

President Gordon B. Hinckley

The shepherds of Israel

Brethren, tonight I am going to do something a little unusual. I am going to repeat some elements of a talk which I gave 15 years ago in our general priesthood meeting. I am going to speak of and to the bishops of the Church, this wonderful body of men who are in a very real sense the shepherds of Israel.

Everyone who participates in this conference is accountable to a bishop or a branch president. Tremendous are the burdens which they carry, and I invite every member of the Church to do all that he or she can to lift the burden under which our bishops and branch presidents labor.

We must pray for them. They need help as they carry their heavy loads. We can be more supportive and less dependent upon them. We can assist them in every way possible. We can thank them for all that they do for us. We are wearing them out in a short time by the burdens which we impose upon them.

We have more than 18,000 bishops in the Church. Every one is a man who has been called by the spirit of prophecy and revelation and set apart and ordained by the laying on of hands. Every one of them holds the keys of the presidency of his ward. Each is a high priest, the presiding high priest of his ward. Each carries tremendous responsibilities of stewardship. Each stands as a father to his people.

None receives money for his service. No ward bishop is compensated by the Church for his work as a bishop.

Requirements of a bishop

The requirements of a bishop today are as they were in the days of Paul, who wrote to Timothy:

“A bishop then must be blameless, the husband of one wife, vigilant, sober, of

good behaviour, given to hospitality, apt to teach;

“Not given to wine, no striker [that is, not a bully or a violent person], . . . not a brawler, not covetous;

“One that ruleth well his own house, having his children in subjection with all gravity;

“(For if a man know not how to rule his own house, how shall he take care of the church of God?)

“Not a novice, lest being lifted up with pride he fall into the condemnation of the devil” (1 Timothy 3:2–6).

In his letter to Titus, Paul adds that “a bishop must be blameless, as the steward of God; . . . holding fast the faithful word as he hath been taught, that he may be able by sound doctrine both to exhort and to convince the gainsayers” (Titus 1:7, 9).

Those words aptly describe a bishop today in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

Men of integrity and moral strength

Let me now speak directly to the thousands of bishops who are in attendance tonight. Let me say first that I love you for your integrity and goodness. You must be men of integrity. You must stand as examples to the congregations over which you preside. You must stand on higher ground so that you can lift others. You must be absolutely honest, for you handle the funds of the Lord, the tithes of the people, the offerings that come of their fasting, and the contributions which they make from their own strained resources. How great is your trust as the keepers of the purse of the Lord!

Your goodness must be as an ensign to your people. Your morals must be impeccable. The wiles of the adversary may be held before you because he knows that if he can destroy you, he can injure an

entire ward. You must exercise wisdom in all of your relationships lest someone read into your observed actions some taint of moral sin. You cannot succumb to the temptation to read pornographic literature or even in the secrecy of your own chamber to view pornographic films. Your moral strength must be such that if ever you are called on to sit in judgment on the questionable morals of others, you may do so without personal compromise or embarrassment.

You cannot use your office as bishop to further your own business interests lest through some ensuing financial mishap accusation be placed against you by those who succumbed to your persuasiveness.

A common judge in Israel

You cannot compromise your qualifications to sit as a common judge in Israel. It is a fearsome and awesome responsibility to stand as a judge of the people. You must be their judge in some instances as to worthiness to hold membership in the Church, worthiness to enter the house of the Lord, worthiness to be baptized, worthiness to receive the priesthood, worthiness to serve missions, worthiness to teach and to serve as officers in the organizations. You must be the judge of their eligibility in times of distress to receive help from the fast offerings of the people and commodities from the storehouse of the Lord. None for whom you are responsible must go hungry or without clothing or shelter though they be reluctant to ask. You must know something of the circumstances of all of the flock over whom you preside.

A strength in times of trouble

You must be their counselor, their comforter, their anchor and strength in times of sorrow and trouble. You must be strong with that strength which comes from the Lord. You must be wise with

that wisdom which comes from the Lord. Your door must be open to hear their cries and your back strong to carry their burdens, your heart sensitive to judge their needs, your godly love broad enough and strong enough to encompass even the wrongdoer and the critic. You must be a man of patience, willing to listen and striving to understand. You are the only one to whom some can turn. You must be there when every other source has failed. Permit me to read you a few lines from a letter sent to a bishop.

“Dear Bishop:

“It has been almost two years since I desperately called you asking for help. At that time I was ready to kill myself. I had no one else to turn to—no money, no job, no friends. My house had been taken, and I had no place to live. The Church was my last hope.

“As you know, I had left the Church at the age of 17 and had broken just about every rule and commandment that there was in my search for happiness and fulfillment. Instead of happiness, my life was filled with misery, anguish, and despair. There was no hope or future for me. I even pleaded with God to let me die, to take me out of my misery. Not even He wanted me. I felt that He had rejected me too.

“That’s when I turned to you and the Church. . . .

“You listened with understanding, you counseled, you guided, you helped.

“I began to grow and develop in understanding and knowledge of the gospel. I found that I had to make certain basic changes in my life that were terribly difficult, but that within me I had the worth and strength to do so.

“I learned that as I lived the gospel and repented, I had no more fear. I was filled with an inner peace. The clouds of anguish and despair were gone. Because of the Atonement, my weaknesses and sins were forgiven through Jesus Christ and His love for me.

“He has blessed and strengthened me. He has opened pathways for me, given me direction, and kept me from harm. I have found that as I overcame each obstacle, my business began to grow, enabling my family to benefit and making me feel as though I had accomplished something.

“Bishop, you have given me understanding and support through these past two years. I never would have reached this point if not for your love and patience. Thank you for being what you are as the servant of the Lord to help me, His wandering child.”

A watchman on the tower

Bishops, you stand as watchmen on the tower of the wards over which you preside. There are many teachers in each ward. But you must be the chief teacher among them. You must see that there is no false doctrine creeping in among the people. You must see that they grow in faith and testimony, in integrity and righteousness and a sense of service. You must see that their love for the Lord strengthens and manifests itself in greater love for one another.

You must be their confessor, privy to their deepest secrets, holding absolutely inviolate the confidences placed in you. Yours is a privileged communication that must be guarded and respected against all intruders. There may be temptations to tell. You cannot succumb.

Unless specifically mandated by legal requirement in cases of abuse, what is told to you in confidence must remain with you. The Church maintains a hotline which you should call concerning cases of abuse which may come to you.

The presiding high priest

You as an individual preside over the Aaronic Priesthood of the ward. You are their leader, their teacher, their example, whether you wish to be or not. You are the

presiding high priest, the father to the ward family, to be called upon as arbiter in disagreements, as defender of the accused.

You preside in meetings where the doctrine is taught. You are accountable for the spiritual nature of those meetings and for the administration of the sacrament to the members, that all may be reminded of sacred covenants and obligations incumbent upon those who have taken upon them the name of the Lord.

You must stand as the strong friend of the widow and the orphan, the weak and the beleaguered, the attacked and the helpless.

The sound of your trumpet must be certain and unequivocal. In your ward you stand as the head of the army of the Lord, leading them on to victory in the conquest against sin, indifference, and apostasy.

Wisdom and strength beyond your own

I know that the work is hard at times. There are never enough hours to get it done. The calls are numerous and frequent. You have other things to do. That is true. You must not rob your employer of the time and energy that are rightfully his. You must not rob your family of time which belongs to them. But as most of you have come to know, as you seek for divine guidance, you are blessed with wisdom beyond your own and strength and capacity you did not know you had. It is possible to budget your time so that you neglect neither your employer, your family, nor your flock.

The sweetest, most rewarding service

God bless the good bishops of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. You may on occasion be inclined to complain about the burdens of your office. But you also know the joys of your service. Heavy as the load may be, you know this is the sweetest, the most rewarding, the

most important thing you have ever done outside the walls of your own home.

I thank the Lord for you. I thank the Lord for the good bishops in this Church throughout the world. I pray for you—all 18,000 of you. I plead with you to be strong. I plead with you to be true. I plead with you to be uncompromising in your own lives and in the goals you set for others. Though your days be long and wearisome, may your rest be sweet and in your hearts may you know that peace which comes alone from God to those who serve Him.

I bear testimony of the strength and goodness of the bishops of this Church. I pay tribute to counselors who help them and to all who serve under their direction in response to the calls they make.

We do not expect the impossible from you. We ask that you do the very best you can. Delegate to others every aspect of the work that you legitimately can. And then leave matters in the hands of the Lord.

Someday you will be released. It will be a time of sadness for you. But there will be comfort as your people thank you. Nor will they ever forget you. They will remember you and speak with appreciation through years to come, for among all Church officers you are nearest to them. You have been called, ordained, and set apart as shepherds to the flock. You have been endowed with discernment, judgment, and love to bless their lives. In the process, you will bless your own.

I bear testimony of the divine nature of your calling and of the magnificent way in which you fulfill it. May you, your counselors, your wives, and your children be blessed as you serve the children of the Lord, I humbly pray, in the sacred name of Jesus Christ, amen.

The choir sang "Praise to the Man."
Elder H. Ross Workman offered the benediction.

SUNDAY MORNING SESSION

The fourth session of the 173rd Semiannual General Conference convened in the Conference Center at 10:00 A.M. on Sunday, October 5, 2003. President James E. Faust conducted this session.

Music was provided by the Tabernacle Choir. Craig Jessop directed the choir, and John Longhurst was the organist. The choir sang "Guide Us, O Thou Great Jehovah" to begin the session. President Faust then made the following remarks.

President James E. Faust

Brothers and sisters, we welcome you to this fourth general session of the 173rd Semiannual Conference of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. President Gordon B. Hinckley, who presides at this conference, has asked that I, Brother Faust, conduct this session.

We extend our greetings to those of you who are participating via radio, television, the Internet, or satellite transmission.

We are grateful to the owners and operators of the facilities who are making the proceedings of this conference available to many areas across the world.

We acknowledge the presence this morning of government, education, and civic leaders and members of the Church who have assembled to worship together.

The music for this session will be by the Tabernacle Choir, under the direction of Craig Jessop, with John Longhurst at the organ.

The choir opened this session by singing "Guide Us, O Thou Great Jehovah" and will now favor us with "Sabbath Day." The invocation will then be offered by Elder Angel Abrea, who yesterday received emeritus status.