

“Listen Together”

HENRY B. EYRING

I am grateful for the opportunity to be with you tonight, and I pray that the Holy Spirit may help us learn something about listening. I believe the Savior was speaking to you and me in the very first verse of the Doctrine and Covenants. It reads:

Hearken, O ye people of my church, saith the voice of him who dwells on high, and whose eyes are upon all men; yea, verily I say: Hearken ye people from afar; and ye that are upon the islands of the sea, listen together.

Let me tell you something about the opportunity you will have in the next few weeks to learn how to “listen together.”

“By the Mouths of My Disciples”

Your stake presidencies and bishops are organizing their wards and stakes. I am not sure where you are in the process in your ward. I imagine the elders quorum president and the Relief Society president have been called. Perhaps some counselors have been called, and maybe some teachers. I hope some teachers have been called because next week there will be some classes that will need to be taught, and it will help if the people who will teach know about it now.

If I can read your hearts, this is a time of testing. Some of you are disappointed that you were not called. A few will be glad you were not called. Some of you maybe sad that you were overlooked again. And some of you are wondering about a person who was called whose weaknesses you know. Perhaps someone was called—someone you now must follow—whom you do not admire, or perhaps don’t even like.

I bear you two testimonies that I pray the Spirit will confirm to you. First, God directs those who issue calls to even the apparently minor offices in the Church. And, equally important, God honors and respects those calls to his servants by using them to serve you.

Most of you believe that, and yet you still have a challenge. I have one, too. I have had experiences where even after I had a clear spiritual conviction that a person had been called to lead me or to teach me, it was still hard to really listen to them. You may think, “If only I were in a higher calling, then I wouldn’t have

Henry B. Eyring was First Counselor in the Presiding Bishopric of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints when this fireside address was given at Brigham Young University on 4 September 1988.

to worry about getting my instructions from anyone else.” But you know that is not true.

Every Sunday your bishop, for instance, makes a choice whether he will hold some meetings or some interviews or go to a Sunday School class. Teaching that Sunday School class will be someone whose weaknesses he knows and who likely will not have prayed and studied and struggled and served as much as the bishop has in the past week. But the bishop will go. And he, like you, will need to know how to listen.

A few may wonder about the requirement to listen to other people and ask, “Why do I have to get my directing and teaching from somebody else? Why can’t I go to God for myself and get my own revelation? Why can’t I have the Holy Ghost inspire me? Why does every call to lead, in fact, call others to listen? Why are we all, therefore, called to listen? Why should even a prophet have a home teacher?”

I don’t know all the answers, but this much I do know: The revelations of God make it clear that his voice will sound to all people. We are told that in the fourth verse of the first section of the Doctrine and Covenants. It says this: “And the voice of warning shall be unto all people.” That voice, of course, is the voice of God. Verse 2 says, “For verily the voice of the Lord is unto all men” (D&C 1:2). But in verse 4 when it says “the voice of warning shall be unto all people,” it concludes with “by the mouths of my disciples, whom I have chosen in these last days.”

More than once the Lord simply says you will need to hear his voice, but you will need to hear his voice from him and from his servants. In verse 14 it says:

And the arm of the Lord shall be revealed; and the day cometh that they who will not hear the voice of the Lord, neither the voice of his servants, neither give heed to the words of the prophets and apostles, shall be cut off from among people.

I know a few of the reasons why the Lord requires us to listen to mortal servants. One of the reasons is that you and I need a check on our own inspiration occasionally. We can be mistaken. We at times, even with real intent and with faith and with careful prayer, may come to wrong conclusions. Listening to others can provide correction. It can promote more careful consideration. I hope you will always remember that there is safety in counsel.

I can think of another reason why we are blessed to be required to be taught by other human beings. For me, that is made clear in the first section of the Doctrine and Covenants, verse 23, which says: “That the fullness of my gospel might be proclaimed by the weak and the simple unto the ends of the world, and before kings and rulers.”

Now why in the world would the weak and the simple be sent to kings and rulers? You and I sometimes feel that we are wise and we know a good deal. We have increasing experience. So why should a Sunday School teacher who seems to us weak and simple and less experienced be called by inspiration to teach us?

One reason is that it requires humility on our part. It requires a humble heart to believe that you can be taught by someone who apparently knows a good deal less than you do, and perhaps seems less likely to get revelation.

When I was the president of Ricks College years ago, I remember having a man who was my priesthood leader come to my house each month to interview me about my home teaching. He brought with him a gray notebook in which he wrote notes. He recorded not only my report as a home teacher, but my observations about the gospel and life as well.

I remember at first being very flattered. Then one Sunday he and I were visiting what was then called junior Sunday School. He was a few rows in front of me. The speaker was a little girl, no more than six or seven, probably not yet old enough to have the gift of the Holy Ghost. I glanced over at the man and noticed

with surprise that he had that same gray notebook open. As the little girl spoke, he was writing with as much speed and intensity as he had in the study of my home. I learned a lesson from him that I haven't forgotten. He had faith that God could speak to him as clearly through a child as through the president of a college.

I watched that man in later months and years deal with great difficulties and with important assignments. I saw miracles—at least to me they seemed to be miracles—in his wisdom and in his ability to lead and to direct. Those miracles came, I believe in large part, because he could hear the voice of God confirmed by the Holy Spirit in words of the weak and the simple.

If you and I are going to live up to the glorious promises of the first section of the Doctrine and Covenants, I think we will have to learn how to have the everyday faith of my friend with the gray notebook. You remember verses 20 through 22 of the first section of the Doctrine and Covenants:

*But that every man might speak in the name of God the Lord, even the Savior of the world;
That faith also might increase in the earth;
That mine everlasting covenant might be established.*

You have often heard verse 38 quoted. It is the next to the last verse in the section. It is the way the Lord chooses to end his preface to his Doctrine and Covenants. He says:

What I the Lord have spoken, I have spoken, and I excuse not myself; and though the heavens and the earth pass away, my word shall not pass away, but shall all be fulfilled, whether by mine own voice or by the voice of my servants, it is the same.

Clearly, my problem and your problem is to hear the word of God from and through imperfect teachers and leaders. That is your test and mine. And it is our opportunity. All of us—

today, next week, and for the rest of our lives—are going to be sitting somewhere while someone leads us or teaches us who will seem weak and simple because they are human, like us. God has said that if we are going to make it home again, we must not only hear his voice privately by our own effort, but also through the voice of his servants who, when they speak by the power of the Spirit, speak as if it were his voice.

Now the practical question is, how can we do it? Next week, for instance, you will go into a class where someone will teach you. They will look a little afraid and be imperfectly prepared, no matter how hard they have worked. You will have the challenge not simply to be attentive, but to listen the way my friend with the gray notebook did. He could hear the voice of God in the words of a child.

Our problem is to have the Spirit confirm to us the truth of the words of our leader or teacher just as it has, for instance, confirmed the words we have read in the Book of Mormon. Most of you, I would hope, have read in the Book of Mormon and have felt something in your heart or in your mind that told you it was true. I bear you my testimony that that is the voice of the Spirit speaking to you. Our pride is less likely to be aroused when we open the book than when a stranger or the fellow from the next apartment begins to speak. Nevertheless, whatever method works when we study alone should work as well when we listen together.

The Guidance of the Spirit

To me, the best directions of how to get the help of the Holy Ghost (directions that I have tested and know to be true) were given by President Marion G. Romney. If you will listen carefully, I will give you his instructions in his own words. Then together let us see if we can figure out how we can work to prepare for that Sunday School teacher or quorum leader or

sacrament meeting speaker to whom we will listen next week.

Here are President Romney's instructions:

If you want to obtain and keep the guidance of the Spirit, you can do so by following this simple four-point program.

One, pray. Pray diligently. Pray with each other. Pray in public in the proper places. . . .

Learn to talk to the Lord; call upon his name in great faith and confidence.

Second, study and learn the gospel.

Third, live righteously; repent of your sins by confessing them and forsaking them. Then conform to the teachings of the gospel.

Fourth, give service in the Church.

And then President Romney concludes this way:

*If you will do these things, you will get the guidance of the Holy Spirit and you will go through this world successfully, regardless of what the people of the world say or do. ["Guidance of the Holy Spirit," *Ensign*, January 1980, p. 5]*

That four-point program makes no distinction between the moments we seek the Spirit when we are alone in our scripture reading and those moments when we are listening to a human being. I bear testimony that it works in both settings. It takes some extra effort sometimes when the words come from people instead of from the gilt-edged pages of scripture with which you have had long and sacred experience, but it can be done. Let us see how we might make that effort. In fact, we can decide together how we might start to do it tonight.

Pray Diligently

You remember President Romney began by saying: "Pray. Pray diligently. Pray with each other. Pray in public in the proper places. . . .

Learn to talk to the Lord; call upon his name in great faith and confidence."

You might (and I assure you I will) find a moment tonight to get in the proper place, perhaps alone, where you can pour out your heart. Among the things you will pray about, you might ask for a blessing on those who will teach you next Sunday—I promise you that I will. Try to visualize where you will be and who will teach you.

Next Sunday I am going to be sitting in a stake conference on one of the islands of the sea. Some of you know in a stake conference how it works. The visiting authority does a lot of listening. I will speak at the end of each meeting that I am in, but the rest of the time I will be listening. I will hear those people speak and their words will be translated for me. It is likely that the speakers will not have had as much education as I have had, nor have seen as many things as I have seen, nor have been taught as often as I have been taught by the prophets. But tonight I will pray for them. I don't know all their names. I haven't seen the full program yet, but I am sure they have been told who they are. They may be frightened, and they may be preparing right now. I will pray for them tonight with faith and with confidence. I will talk to God about them and tell him how much I desire for him to teach me through them. And I will promise tonight that, as I give my concluding talks, I will bear testimony of that which I have heard that I know is true. I will tell you now that I will be taught things that neither education nor the previous teaching I have received has ever provided me. From those humble, simple people I will be taught things that I will be able to bear testimony of.

You may not know who your Sunday School teacher or quorum teacher of Relief Society teacher will be next week, but you can do the same thing. You can pray specifically that the Holy Ghost will come to them as they

prepare to teach, and then come again as you sit at their feet to listen next week.

I am not sure I understand how this works, but I know it works. Last Monday night I was preparing to come here. I felt some impressions of something I was supposed to teach you. They came with more than the normal intellectual force. In fact, I felt that power I have come to know as the teaching of the Holy Spirit. But something else came. As I received the idea for this talk, I felt it an impression that I was receiving it because of the prayers of one or more of you. Now I am not so egotistical to think that many of you even knew I was coming. I wouldn't think I was on very many people's minds, but I must have been on someone's mind. Perhaps it wasn't so much that you were naming me, but you must have been pleading to be given some help, to be taught something, to be given some assurance, and I must have been the most available servant, or at least the one who was going to come here next.

Now you blessed me, but I want you to know there are limits to that, of course. The companionship of the Holy Ghost is one that you earn. Your teacher cannot depend upon you alone. You cannot with your faith force the attendance of the Holy Ghost on him or her. As you know, when we receive the gift of the Holy Ghost, the Holy Ghost is not told to come to us. We are told to receive the Holy Ghost. That is done by faith and repentance, by making covenants and accepting ordinances, and then working hard to get and keep the gift. Your teacher cannot be compelled by you to receive it, but by your prayers you can and will bring down the blessings of heaven, and particularly the gift of the Holy Ghost, which will help your teachers and your leaders.

Study and Learn

As you will recall, President Romney's second suggestion for obtaining and keeping the guidance of the Spirit was to study and learn

the gospel. That won't be hard for you to apply tonight in getting ready for next week either. There will be a lesson in that class next Sunday. With a little effort you could probably get a manual, or with a phone call find out what the subject will be. Then you could go to the topical guide, or from your own knowledge of the scriptures you could begin to learn something now about what you will listen to then.

Most of you have been teachers at one time or another in the Church, and so you know how rare it is for a student in your class to have done that. You knew who they were. It was not so much what they said, although it may have been in what they asked in class. It may have been simply the look in their eyes. It may have been their attentiveness. But you knew that some people prior to coming to your class had studied and by doing so had let heaven know that they wanted to be taught. That changed the class, and it chanted your teaching.

Live Righteously

President Romney's third injunction was to "live righteously; repent of your sins by confessing them and forsaking them. Then conform to the teachings of the gospel." I hope a day doesn't begin or end that you don't consider whether something you did might have offended the Holy Ghost or made it harder for the Spirit to influence you. That is what it means to me to have a repentant heart.

You might, in addition, be eager to conform to the quiet promptings that urge you to take action. Make a commitment tonight that the next time you are taught by one of the servants of God you will heed any prompting, even the faintest prompting, to act, to do better. In fact, you could commit to opening your heart now to those promptings. That also is the spirit of repentance.

I have had that happen to me recently. I was sitting in my home ward in the presence of a teacher who said something, and I felt a very faint prompting from the Spirit to act that day.

I bear you my testimony that the scriptures are not being poetic when they describe the Holy Ghost as the still, small voice. It is so quiet that if you are noisy inside, you won't hear it. It is real. I felt also that if I didn't do it promptly, I would not again, at least not soon, feel that gentle instruction. So I did it. It is already changing my life and the lives of my children, some of whom are here tonight. I am confident that because I went and did the small thing that I felt impressed by the quiet voice to do, I made it more likely that I could receive a spiritual nudge again.

I pray that you will make a commitment to act on those promptings you receive when listening to your teachers and leaders. If you have felt a prompting to do something that you heard tonight, and if you do it, you will reinforce a pattern in your life of repentance—which is to be eager to be instructed, even to be reproved, and then to act.

What the scripture calls a “humble and contrite heart” has always been exemplified for me in two paragraphs from the autobiography of Parley P. Pratt. Perhaps it touched me because I admired so much the strength of Elder Pratt and also because I like so little to be rebuked. Here is the first paragraph of the two—I will have to break between the two because you need a little background.

After journeying for several hundred miles up the Platte, we at length met two messengers from the pioneers under President Young, from Salt Lake Valley. These were P. Rockwell and E. T. Benson; who had been sent out to try to find us and report our progress and circumstances. Having visited all the camps, they returned to the valley, or rather to where they met the President and pioneers, on their way back to Winter Quarters on the Missouri. I accompanied them back nearly one days' ride on the way, and then bid them God speed, and returned to my own camp. Soon after this our fifty met the President and company of pioneers and camped with them one day.

Now this is where you need a little background. For a moment, think of yourselves as Parley P. Pratt. He was leading a hard, hard march. He was doing the best he knew how. He was an apostle of the Lord Jesus Christ. He was meeting his leader, one with whom he had been in great difficulties. Elder Pratt saw himself as an experienced man, as indeed President Young was experienced.

Can you young men now picture yourselves having a priesthood interview with your elders quorum president? He is going to talk to you about what you have been doing. You have been working hard. Aren't you prepared for a little praise? Wouldn't you like him to tell you how wonderful you were?

Parley P. Pratt had arrived in Winter Quarters after President Young and the Quorum of the Twelve had made some very specific arrangements. Elder Pratt had taken a look at the plans and thought he could do better. He changed the arrangements. He did not know that—at least according to one of the other members of the Twelve who had been there—they were a decision of the Council and were revelation. Listen to Parley P. Pratt's description of that day with his priesthood leader.

A council was called, in which I was highly censured and chastened by President Young and others. This arose in part from some defect in the organization entered into under the superintendence of the President before he left the camps at Winter Quarters; and of variously interfering with previous arrangements. In short, I was severely reprovved and chastened. I no doubt deserved this chastisement; and I humbled myself, acknowledged my faults and errors, and asked forgiveness. I was frankly forgiven, and, bidding each other farewell, each company passed on their way. This school of experience made me more humble and careful in future, and I think it was the means of making me a wiser and better man ever after. [Autobiography of

Parley P. Pratt (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1985), pp. 330–31]

Serve in the Church

Fourth, President Romney said to give service in the Church. That works in powerful ways when you are seeking the Holy Spirit and its direction privately. In my life, I have felt the most guidance when I was in God’s service, doing something for one of his children.

It can work in the next class or executive meeting you attend in the Church when some very mortal person is in front of you. Rather than thinking, “Well, let’s see whether this teacher or leader can convince me” or “How good are they going to be today?” you could think another way. You could say to yourself, “What is it they are trying to accomplish?” Then you could ask yourself quietly, “What can I do to help?”

You will change your whole experience in that hour by making their service your service. That choice of an attitude will change the way you listen. Thoughts will come to you during a class or in a meeting that would not come otherwise.

The Giving of a Gift

We have talked mostly about what can come to you as you listen if you apply President Romney’s guide, but there is something even more. Seeking the Spirit can bring your blessings. Seeking to bring it down on someone else brings it to you, but it also adds the joy of gift-giving.

What we have been talking about is giving a gift to your teacher or your leader. It is done by the way you pray, by the way you study, by the way you have a contrite heart, and by the way you add your service to theirs. You make it more likely that they will feel the power of the Holy Ghost in their service.

Elder Bruce R. McConkie described the magnitude of that gift. Listen carefully to what he said:

The Holy Ghost is a Revelator; he is a Sanctifier; he reveals truth, and he cleanses human souls. He is the Spirit of Truth, and his baptism is one of fire; he burns dross and evil out of repentant souls as though by fire. The gift of the Holy Ghost is the greatest of all the gifts of God, as pertaining to this life; and those who enjoy that gift here and now, will inherit eternal life hereafter, which is the greatest of all the gifts of God in eternity. [The Mortal Messiah (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1979–81), 2:122]

Now, I have tried to give you some reasons why our Heavenly Father had the Savior organize his Church so that we have to be led and taught by his weak and simple servants. And we have talked about how to make it more likely that we can hear the words of God in their words. If we will try to apply President Romney’s advice, not just for our own revelation, but to bring the Holy Ghost as a revelator to those who lead and teach us, we will add the blessing to our lives of participating in the giving of a gift.

President David O. McKay describes what it means when the Holy Ghost comes into a life. He said it this way: “What the sunshine is to the field and to the flowers the Holy Spirit is to the life of man” (CR, October 1930, p.10). It has been my experience that that sunshine comes into my life even more powerfully when my effort is to try to help those who lead or teach me.

Some of you are perhaps already thinking about general conference. You may be praying that the Brethren who speak and who lead us will have the Holy Spirit. I will make a twofold promise to you. First, your prayers will be answered if they are offered with faith and with confidence. Second, not only will you bring sunshine to the lives of others, but you will bring sunshine into your own life. As the Brethren speak, you will be able to listen and hear the words of God as he instructs you through his servants. You will recognize the

words of truth that you need. And that is sunshine.

George Q. Cannon gives one of the marvelous descriptions of how you will recognize the influence of the Holy Ghost. He said this:

I will tell you a rule by which you may know the Spirit of god from the spirit of evil. The Spirit of God always produces joy and satisfaction of mind. When you have that Spirit you are happy; when you have another spirit you are not happy. The spirit of doubt is the spirit of the evil one; it produces uneasiness and other feelings that interfere with happiness and peace. [JD 15:375]

I do not know how you are feeling tonight, but I hope you feel happiness. I do. That is an indication that we are on the right course. I can promise you that you can not only feel that now, but you can look forward to it over a lifetime, even a lifetime that may have its trials and its great difficulties.

“When the Speaker Begins, I Listen”

Years ago I was sitting in a sacrament meeting with my father, whose name is the same as my own, Henry Eyring. He seemed to be enjoying what I thought was a terrible talk. I watched my father, and to my amazement, his face was beaming as the speaker droned on. I kept stealing looks back at him, and sure enough, through the whole thing he had this beatific smile.

Our home was near enough to the ward that we walked home. I remember walking with my father on the shoulder of the road that wasn't paved. I kicked a stone ahead of me as I plotted what I would do next. I finally got up enough courage to ask him what he thought of the meeting. He said it was wonderful.

Now I really had a problem. My father had a wonderful sense of humor, but you didn't want to push it too far. I was puzzled. I was trying to summon up enough courage to ask

him how I could have such a different opinion of that meeting and that speaker.

Like all good fathers, he must have read my mind because he started to laugh. He said: “Hal, let me tell you something. Since I was a very young man, I have taught myself to do something in a church meeting. When the speaker begins, I listen carefully and ask myself what it is he is trying to say. Then once I think I know what he is trying to accomplish, I give myself a sermon on that subject.” He let that sink in for a moment as we walked along. Then, with that special self-deprecating chuckle of his, he said, “Hal, since then I have never been to a bad meeting.”

I don't suppose he used all of the steps I have described to you. He may very well have prayed for that speaker. Over a lifetime he had studied. When he knew what the speaker was trying to say, he had a deep well to go to so he could give himself that sermon.

My father was the kind of man who would have listened to that high council visitor. If he had felt a little pricking in his heart to do something, Dad would have done it. He could listen to anybody. He used to embarrass me when we stopped to get gas because he would seek advice from the gas station attendant. Dad would always treat him as an equal. Dad would say: “Look, I can learn something from anybody. They have had experiences I haven't had.”

I think you can have faith and confidence that you will never need to hear an unprofitable sermon or live in a ward where you are not fed spiritually. Wherever you are can always be a place in the kingdom where the first section of the Doctrine and Covenants is not poetry but pure description. These words will be true for you when you are taught in your home or in your apartment or in a class or in a council meeting. These words for you will simply be the truth.

But that every man might speak in the name of God the Lord, even the Savior of the world;

That faith also might increase in the earth;

That mine everlasting covenant might be established;

That the fullness of my gospel might be proclaimed by the weak and the simple unto the ends of the world, and before kings and rulers. [D&C 1:20–23]

What I the Lord have spoken, I have spoken, and I excuse not myself; and though the heavens and the earth pass away, my word shall not pass away, but shall all be fulfilled, whether by mine own voice or by the voice of my servants, it is the same. [D&C 1:38]

I pray with my whole heart that we may listen together and that we may have the gift of the Holy Ghost, both in our private search for truth and as we sit at the feet of the servants of God wherever we may be.

I am blessed in my calling to sit at the feet of prophets. I have spent hours in their presence. I bear you my testimony that Ezra Taft Benson is God's prophet upon the earth. I sit with him and hear him speak on a wide variety of issues. He is careful. He speaks with deliberation. I have had the Spirit confirm to me that the words he spoke were what the Lord would have him speak.

Today I sat in a Sunday School class and heard a man who had worked hard to prepare. I heard him speak words that the Holy Spirit also bore witness to me were true.

I know God lives. He is your Father and he loves you. There are some in this room who need to know that to him you are very important and perfectly known. I bear you my testimony that his son, Jesus Christ, came into the world and atoned for our sins. I testify that the Atonement works. If you will have faith in the Lord Jesus Christ and repent and submit to the ordinances at the hand of those who have authority and then receive the gift of the Holy Ghost, in time and by your effort sins will be washed away and you can have confidence that you can go again into the presence of your Heavenly Father.

The Holy Ghost is real. There is a still small voice of truth that can speak to you. I pray with my whole heart that you have felt it in some way this day, perhaps not while we have been together, but when someone spoke to you in a meeting earlier today. I pray that it will happen again this evening. If someone who is trying to serve you calls you on the phone or speaks to you in some way, I hope you will see their human kindness and their interest. But beyond that, I hope you will understand that God's servants are going out across the earth called and empowered by him. They can bring blessings and guidance and help to you.

I pray that will come to you this day and always, and I pray that you will do all you can to help it come. I bear you this testimony and pray these blessings for you and for myself in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.