

# *Succession in the Presidency*

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I am pleased and honored to have this privilege of meeting and worshiping with you in your devotional services as you commence the new year. I devoutly and sincerely desire the guidance and enlightenment that comes from the Holy Spirit—first for me, so that I may say what ought to be said and what the Lord would have said on this occasion; and secondly for you, so that your hearts may be open and receptive and so that you may feel the truth and verity of the expressions that will be made.

President Dallin Oaks has indicated, appropriately, the passing of President Harold B. Lee, one of the great spiritual giants of our dispensation. I would like, if I may properly be guided, to talk to you about succession in the presidency and to let you have a feeling and an understanding of what is involved when the Lord calls a prophet to other spheres of activity.

Let us begin with the sure and certain conviction in our souls that this is the Lord's work. This is the Lord's church and he is running it. There isn't any question at all about that. As President Oaks indicated, the Lord calls his prophets and the Lord releases his prophets. No prophet can be called by any other power, and no prophet can be released by any other power.

And so, for reasons that are not wholly and completely known to us, although we do have some vision and understanding of what is involved, on Wednesday, December 26, 1973, the Lord reached forth his hand and touched his servant, President Harold B. Lee. President Lee had been in good health; he had been vigorous and active up to that point in his life. But on that day the Lord said to him: "Come hither. I have other work for you to do in another sphere. I have greater labors and a greater work for you here than you've been doing in mortality."

## **Callings to the Other Side of the Veil**

Difficult as it is for us to envision fully why President Lee was taken, we have no difficulty in accepting it and in understanding that he is going forward in the Lord's work in another sphere. I would like to read a statement by President Wilford Woodruff relative to the passing of the noble and good and faithful

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from this life into the labors that await them in the realms ahead. President Woodruff says:

*The same Priesthood exists on the other side of the veil [sic]. Every man who is faithful in his quorum here will join his quorum there. When a man dies and his body is laid in the tomb, he does not lose his position. The Prophet Joseph Smith held the keys of this dispensation on this side of the veil, and he will hold them throughout the countless ages of eternity. He went into the spirit world to unlock the prison doors and to preach the Gospel to the millions of spirits who are in darkness, and every Apostle, every Seventy, every Elder, etc., who has died in the faith as soon as he passes to the other side of the veil, enters into the work of the ministry, and there is a thousand times more to preach there than there is here.*

I think President Woodruff's next comment has particular application to President Lee's passing:

*I have felt of late as if our brethren on the other side of the veil had held a council, and that they had said to this one, and that one, "Cease thy work on earth, come hence, we need help," and they have called this man and that man. It has appeared so to me in seeing the many men who have been called from our midst lately. [Journal of Discourses, 22:333–34]*

When President Lee passed he was attended by President Marion G. Romney, his second counselor, and President Spencer W. Kimball, the President of the Council of the Twelve. President N. Eldon Tanner was in Arizona at the time. Brother Romney, as the representative of and counselor to President Lee, was in complete and total charge at the hospital. He gave President Lee a blessing. He felt the spirit of peace and satisfaction, the calm assurance that whatever eventuated would be right. He did not promise President Lee that he would be healed. The President had become

ill very rapidly, just in a matter of hours or moments. Shortly after this blessing, he passed away. At the moment he passed, Brother Romney, in harmony with the system and the established tradition and custom of the Church, stepped aside, and President Spencer W. Kimball was then in complete charge and had total direction. President Kimball was at that moment the senior apostle of God on earth. And as the last heartbeat of President Lee ceased, the mantle of leadership passed to President Kimball, whose next heartbeat was that of the living oracle and presiding authority of God on earth. From that moment the Church continued under the direction of President Kimball.

#### **The Established Procedure for Succession**

It was not required, nor was it requisite or needed, that the Lord give any revelation, that any special direction be given. The law was already ordained and established. God does not look down each morning and say, "The sun shall rise." He has already established the law, he has set the sun in the firmament, and the sun operates in harmony with established law in its rising. And so it was with the transfer of leadership from President Lee to President Kimball.

When the President of the Church passes on, the First Presidency is disorganized, and the mantle of leadership—the reins of presidency—go to the senior man left and to the Council of the Twelve as a body; in effect the Council of the Twelve then becomes the First Presidency of the Church and so continues unless and until a formal reorganization takes place. These words I read to you from President Joseph F. Smith:

*There is always a head in the Church, and if the presidency of the Church are removed by death or another cause, then the next head of the Church is the Twelve Apostles, until a presidency is again organized of three presiding high priests who have*

*the right to hold the office of First Presidency over the Church; and, according to the doctrine laid down by President Wilford Woodruff, who saw the necessity for it, and that of President Lorenzo Snow, if the President should die, his counselors are then released from that presidency, and it is the duty of the Twelve Apostles to proceed at once, in the manner that has been pointed out, to see that the First Presidency is reorganized, so that there may be no deficiency in the working and order of the priesthood in the Church of God. [Conference Report, April 1913, pp. 4–5]*

Harmonious with that policy, that counsel, and that instruction—which has been followed in previous instances—the Council of the Twelve met in the upper room of the Salt Lake Temple on Sunday, December 30, at 3:00 p.m. for the purpose of reorganizing the First Presidency of the Church. Normally in that upper room there are three chairs occupied by the First Presidency and twelve chairs in a semicircle in front of them occupied by the members of the Council of the Twelve. On this occasion, however, there were fourteen chairs in the semicircle, because there were fourteen Brethren present who had been sustained and ordained and set apart as members of the Council of the Twelve.

We took our places in those chairs, and President Kimball presided in the meeting, which lasted for about 3½ hours. In the course of this meeting President Kimball explained the business to be transacted, the things that might be done if the Brethren felt so guided and led. He explained that when the Prophet Joseph Smith was martyred, 3½ years went by before President Young was formally chosen and installed as President of the Church. He noted that almost that period went by between President Young and President John Taylor and between President Taylor and President Wilford Woodruff but that in each succeeding instance the time had varied from four to

eleven days, and we were meeting on the fourth day after the passing of President Lee.

He expressed himself as to what should be done, and he said that the proposition to be first considered was whether the First Presidency should then be reorganized or whether the Church should continue to function with the Council of the Twelve as its presiding officers. He then invited each member of the Twelve, commencing with Elder Ezra Taft Benson and continuing around the circle to me, to arise in turn and express himself frankly and fully and freely as to what ought to be done. I'll tell you what in thought-content and substance was said by all of the Brethren on that occasion, but if may, let me preface my statement by reading an account of what happened in the meeting of the Council of the Twelve on the first occasion when they considered the problem of reorganizing the First Presidency of the Church. There have, of course, been eleven such meetings in this dispensation. These words I now read were spoken by Elder Orson Hyde of the Council of the Twelve as he told of the first meeting:

*In the month of February, 1848, the Twelve Apostles met at Hyde Park, Pottawattamie County, Iowa, where a small Branch of the Church was established. . . . We were in prayer and council, communing together; and what took place on that occasion? The voice of God came from on high, and spake to the Council. Every latent feeling was aroused, and every heart melted. What did it say unto us? "Let my servant Brigham step forth and receive the full power of the presiding Priesthood in my Church and kingdom." This was the voice of the Almighty unto us at Council Bluffs, before I removed to what was called Kanessville. It has been said by some that Brigham was appointed by the people, and not by the voice of God. I do not know that this testimony has often, if ever, been given to the masses of the people before; but I am one that was present, and there are others here that were also present on that occasion, and did hear and feel the*

*voice from heaven, and we were filled with the power of God. This is my testimony; these are my declarations unto the Saints—unto the members of the kingdom of God in the last days, and to all people.*

*. . . Men, women, and children came running together where we were, and asked us what was the matter. They said that their houses shook, and the ground trembled, and they did not know but that there was an earthquake. We told them that there was nothing the matter—not to be alarmed; the Lord was only whispering to us a little, and that he was probably not very far off. We felt no shaking of the earth or of the house, but were filled with the exceeding power and goodness of God. We knew and realized that we had the testimony of God within us. On the 6<sup>th</sup> day of April following, at our Annual Conference [I might say that on the coming sixth day of April at our annual conference, we'll do precisely what they did here], held in the Log Tabernacle at Kaneshville, the propriety of choosing a man to preside over the Church was investigated. In a very few minutes it was agreed to, and Brigham Young was chosen to fill that place without a dissenting voice, the people not knowing that there had been any revelation touching the matter. They ignorantly seconded the voice of the Lord from on high in his appointment. (Voice from the stand: "That is, Vox Dei, vox populi.") Yes, the voice of God was the voice of the people. Brigham went right ahead, silently, to do the work of the Lord, and to feed his sheep, and take care of them like a faithful shepherd, leaving all vain aspirants to quarrel and contend about lineal descent, right, power, and authority. [Journal of Discourses, 8:233–34]*

That is what transpired the first time that the Council of the Twelve met to reorganize the First Presidency of the Church. And in essence, thought-content, and certainly in spirit, precisely the same thing occurred on the thirtieth day of December last. Each member of the Council in turn, specifically and pointedly, expressed himself to the effect that now was

the time to reorganize the First Presidency of the Church, that there should not be further delay, that the effective and proper operation of this great organization that we have from the Lord needed this administrative arrangement. Each one in turn expressed himself that President Spencer W. Kimball was the man whom the Lord wanted to preside over the Church; there was no question whatever about that. There was total and complete unity and harmony. The prayer that was in the heart of every person present was "Lord, show unto thy servants whom thou hast chosen to be President of the Church." We did not want to do anything other than what the Lord wanted done.

President Young is quoted as having said, following the death of the Prophet, "I don't care who presides in the Church. All I want to know is what the Lord thinks about it." The Lord made manifest his will in that day, and that's all we wanted to know for our day. And when we met for this most recent reorganization, the Lord made manifest his will to us. It was as though the voice of God had said to each one of us individually and to all of us collectively: "Let my servant Spencer step forth and receive the full power of the presiding priesthood in my Church and kingdom."

#### **The Ordination of President Kimball**

And so after there had been full expression and consideration, Elder Ezra Taft Benson, the next one in seniority to President Kimball, made the formal motion that the First Presidency of the Church be reorganized; that President Spencer W. Kimball be sustained, ordained, and set apart as the President of the Church; as the prophet, seer, and revelator to the Church; and as the Trustee-in-Trust. This motion was adopted unanimously.

At this point President Kimball made a speech of acceptance—a very sweet, humble, appropriate expression. In the course of our meeting he had explained, as he did at

President Lee's funeral, that no man had prayed more sincerely and devoutly, with more feeling and desire, for the life, vigor, health, and continued spiritual and physical prosperity of President Lee than he had done. But President Kimball was willing to accept the will of the Lord and the mantle of leadership that had fallen upon him.

At this point, he chose his first counselor, President N. Eldon Tanner, who responded appropriately and sweetly; he then chose President Marion G. Romney to be the second, who similarly responded. Following these appointments, Brother Benson was sustained as the President of the Council of the Twelve. And then all those present placed their hands upon the head of President Kimball, and he was ordained and set apart, with President Benson being mouth, to serve as President of the Church and as the prophet, seer, and revelator for this time and this season.

Now President Lee has passed away. He was a great spiritual giant, a prince in Israel, someone to whom we looked with unbounded admiration. Few men have lived in our day who have had more direct contact with the Lord, who have felt the spirit of inspiration and who have been able to convey the mind and will of the Lord to his people as well as President Lee has done. We had supposed, not knowing the providences of the Lord, that President Lee would be with us for a long time. But there are two things we should note in his call to go elsewhere. One is that the Lord has another work for him to do, and it is a greater and more extensive work than what he was presently assigned to do. The Lord, in his infinite wisdom and goodness, knows what ought to be done with his servants. The other thing to note is that when the Lord calls a new prophet he does it because he has a work and a labor and a mission for the new man to perform.

I can suppose that when the Prophet Joseph Smith was taken from this life the Saints felt

themselves in the depths of despair. To think that a leader of such spiritual magnitude had been taken from them! Our revelation says, "Joseph Smith, the Prophet and Seer of the Lord, has done more, save Jesus only, for the salvation of men in this world, than any other man that ever lived in it" (D&C 135:3). We do not have language or capacity or ability to extol the greatness and the glory of the ministry and mission of the Prophet Joseph Smith. And yet when he was taken the Lord had Brigham Young. Brigham Young stepped forth and wore the mantle of leadership. With all respect and admiration and every accolade of praise resting upon the Prophet Joseph, still Brigham Young came forward and did things that then had to be done in a better way than the Prophet Joseph himself could have done them.

Now, no one can say too emphatically or too strongly or praise too highly the leadership of President Lee, but this is a forward-looking Church. We do not look backward. We do not do other than go forward and onward. Our destiny is to proclaim the everlasting gospel into every ear. This Church will roll on until the knowledge of God covers the earth as the waters cover the sea. And so we look to the future. We now look to a new prophet who will wear the mantle of leadership and who will, with dignity and honor and inspiration and with the guidance of heaven, do things that are appointed for his time and his season that no one else could have done. The Lord's hand is in the work, and Spencer Kimball is the prophet of God, the mouthpiece of the Almighty for the time and the season that are appointed ahead. God grant that it may be extensive and long and that we may continue to get the inspiration and guidance that come through his newly appointed servant.

### **Keys of Presidency**

Now, this is the pattern; this is the system. Succession in the presidency happens in an

orderly and systematized way, because the Lord has conferred upon the members of the Council of the Twelve all of the keys and powers and authorities that have ever been held in any dispensation or any age of the past. Every key is given to each apostle who is set apart a member of the Council of the Twelve. But because keys are the right of presidency, they lie dormant, as it were, in each man unless and until he becomes the senior apostle and is thus in a position of presidency to direct the labors and the work of all others. Therefore succession occurs, as it were, automatically.

Let me turn again to Wilford Woodruff, who spoke so eloquently and accurately on this, and let you feel, as I read, the spirit of that great prophet and the message he gave:

*We had had our endowments; we had had all the blessings sealed upon our heads that were ever given to the apostles or prophets on the face of the earth. On that occasion the Prophet Joseph rose up and said to us: "Brethren, I have desired to live to see this temple built. I shall never live to see it, but you will. I have sealed upon your heads all the keys of the kingdom of God. I have sealed upon you every key, power, principle that the God of heaven has revealed to me. Now, no matter where I may go or what I may do, the kingdom rests upon you."*

*. . . "But," he said, after having done this, "ye apostles of the Lamb of God, my brethren, upon your shoulders this kingdom rests; now you have got to round up your shoulders and bear off the kingdom." And he also made this very strange remark, "If you do not do it you will be damned." . . .*

*When the Lord gave the keys of the kingdom of God, the keys of the Melchizedek Priesthood, of the apostleship, and sealed them upon the head of Joseph Smith, he sealed them upon his head to stay here upon the earth until the coming of the Son of Man. Well might Brigham Young say, "The keys of the kingdom of God are here." They were with him to the day of his death. They then rested upon the head of another man—President John Taylor. He held those keys to the hour of his death. They then fell by*

*turn, or in the providence of God, upon Wilford Woodruff.*

*I say to the Latter-day Saints, the keys of the kingdom of God are here, and they are going to stay here, too, until the coming of the Son of Man. Let all Israel understand that. They may not rest upon my head but a short time, but they will then rest on the head of another apostle, and another after him, and so continue until the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ in the clouds of heaven to "reward every man according to the deeds done in the body." . . .*

*. . . I say to all Israel at this day, I say to the whole world, that the God of Israel, who organized this Church and kingdom, never ordained any President or Presidency to lead it astray. Hear it, ye Israel, no man who has ever breathed the breath of life can hold these keys of the kingdom of God and lead the people astray. [Discourses of Wilford Woodruff, ed. G. Homer Durham (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1946), pp. 72–74]*

### **The Destiny of the Church**

And that conclusion of President Woodruff's is implicit in the eternal decree that the gospel is to roll forth, that the Church is to remain, that this time there will never be apostasy, but that we are preparing a people for the second coming of the Son of Man. Let me read you the words that the Lord said to Joshua when Moses was taken:

*There shall not any man be able to stand before thee all the days of thy life: as I was with Moses, so I will be with thee: I will not fail thee, nor forsake thee.*

*Be strong and of a good courage. [Joshua 1:5–6]*

Now, in effect, the Lord has said that to Spencer W. Kimball. And as the Lord was the President Harold B. Lee, so he will be with his newly called servant—that humble and sweet and gracious and wonderful man, President Spencer W. Kimball. The problem is not one of what happens where the Church is concerned.

The destiny of the Church is guaranteed and assured. The only problem that ever can arise is with individuals—whether individuals will walk in the light and do the things that they must do to be in harmony with the Church and to reap and inherit its blessings.

I have attempted very simply and informally to recite to you what took place and to recount and set forth the principle that is involved. What I have said is true and accurate. It is proper and it is appropriate that these things should be known to us. Now I think every one of us needs to know in his heart of the truth and divinity of the work and have a testimony and assurance that what has gone forward is right and is the mind and will of the Lord. All of the Twelve have that. That

is the beginning. It spreads forth from them to all Israel. I bear testimony because the Holy Spirit of God has revealed it to my soul that President Spencer W. Kimball is the Lord's anointed for the time and season ahead. And because God is no respecter of persons, everyone in the Church who will get on his knees and ask the Lord for guidance and direction will receive identically that same knowledge, that same assurance, and that same understanding. And those who have this assurance will have a foundation for continued righteousness and devotion and for that course of conduct which brings peace in this life and eternal life in the world to come, which may God grant for all of us in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.