of our lives will be the testimony of Christ. When our burdens become unbearable, let us go to Him for succor.

4. We will rely on the authority, knowledge, and testimony of the great keystone scripture, the Book of Mormon, to gain the plain and simple truths of the fulness of the gospel.

5. We will see the caravan of the kingdom moving forward and lighting the pathway we must take as we endure to the end.

And, finally, that we will keep our personal lives full of simplicity, love, and good humor.

The testator is dead and the testament of Bruce R. McConkie is in force.

On my flight from the Bay Area to San Bernardino the day after his death, I wrote these words:

Elder Bruce R. McConkie is gone.

The loftiest tree in the forest has fallen, leaving us bereft of its shade.

A powerful voice, undiminished by the ravages of pernicious disease, has spoken its last great sermon, testifying one final unforgettable time of Jesus the Christ.

*An era of leadership under Spencer W. Kimball,
N. Eldon Tanner, Marion G. Romney, and
Bruce R. McConkie is fast drawing to a
conclusion.*

We are bereft of our great ones.

*But hearken, and see—mighty leaders are
among us and will arise; and lo*

*Elder McConkie’s measured cadence is heard, even
now, with our spiritual ears, among the
departed spirits.*

*There remain thousands of his pages to read, ponder,
and understand,*

*As we read, we hear his voice of authority and
power testifying of what he knows,*

*He counsels us that we should know, worship, and
obey.*

*His example of courage, scholarship, and simplicity
yet lights our path.*

*Unpublished manuscripts await us, testifying of
God’s mercy in sparing him for a season.*

*The limitless good of his ministry rolls onward,
washing distant shores as the waves of a deep
eternal sea.*

*Father, God, we thank thee that we shared mortality
with such as he.*

*Through him we learned to distinguish truth and
error.*

*By him we were raised in mind and spirit to rever-
ence thy Son.*

*In his humble example, we have been encouraged to
establish homes and raise families where love
and gospel truths rule in natural simplicity.*

*The picture is incomplete without his Amelia, “an
help meet for him” (Genesis 2:18, Moses 3:18).*

We are indeed bereft,

*But we are ennobled, exalted, and edified by our
friend, brother, and leader.*

*“Oh give thanks unto the God of Heaven: for his
mercy endureth forever!” (Psalms 136:26).*

I say this in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.