Revelation — for self, not for others


... First, we should understand what can be called the principle of “stewardship in revelation.” Our Heavenly Father’s house is a house of order, where his servants are commanded to “act in the office in which [they are] appointed” (D&C 107:99). This principle applies to revelation. Only the president of the Church receives revelation to guide the entire Church. Only the stake president receives revelation for the special guidance of the stake. The person who receives revelation for the ward is the bishop. For a family, it is the priesthood leadership of the family. Leaders receive revelation for their own stewardships. Individuals can receive revelation to guide their own lives. But when one person purports to receive revelation for another person outside his or her own stewardship — such as a Church member who claims to have revelation to guide the entire Church or a person who claims to have a revelation to guide another person over whom he or she has no presiding authority according to the order of the Church — you can be sure that such revelations are not from the Lord. “There are counterfeit signals” (Boyd K. Packer, “Prayers and Answers,” Ensign, November 1979, 20). Satan is a great deceiver, and he is the source of some of these spurious revelations. Others are simply imagined.

If a revelation is outside the limits of stewardship, you know it is not from the Lord, and you are not bound by it. I have heard of cases where a young man told a young woman she should marry him because he had received a revelation that she was to be his eternal companion. If this is a true revelation, it will be confirmed directly to the woman if she seeks to know. In the meantime, she is under no obligation to heed it. She should seek her own guidance and make up her own mind. The man can receive revelation to guide his own actions, but he cannot properly receive revelation to direct hers. She is outside his stewardship.

What about those times when we seek revelation and do not receive it. We do not always receive inspiration or revelation when we request it. Sometimes we are delayed in the receipt of revelation, and sometimes we are left to our own judgment. We cannot force spiritual things. It must be so. Our life’s purpose to obtain experience and to develop faith would be frustrated if our Heavenly Father directed us in every act, even in every important act. We must make decisions and experience the consequences in order to develop self-reliance and faith.

Even in decisions we think very important, we sometimes receive no answers to our prayers. This does not mean that our prayers have not been heard. It only means that we have prayed about a decision which, for one reason or another, we should make without guidance by revelation. Perhaps we have asked for guidance in choosing between alternatives that are equally acceptable or equally unacceptable. I suggest that there is not a right and wrong to every question. To many questions, there are only two wrong answers or two right answers.

... I once heard a young woman is a testimony meeting praise the spirituality of her husband, indicating that he submitted every question to the Lord. She told how he accompanied her shopping and would not even choose between different brands of canned vegetables without making his selection a matter of prayer. That strikes me as improper. I believe the Lord expects us to use the intelligence and experience he has given us to make these kinds of choices. When a member asked the Prophet Joseph Smith for advice on a particular matter, the Prophet stated:

“It is a great thing to inquire at the hands of God, or to come into His presence: and we feel fearful to approach Him on subjects that are of little or no consequence.” (Teachings, 22).

Of course we are not always able to judge what is trivial. If a matter appears of little or no consequence, we can proceed on the basis of our own judgment. If the choice is important for reasons unknown to us, such as the speaking invitation I mentioned earlier or even a choice between two cans of vegetables when one contains a hidden poison, the Lord will intervene and give us guidance. When a choice will make a real difference in our lives — obvious or not — and when we are living in tune with the Spirit and seeking his guidance, we can be sure we will receive the guidance we need to attain our goal. The Lord will not leave us unassisted when a choice is important to our eternal welfare.

All inspiration does not come from God. (See D&C 46:7.) The evil one has the power to tap into those channels of revelation and send conflicting signals which can mislead and confuse us. There are promptings from evil sources which are so carefully counterfeited as to deceive even the very elect. (See Mt 24:24.) Nevertheless, we can learn to discern these spirits. Even with every member having the right to revelation, the Church can be maintained as a house of order.

Revelations come in an orderly way in the Church. We are entitled to personal revelation. However, unless we are set apart to some presiding office, we will not receive revelations concerning what others should do. Revelation in the Church comes to those who have been properly called, sustained, ordained, or set apart. A bishop, for instance will not receive any revelation concerning a neighboring ward, because that is out of his jurisdiction.

Occasionally someone will claim to have received authority to teach and bless without having been called and set apart. Less than a year after the Church was organized [February 1831], a revelation was received which the Prophet specified “embraced the law of the church.” It contains this verse: “It shall not be given to any one to go forth to preach my gospel, or to build up my church, except he be ordained by some one who has authority, and it is known to the church that he has authority and has been regularly ordained by the heads of the church.” *(D&C 42:11; italics added.)*

An unusual spiritual experience should not be regarded as a personal call to direct others. It is my conviction that experiences of a special, sacred nature are individual and should be kept to oneself.

Few things disturb the channels of revelation quite so effectively as those who are misled and think themselves to be chosen to instruct others when they are not chosen.


*The Spiritual Con Artists.* In one of its most insidious forms, the con game is played by someone using Church membership or priesthood position as collateral for a business deal. This sham also includes the many young men and young women who have had dreams or visions in which they have been given specific directions as to whom they are to marry. A frustration to these manipulators of romance is that so many of them receive instructions that they are to marry the same person. One of the identifying characteristics of the spiritual con artists is the seeming ease with which they get answers to their prayers and the freedom with which they communicate with the heavens.

Spencer W. Kimball, BYU, 18 June 1962.

One woman, for example, came to the temple. She claimed she was receiving revelations every day while putting up the lunches. These purported revelations were childish and silly and pertained to such little things as the Lord would never deign to control or guide. At first I said, “These are not from the Lord. He does not fool with these little things where we can make up our own minds, such as what clothes to wear or what to eat today.” My observations to her did not do any good. Her “revelations” came all the more, and she knew they were from the Lord. Then I said to her, “Well, now sister, if these come from the Lord, they are for you alone. Do not every whisper them to a soul.” When she quit telling about them, they ceased to come any more. She was just glorying in her superiority over her fellow beings when she received them.


We must make allowance for the real possibility that we are lacking in faith and/or worthiness. But we must also make allowance for the equally real possibility that some considerations of growth are involved at times, too.