

God's Simple Eternal Truth

LEGRAND RICHARDS

I first greet all of you and tell you how honored I feel to be invited to address you this morning, and how surprised I am to see so many of you here. I thought that you would be on the way to Jerusalem with the President of the Church; he is on his way over there to dedicate the Orson Hyde Memorial Gardens. I have a great interest in what is going on over there because I was appointed president of the Orson Hyde Foundation, although I am not a relative but simply have a great love for the people of Israel. And I have a deep feeling of gratitude in my heart for the twenty-five thousand people that contributed to the raising of a million-dollar fund, for which I was responsible, to make possible the dedication of that park.

While I was thinking of what I might say to you today, I thought of all the beautiful sermons you have heard in the last ten days in connection with the General Conference. And since we have a multitude of young Mormon missionaries here, I thought I might talk to you today of some of my experiences as a missionary, hoping that it might strengthen your testimony and that you might enjoy what I have to say to you.

I went on my first mission back in 1905, and four sons of the President of the Church went

at the same time. One was my cousin; he was sent up to the Land of the Midnight Sun in Norway, and I was sent to the little land of Holland. I had never met a Hollander nor heard a Dutch word before in my life, and we did not have a language school in those days as we have now. After I had been in Holland a few weeks, you know, I used to like to hear a dog bark. They bark just the same in Holland as they do here. I felt then as though I had a friend, because I could not understand those Dutchmen at all. But I figured that if the dog could learn to understand them, I ought to be able to do the same, so we got along all right.

This cousin of mine who went to Norway—and he had been raised so that he had no experience with difficult situations—wrote me when he had been there a few weeks, and he said, “LeGrand, I met a man the other day who knows more about religion than I’ve ever dreamed of, and I told him that if he had something better than I had, I’d join his church.”

LeGrand Richards was a member of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints when this devotional address was given at Brigham Young University on 16 October 1979.

I wrote back and, calling him by name, I said, "You told him just the right thing. If he has something better than you have, you ought to join his church. Does he have something better than a personal visitation of God the Father and his Son, Jesus Christ, after centuries of darkness, when the heavens had been sealed and not one religious leader believed that there was any direct communication from God upon this earth today? Does he have something better than the coming of Moroni, and the knowledge of the gold plates, and the marvelous message that those plates contain and that was translated by the gift and the power of God? Does he have something better than the coming of John the Baptist with the Aaronic Priesthood, the power and the authority to lead men down into the waters of baptism for the remission of their sins? Does he have something better than the coming of Peter, James, and John with the holy Melchizedek Priesthood, the power to organize again the Church and the kingdom of God upon the earth and to bestow the Holy Ghost by the laying on of hands?" Then I went on to recall the mission of Moses and Elijah and Elias, and I said: "If he has something better than that, you ought to join his church." Now, I hope that all of you feel as I do regarding this matter.

It reminds me of an experience I had when I was doing missionary work in New Bedford, Massachusetts. One morning I came to the door of a woman who said, "Now, Mr. Richards, what are you trying to do? Are you trying to make Mormons out of all of us?"

"Well," I said, "I will promise you one thing. I will never ask you to join the Mormon church." That seemed to put her mind at ease. Then I said, "But if I could show you where you could trade one dollar for five dollars, would I have to ask you to do it?"

She said, "I get you."

When I had been home a few weeks, I received a letter from her calling me "Brother Richards." She said, "I decided to trade the

dollar for five dollars. I was baptized a member of the Church last Friday night."

For thirty years or longer I taught every group of missionaries that came through the Salt Lake missionary home before they were all moved down here, and I used to tell those missionaries that if they could not make Mormonism look better than five to one of any religion or philosophy in this world, I would think that they were mighty poor missionaries. I am saying that to these missionaries so that they will know what we expect of them.

When I went on that first mission, President Anthon H. Lund spoke to us missionaries before we left and he told us that the people in the mission field would love us. But he said, "Don't get lifted up in the pride of your hearts and think they love you because you are better than other people. They will love you because of what you bring to them." I did not realize just what that meant at that time, but before I left Holland to come home, I knew what Brother Lund had meant. I shed many more tears bidding goodbye to my friends and converts there than I had when I bid farewell to my mother and father and brothers and sisters.

For instance, over in Amsterdam where I finished my mission, I went into the home of a short little woman, the mother of eight children, to say goodbye. Looking up into my face, the tears rolling down her cheeks and down the front of her apron, she said, "Brother Richards, it was hard to see my daughter leave for Zion a few months ago, but it is harder to see you go." Then I thought I could understand what Brother Lund meant when he said that they would love us, because I was the first missionary that she had ever met, and her whole family had joined the Church. One of her boys returned from his second mission just a short time ago—but I had better not give you the history of the whole family.

Then I went to say goodbye to a man who stood erect in the uniform of his country—a tall man with a little Dutch beard. He got down on

his knees, took my hand in his, and hugged it and kissed it and bathed it with his tears. Then I thought I could understand what Brother Lund had meant when he said that they would love us because of what we brought to them.

Brother Lund also said, "If you are ever called upon to speak and you don't know what to say and you haven't had time to figure it out, just stand up and bear testimony of the divine mission of the Redeemer of the world and of his Prophet of this dispensation, and I promise you that the Lord will give you something to say." A child in Primary can bear witness of those things. And that reminds me of an experience that I had.

I was secretary of the mission in Holland. Our headquarters at that time were in Rotterdam. President Grant was then president of the European Mission, and he came over to attend one of our mission conferences. We had rented a theatre, and we had over 1,500 people there. Men came with their stovepipe hats and their walking canes, and it was a great meeting. My mission president had promised me that if I would take down President Grant's talk (I could write shorthand) they would not ask me to speak, so I sat down at the little table in front of the stand. Right in the middle of that meeting the mission president stood up and said, "Our next speaker will be Elder LeGrand Richards, the secretary of the mission." And he had promised me that I would not have to speak! But there was one higher in authority than he was: President Grant had said that he wanted to hear from me.

As I walked up onto the stand, I remembered the words of Brother Anthon H. Lund: "If you are ever called upon to speak unexpectedly and you don't know what to say, bear your testimony." And as I stood there, brothers and sisters, I am not exaggerating when I tell you that I felt as though I were lifted right off that floor—they could have moved the floor out from under my feet and I would have remained standing there, bearing witness of

the truth. I did not know whether I had done any good or not, but a few weeks after that I attended a baptismal service in Rotterdam—and I am always one who goes around and shakes hands with everybody; I like to shake hands—and I shook hands with a man and his wife. He said, "You don't know us, but we know you."

I asked, "How do you know me?"

"We were in that conference when you bore your testimony, and that is what started us investigating the gospel."

The mission president was there, an apostle presiding over the European Mission was there, and I was just a young man with broken language who had only been in the mission a few months; yet the testimony that I bore as Brother Lund advised was what touched their hearts. These are the things that make life worthwhile.

Now I want to tell you about a debate I had in Amsterdam before I finished my first mission. My companion and I had been invited to the home of one of the Saints; she wanted to invite her neighbor over so that we could teach her the gospel. When we arrived, the neighbor was there but she had brought her minister with her. In conversing with him we had a little difference of opinion on priesthood. I don't want to discuss the details with you because it would take too much time; but right there he challenged me to a debate in his church. In those days we were not advised not to debate; and I was young and had a lot of pep, so I accepted his challenge. We were to meet in his church a week from Saturday night.

When we arrived his church was full: all of his people were there, and all of our people were there. How our people found out about it I never knew; I had not told them. This minister then stood up and said, "Now, Mr. Richards, inasmuch as you're a guest in our church, we'll accord you the privilege of opening the debate. We'll each talk twenty minutes. Is that satisfactory?"

I told him, "Very much so." I did not tell him that I would have given him the shirt off my back for the privilege of opening that debate, and he had just handed it to me on a silver platter. I do not know whether or not the Lord had anything to do with that, but I always thought that he did. So I stood up and said something like this:

"The last time I talked to my friend, we had a difference of opinion on the principles of the priesthood. I've come tonight prepared to discuss that subject, but I don't propose to start at that point. If you were going to build a house, you wouldn't try to put the roof on before you got the foundation in, would you?" I got nods from the congregation. "Therefore," I said, "I propose to open this debate tonight by discussing the foundation of the gospel of Jesus Christ. I choose for my text the sixth chapter of Hebrews, verses one and two, where Paul said, 'Therefore leaving the principles of the doctrine of Christ, let us go on unto perfection'—I suppose everybody wants to go on to perfection after they have laid the foundation of his gospel—not laying again the foundation of repentance from dead works, of faith toward God, " 'Of the doctrine of baptisms, and of laying on of hands, and of the resurrection of the dead, and of eternal judgment.' "

I hurried over faith and repentance; I thought that they would believe that. I spoke about baptism by immersion for the remission of sins until everybody was giving me a nod. And then I came to the laying on of hands, and they would not believe that. In all the missionary work I have done—and I spent nearly ten years in the mission field—I have never found a church that believed in the laying on of hands for the gift of the Holy Ghost except for our own Church. As I spoke on the laying on of hands, I reminded them of the occasion when the apostles at Jerusalem heard that Samaria had accepted the word of God through the preaching of Philip. Peter and John were sent to these saints; and when the apostles came

they prayed for them and laid their hands upon them, and they received the Holy Ghost. When Simon the sorcerer saw the Holy Ghost was conveyed by the laying on of the apostles' hands, he offered them money, saying, "Give me also this power, that on whomsoever I lay hands, he may receive the Holy Ghost."

Why, I argued, would Simon have offered to purchase that power if he could have obtained the Holy Ghost in any other way? And what was Peter's answer? "Thy money perish with thee, because thou hast thought that the gift of God may be purchased with money." (See Acts 8:14–20.)

Next I reminded them that Paul in his travels came to Ephesus and found there men who had been baptized, and he asked them, "Have ye received the Holy Ghost since ye believed?"

And they answered, "We have not so much as heard whether there be any Holy Ghost."

Paul knew then that they had been baptized by one without authority; and so he baptized them over again and laid his hands upon them, and they received the Holy Ghost. (See Acts 19:1–6.) I gave a few more references to the laying on of hands and then sat down.

This minister stood up and, without mentioning a word I had said, he started in on the Mountain Meadow Massacre and the "Golden Bible" and Joseph Smith's admission that he had made many mistakes. Then he turned and said, "Now, if Mr. Richards will enlighten us on these matters, I'm sure this audience will be most appreciative."

I was on my feet just like that. I could not wait.

My companion later asked, "How did you think so fast?"

And I asked, "What had you been praying for all week?"

"In the days of the Savior," I said, "his enemies tried to trick him. I don't suppose there's anybody here today who would like to see us return to those old tricks. I understand that a debate is the presentation and the answering of

argument. Has this man answered any of my arguments?" They all shook their heads. I said, "All right; you may have your twenty minutes over again."

He did not do it, and I knew that he could not. Finally, his wife stood up from among the audience and said, "What Mr. Richards is asking is fair. You ought to answer him." Even then he could not do it.

I said to my companion, "Hand me my coat and hat"—it was wintertime—"and stand up." Addressing the minister, I said, "One more chance. I'm willing to remain here until ten o'clock tomorrow morning when I have to be in my own church meeting, provided that this debate can go forward on the basis on which you set it up; if not, I'm going to leave. You accorded me the privilege of opening the debate, as the guest in your church; now you want to steal from me the very privilege that you accorded me, and I don't propose to let you do it."

And even then he could not. We all walked out on him; I invited our people to leave with me and they did. I met him on the street time and time again after that, but he always ducked his head so that he would not have to speak to me. It is wonderful to have the truth and to have no fear of meeting anybody. As I told the missionaries, if you learn how to tell our story and you know what the Lord has given us through his holy prophets, you do not need to be afraid of anybody.

I preached a sermon in Quitman, Georgia, when I was mission president in that area, on the eternal duration of the marriage covenant and the family unit. I quoted from Rulon Howe's graph, where he listed all of the main churches and their answers to these important questions, and not one of them believed in the eternal duration of the marriage covenant and the family unit. At the close of that meeting, as I stood at the door to shake hands with the people as they went out, a man came up and

introduced himself to me as a Baptist minister. I asked, "Did I misquote you here tonight?"

"No, Mr. Richards, but just as you say, we don't all believe all the things our churches preach."

I said, "And you don't believe them either. Why don't you go back and teach your people the truth? They'll take it from you, and they're not ready to take it from the Mormon elders yet."

He said, "I'll see you again." That was all I got from him that night.

The next time I went there, about four months later, I walked up to that little church and there stood that same minister. As I shook hands with him I said, "I'd certainly be interested to know what you thought of my last sermon here."

He replied, "I've been thinking about it ever since, and I believe every word you said. Only I'd like to have heard the rest of it."

You know that one never can finish talking about these marvelous truths that the Lord has restored. There was a man occupying the pulpit that believed every word I said, yet he could not tell his people.

I wonder if any of you have read the book or seen the movie shown sometime back entitled *A Man Called Peter*. Peter Marshall was a Presbyterian minister down in Atlanta, Georgia, when I was the president of the mission there. Later he went to Washington, and he was the chaplain of the United States Senate at the time he died. Many of the things that he and his wife taught in that show he got from our Church. He used to send his representatives over to get our MIA outlines in order to hold his young people, because we were stealing them all away from him. As I sat in his study one day I asked, "Reverend Marshall, what is the attitude of your Church with respect to the eternal duration of the marriage covenant and the family unit?"

He said, "Well, Mr. Richards, we're not allowed to preach that in our church. But in my

heart I find stubborn objections." Then he gave this little illustration—I used it in *A Marvelous Work and a Wonder*, but I did not give him credit for it because I was afraid that he would not let me if I asked to use his name. So I just told about a minister (but it was Peter Marshall), and he said,

When you take [the kitten] away from the cat, in a few days the mother cat has forgotten all about it. Take the calf away from the cow and in a few days the cow has forgotten all about the calf. But when you take a child away from his mother, though she lives to be a hundred years old, she never forgets the child of her bosom. I find it difficult to believe that God created such love to perish in the grave.
[LeGrand Richards, *A Marvelous Work and a Wonder*, rev. ed. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1971), pp.203–4]

Are we not happy that we know differently? The Lord did not create love like that to perish in the grave. What a comfort it is to those of us who have lost children! We had a little girl born in Holland who would be a little older than this daughter with me here today if she had lived, and she has gone into the eternal world. What a comfort and a joy this knowledge is! And then her oldest brother, our first son after four girls, we lost in an accident at the beach in California. What a world it would be if we did not expect ever to see them again and to know that they belong to us! Thank God for the restored truths of the gospel.

That reminds me of a sermon that I preached in Atlanta at the funeral of the president of our branch there. He was at the head of the hat department in one of the large stores there in Atlanta, and many of the people from the store attended the funeral service. It was held in a mortuary. When I went to the store some time after that a member of the Church saw me and said, "President Richards, there's a man up on the third floor in the lingerie department who attended that funeral, and he

said that if you ever came in he'd like to meet you. Would you like to meet him?"

I said, "I certainly would."

We went up to the third floor and met the head of that department, and he said, "Mr. Richards, I'm a religious man, and my friends are religious. We go to church every Sunday and we hear the minister preach. But half an hour after the church service is out, we couldn't tell you a thing about what he said. All we know is that we've had a good talk. I attended that funeral service weeks ago, and I came home and told my wife I'd heard something I wished all Atlanta could hear. It's been weeks now, and I can still remember what you said." That is the difference between God's simple eternal truth and the philosophies of men. My, how grateful we ought to be for what we have!

One of our missionaries in that mission preached in one of our conference meetings on the dream of Nebuchadnezzar. You remember that Nebuchadnezzar forgot his dream, and he sent for the wise men and astrologers and soothsayers, but none of them could tell him what his dream was. Then he heard of the man Daniel in Israel and sent for him. Daniel told King Nebuchadnezzar that there was a God in heaven that would make known the dream and the interpretation thereof. Then Daniel told him about the rise and fall of the kingdoms of this world, including his own kingdom, until the latter days when the God of heaven would set up a kingdom that should never be destroyed or given to another people. Like a little stone cut out of the mountains without hands, it would roll forth until it should become as a great mountain and fill the whole earth.

When the meeting was over I stood at the door, and a man came up and introduced himself to me as a minister of the gospel. He said, "You don't mean to tell me that you think the Mormon Church is the kingdom that God was to set up in the last days, do you?"

And I answered, "Yes, sir; why not?"

He said, "It couldn't be."

"Why couldn't it?" I asked.

"You can't have a kingdom without a king, and we don't have a king so we don't have a kingdom."

"Oh," I said, "my friend you didn't read far enough. You just read the seventh chapter of Daniel, and you'll see where Daniel said that he saw 'one like the Son of man [coming] with the clouds of heaven, and came to the Ancient of days,' and unto him was given the kingdom; and all other kingdoms, powers, and dominions under the whole heaven should serve and obey him (see Daniel 7:13-14). Now, my friend, tell me: how can the kingdom be given to him when he comes in the clouds of heaven if there's no kingdom prepared for him? That's what we're doing. We have that kingdom that was never to be thrown down or given to another people.

"Maybe you'd like to know what's going to become of the kingdom. If you'll read a little further in that same chapter you'll see where Daniel made this statement: 'And the kingdom and dominion, and the greatness of the kingdom under the whole heaven, shall be given to the people of the saints of the most High,' that they might 'possess the kingdom forever.' And as if that were not quite long enough, Daniel adds, 'Even for ever and ever.'" (Daniel 7:18, 27.) Should we not be grateful to know that we are the Saints of the most high God? And others are scattered throughout this world—over 2 and a half million at the present time. We are honored to live upon the earth at this time and to be a part of that great latter-day kingdom revealed by the God of heaven through Daniel—the kingdom that should be established, never to be thrown down or given to another people. How I thank the Lord for my membership in that kingdom!

I have two minutes left, so I shall not tell you any more stories. I shall just tell you how much I love our youth and how proud I am of you. I was at conference Saturday and Sunday

in La Verne, California; and while it is not scheduled as part of the conference, I always ask for a meeting with the young people. We meet at eight o'clock Sunday morning, and we had over 450 young people there. How I enjoyed talking to them, realizing that they are the future leadership of this Church just as you people here today are! How important it is that you get your education and that you keep yourselves sweet and clean and unspotted from the sins of the world, so that you will be worthy of all the honors and privileges that the Lord has in store for you through your faith and faithfulness!

I shall tell you one more story in closing, one that I think I have told you before. In the days before I went on my first mission, the Saltair Dance Hall was thought to be the finest dance hall in all America. I was there one night, and a young lady came up and said, "LeGrand, we're having a wonderful banquet downstairs. Wouldn't you like to join us?"

You know the old saying that the way to a man's heart is through his tummy. I could not turn that invitation down. So we took hold of hands and went hopscotching down the steps into the north end of that pavilion. As we neared a long table spread, I noticed that by each plate was one of those tall beer bottles they used to have when I was a boy. When I saw that we were headed for that table, I stopped as though I had been shot. The girl I had by the hand looked at me and asked, "What's the matter? Are you too good to drink a little beer?"

I had to think awfully fast, so I said, "Well, Elsie, I guess I am. I thought you were. Good-bye." And I went up those steps a lot faster than I had come down.

I have asked myself time and time again if I would ever have become a Presiding Bishop of this Church, to preside over all the young boys of this Church—the Aaronic priesthood and the girls of the same age—if I had sat at that table that day. If one never takes the first beer

he never needs to worry about the second one. If he never takes the first cigarette, he never needs to worry about the second one. And so I stand before you here today thanking God for the inspiration of the Holy Ghost that has been my companion through life, that has given me

the power to make the decisions that I needed to make so that I can stand here in honor today and advise you to do the same. I leave my love and blessing with each one of you in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, whom I love with all my heart. Even so, amen.