

President Thomas S. Monson

Your personal influence

My dear brothers and sisters, both within my view and assembled throughout the world, I seek an interest in your prayers and your faith as I respond to the assignment and privilege to address you.

More than 40 years ago, when President David O. McKay extended to me a call to the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, he warmly welcomed me with a heartfelt smile and a tender embrace. Among the sacred counsel he extended was the declaration, “There is one responsibility that no one can evade. That is the effect of one’s personal influence.”

The calling of the early Apostles reflected the influence of the Lord. When He sought a man of faith, He did not select him from the throng of the self-righteous who were found regularly in the synagogue. Rather, He called him from among the fishermen of Capernaum. Peter, Andrew, James, and John heard the call, “Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men.”¹ They followed. Simon, man of doubt, became Peter, Apostle of faith.

When the Savior was to choose a missionary of zeal and power, He found him not among His advocates but amidst His adversaries. Saul of Tarsus—the persecutor—became Paul the proselyter. The Redeemer chose imperfect men to teach the way to perfection. He did so then; He does so now.

He calls you and me to serve Him here below and sets us to the task He would have us fulfill. The commitment is total. There is no conflict of conscience.

As we follow that Man of Galilee—even the Lord Jesus Christ—our personal influence will be felt for good wherever we are, whatever our callings.

Our appointed task may appear insignificant, unnecessary, unnoticed. Some may be tempted to question:

“Father, where shall I work today?”
 And my love flowed warm and free.
 Then he pointed out a tiny spot
 And said, “Tend that for me.”
 I answered quickly, “Oh no, not that!
 Why, no one would ever see,
 No matter how well my work was done.
 Not that little place for me.”
 And the word he spoke, it was not
 stern; . . .
 “Art thou working for them or for me?
 Nazareth was a little place,
 And so was Galilee.”²

Service in the home

The family is the ideal place for teaching. It is also a laboratory for learning. Family home evening can bring spiritual growth to each member.

“The home is the basis of a righteous life, and no other instrumentality can take its place or fulfill its essential functions.”³ Such truth has been taught by many Presidents of the Church.

It is in the home where fathers and mothers can teach provident living to their children. Sharing of tasks and helping one another set a pattern for future families as children grow, marry, and leave home. The lessons learned in the home are those that last the longest. President Gordon B. Hinckley continues to stress the avoidance of unnecessary debt, the fallacy of living beyond our means, and the temptation to let our wants become our necessities.

The Apostle Paul’s exhortation to his beloved Timothy provides the counsel that will enable our personal influence to find lodgment in the hearts of those with whom

we associate: “Be thou an example of the believers, in word, in conversation, in charity, in spirit, in faith, in purity.”⁴

A dedicated Sunday School teacher

When I was a boy, our family lived in the Sixth-Seventh Ward of the Pioneer Stake. The ward population was rather transient, which resulted in an accelerated rate of turnover with respect to the teachers in the Sunday School. As boys and girls we would just become acquainted with a particular teacher and grow to appreciate him or her when the Sunday School superintendent would visit the class and introduce a new teacher. Disappointment filled each heart, and a breakdown of discipline resulted.

Prospective teachers, hearing of the unsavory reputation of our particular class, would graciously decline to serve or suggest the possibility of teaching a different class where the students were more manageable. We took delight in our newly found status and determined to live up to the fears of the faculty.

One Sunday morning a lovely young lady accompanied the superintendent into the classroom and was presented to us as a teacher who requested the opportunity to teach us. We learned that she had been a missionary and loved young people. Her name was Lucy Gertsch. She was beautiful, soft-spoken, and interested in us. She asked each class member to introduce himself, and then she asked questions which gave her an understanding and insight into the background of each. She told us of her girlhood in Midway, Utah, and as she described that beautiful valley she made its beauty live within us and we desired to visit the green fields she loved so much.

When Lucy taught, she made the scriptures actually live. We became personally acquainted with Samuel, David, Jacob, Nephi, Joseph Smith, and the Lord Jesus Christ. Our gospel scholarship grew.

Our deportment improved. Our love for Lucy Gertsch knew no bounds.

A lesson in sacrifice

We undertook a project to save nickels and dimes for what was to be a gigantic Christmas party. Sister Gertsch kept a careful record of our progress. As boys with typical appetites, we converted in our minds the monetary totals to cakes, cookies, pies, and ice cream. This was to be a glorious event. Never before had any of our teachers even suggested a social event like this was to be.

The summer months faded into autumn. Autumn turned to winter. Our party goal had been achieved. The class had grown. A good spirit prevailed.

None of us will forget that gray morning when our beloved teacher announced to us that the mother of one of our classmates had passed away. We thought of our own mothers and how much they meant to us. We felt sincere sorrow for Billy Devenport in his great loss.

The lesson this Sunday was from the book of Acts, chapter 20, verse 35: “Remember the words of the Lord Jesus, how he said, It is more blessed to give than to receive.” At the conclusion of a well-prepared lesson, Lucy Gertsch commented on the economic situation of Billy’s family. These were Depression times, and money was scarce. With a twinkle in her eyes, she asked, “How would you like to follow this teaching of our Lord? How would you feel about taking our party fund and, as a class, giving it to the Devenports as an expression of our love?” The decision was unanimous. We counted so carefully each penny and placed the total sum in a large envelope. A beautiful card was purchased and inscribed with our names.

This simple act of kindness welded us together as one. We learned through our own experience that it is indeed more blessed to give than to receive.

The years have flown. The old chapel is gone, a victim of industrialization. The boys and girls who learned, who laughed, who grew under the direction of that inspired teacher of truth have never forgotten her love or her lessons. Her personal influence for good was contagious.

The influence of President Kimball

A General Authority whose personal influence was felt far and wide was the late President Spencer W. Kimball. He really made a difference in the lives of countless individuals.

When I was a bishop, the telephone rang one day, and the caller identified himself as Elder Spencer W. Kimball. He said, "Bishop Monson, in your ward is a trailer court, and in a little trailer in that court—the smallest trailer of all—is a sweet Navajo widow, Margaret Bird. Would you have your Relief Society president visit her and invite her to come to Relief Society and to participate with the sisters?" We did. Margaret Bird came and found a warm welcome.

Elder Kimball called on another occasion. "Bishop Monson," he said, "I have learned that there are two Samoan boys living in a downtown hotel. They're going to get in trouble. Will you make them members of your ward?"

I found these two boys at midnight sitting on the steps of the hotel playing ukuleles and singing. They became members of our ward. Eventually each of them married in the temple and served valiantly. Their influence for good was widespread.

The influence of two dedicated women

When I was first called as a bishop, I discovered that our record for subscriptions to the *Relief Society Magazine* in the Sixth-Seventh Ward had been at a low ebb. Prayerfully we analyzed the names of individuals whom we could call to be magazine representative. The inspiration

dictated that Elizabeth Keachie should be given the assignment. As her bishop, I approached her with the task. She responded, "Bishop Monson, I'll do it."

Elizabeth Keachie was of Scottish descent, and when she replied, "I'll do it," one knew she indeed would. She and her sister-in-law, Helen Ivory—neither more than five feet tall—commenced to walk the ward, house by house, street by street, and block by block. The result was phenomenal. We had more subscriptions to the *Relief Society Magazine* than had been recorded by all the other units of the stake combined.

Covering the final two blocks

I congratulated Elizabeth Keachie one Sunday evening and said to her, "Your task is done."

She replied, "Not yet, Bishop. There are two square blocks we have not yet covered."

When she told me which blocks they were, I said, "Oh, Sister Keachie, no one lives on those blocks. They are totally industrial."

"Just the same," she said, "I'll feel better if Nell and I go and check them ourselves."

On a rainy day she and Nell covered those final two blocks. On the first one she found no home, nor did she on the second. She and Sister Ivory paused, however, at a driveway which was muddy from a recent storm. Sister Keachie gazed about 100 feet down the driveway, which was adjacent to a machine shop, and there noticed a garage. This was not a normal garage, however, in that there was a curtain at the window.

She turned to her companion and said, "Nell, shall we go and investigate?"

The two sweet sisters then walked down the muddy driveway 40 feet to a point where the entire view of the garage could be seen. Now they noticed a door

which had been cut into the side of the garage, which door was unseen from the street. They also noticed that there was a chimney with smoke rising from it.

Elizabeth Keachie knocked at the door. A man 68 years of age, William Ringwood, answered. They then presented their story concerning the need of every home having the *Relief Society Magazine*. William Ringwood replied, "You'd better ask my father."

Ninety-four-year-old Charles W. Ringwood then came to the door and also listened to the message. He subscribed.

The fruits of their efforts

Elizabeth Keachie reported to me the presence of these two men in our ward. When I requested their membership certificates from Church headquarters, I received a call from the Membership Department at the Presiding Bishopric's Office. The clerk said, "Are you sure you have living in your ward Charles W. Ringwood?"

I replied that I did, whereupon she reported that the membership certificate for him had remained in the "lost and unknown" file of the Presiding Bishopric's Office for the previous 16 years.

On Sunday morning Elizabeth Keachie and Nell Ivory brought to our priesthood meeting Charles and William Ringwood. This was the first time they had been inside a chapel for many years. Charles Ringwood was the oldest deacon I had ever met. His son was the oldest male member holding no priesthood I had ever met.

It became my opportunity to ordain Brother Charles Ringwood a teacher and then a priest and finally an elder. I shall never forget his interview with respect to seeking a temple recommend. He handed me a silver dollar, which he took from an old, worn leather coin purse, and said, "This is my fast offering."

I said, "Brother Ringwood, you owe no fast offering. You need it yourself."

"I want to receive the blessings, not retain the money," he responded.

It was my opportunity to take Charles Ringwood to the Salt Lake Temple and to attend with him the endowment session.

Within a few months, Charles W. Ringwood passed away. At his funeral service I noticed his family sitting on the front rows in the mortuary chapel, but I noticed also two sweet women sitting near the rear of the chapel, Elizabeth Keachie and Helen Ivory.

As I gazed upon those two faithful and dedicated women and contemplated their personal influence for good, the promise of the Lord filled my very soul:

"I, the Lord, am merciful and gracious unto those who fear me, and delight to honor those who serve me in righteousness and in truth unto the end.

"Great shall be their reward and eternal shall be their glory."⁵

The influence of the Savior

There is one, above all others, whose personal influence covers the continents, spans the oceans, and penetrates the hearts of true believers. He atoned for the sins of mankind.

I testify that He is a teacher of truth—but He is more than a teacher. He is the Exemplar of the perfect life—but He is more than an exemplar. He is the Great Physician—but He is more than a physician. He is the literal Savior of the world, the Son of God, the Prince of Peace, the Holy One of Israel, even the risen Lord, who declared:

"I am Jesus Christ, whom the prophets testified shall come into the world. . . . I am the light and the life of the world."⁶

"I am the first and the last; I am he who liveth, I am he who was slain; I am your advocate with the Father."⁷

As His witness, I testify to you that He lives! In His holy name—even Jesus Christ, the Savior—amen.

NOTES

1. Matthew 4:19.
2. Meade MacGuire, "Father, Where Shall I Work Today?" in *Best-Loved Poems of the LDS People*, comp. Jack M. Lyon and others (1996), 152.
3. First Presidency letter, Feb. 11, 1999; quoted in *Ensign*, June 1999, 80.
4. 1 Timothy 4:12.
5. Doctrine and Covenants 76:5–6.
6. 3 Nephi 11:10–11.
7. Doctrine and Covenants 110:4.

The choir sang "Come, Come, Ye Saints."

Elder Wayne S. Peterson offered the benediction.

SATURDAY AFTERNOON SESSION

The second general session of the 174th Annual General Conference convened in the Conference Center on Saturday, April 3, 2004, at 2:00 p.m. President James E. Faust conducted this session.

Music for this session was provided by a Relief Society choir from stakes in Salt Lake. Vanja Watkins directed the choir, and Bonnie Goodliffe was the organist.

President Faust made the following remarks as the meeting began.

President James E. Faust

We welcome you this afternoon to the second general session of the 174th Annual General 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 all who are in attendance or who are participating by means of television, radio, or the Internet and to the many who are watching in stake centers in various parts of the world where the conference is being carried by satellite transmission.

The music for this session will be by a Relief Society choir from stakes in Salt Lake, under the direction of Vanja Watkins, with Bonnie Goodliffe at the organ.

The choir will open these services by singing "Dearest Children, God Is Near You." The invocation will then be offered by Elder L. Whitney Clayton of the Seventy.

The choir sang "Dearest Children, God Is Near You."

Elder L. Whitney Clayton offered the invocation.

President Faust

The choir will now sing "The Lord Is My Shepherd." Following the singing, President Thomas S. Monson, First Counselor in the First Presidency, will present the General Authorities, Area Authority Seventies, and general auxiliary presidencies for your sustaining vote. Brother Wesley L. Jones, managing director of Church Auditing, will then read the Church Auditing Department Report. He will be followed by Brother F. Michael Watson, secretary to the First Presidency, who will present the statistical report of the Church for the year 2003.

The choir sang "The Lord Is My Shepherd."
