

Follow the Prophet

The Primary children sing about it and we hear many church members constantly repeat the phrase, "Follow the Prophet". Interestingly, this commonly repeated phrase is a fairly recent development in the church. In General Conference talks the phrase has only been applied to the living prophet since 1966, but it is now deeply rooted in our culture. Previously they would use the phrase "living Oracles" when talking about the living prophets and apostles.

We can see the development of this concept in a story related to us by President Wilford Woodruff.

Wilford Woodruff

I will refer to a certain meeting I attended in the town of Kirtland in my early days. At that meeting some remarks were made that have been made here today, with regard to the living oracles and with regard to the written word of God. The same principle was presented, although not as extensively as it has been here, when a leading man in the Church got up and talked upon the subject, and said: "You have got the word of God before you here in the Bible, Book of Mormon, and Doctrine and Covenants; you have the written word of God, and you who give revelations should give revelations according to those books, as what is written in those books is the word of God. We should confine ourselves to them." When he concluded, Brother Joseph turned to Brother Brigham Young and said, "Brother Brigham I want you to take the stand and tell us your views with regard to the written oracles and the written word of God." Brother Brigham took the stand, and he took the Bible, and laid it down; he took the Book of Mormon, and laid it down; and he took the Book of Doctrine and Covenants, and laid it down before him, and he said: "There is the written word of God to us, concerning the work of God from the beginning of the world, almost, to our day." "And now," said he, "when compared with the living oracles those books are nothing to me; those books do not convey the word of God direct to us now, as do the words of a Prophet or a man bearing the Holy Priesthood in our day and generation. I would rather have the living oracles than all the writing in the books." That was the course he pursued. When he was through, Brother Joseph said to the congregation: "Brother Brigham has told you the word of the Lord, and he has told you the truth." (Conference Report, October 1897, p.22-23)

And yet we have other statements from Joseph Smith where he taught that preaching should never go contrary to the scriptures:

Joseph Smith

"If any man preaches to you, doctrines contrary to the Bible, the Book of Mormon, or the Book of Doctrine & Covenants, set him down as an imposter... Try them by the principles contained in the acknowledged word of God; if they preach, or teach, or practice contrary to that, disfellowship them; cut them off from among you as useless and dangerous branches." (Joseph Smith, Times & Seasons, 5:490-491, April, 1, 1844.)

Joseph also told us that we could detect a bad angel if "he contradicted a former revelation"[1]

More recently Joseph Fielding Smith told us, "My words, and the teachings of any other member of the Church, high or low, if they do not square with the revelations, we need not accept them." [2] And Harold B. Lee has said, "If we want to measure truth, we should measure it by the four standard works, regardless of who writes it." [3]

But you also can't restrict yourself only to the scriptures because they establish the importance of

inspired leaders. Orson Pratt reminds us, “ if we undertake to follow the written word, and at the same time do not give heed to the living oracles of God, the written word will condemn us.” [4]

On the day the church was organized, the Lord said of Joseph Smith Jr., “Wherefore, meaning the church, thou shalt give heed unto all his words and commandments which he shall give unto you as he receiveth them, walking in all holiness before me; For his word ye shall receive, as if from mine own mouth, in all patience and faith.” (D&C 21:4-5) The expectation would be that this would also apply to later prophets called to the same position.

There have been many prophets and leaders that have told us that we can rest assured that the living prophet will never lead us astray. Brigham Young taught, “The Lord Almighty leads this Church, and he will never suffer you to be led astray.”[5] Wilford Woodruff said, “the Lord will never permit me or any other man who stands as president of this Church to lead you astray.”[6] Joseph F. Smith stated, “If any man in that position should become unfaithful, God would remove him out of his place.”[7] Harold B. Lee tells us, “Never would He permit one in this position to lead this church astray.”[8] Joseph Fielding Smith declared, “ Neither the President of the Church, nor the First Presidency, nor the united voice of the First Presidency and the Twelve will ever lead the Saints astray.”[9] Heber J. Grant counseled, “The Lord will never let his mouthpiece lead the people astray.”[10] Ezra Taft Benson tells us, “ Keep your eye on the Prophet, for the Lord will never permit his Prophet to lead this Church astray.”[11] But then President Benson adds, “Let us live close to the Spirit, so we can test all counsel.”[11]

If we can trust absolutely that the prophet will never lead us astray, why does President Benson tell us to “live close to the Spirit, so we can test all counsel”? We have all these prophets and apostles telling us that we don't have to even think about it. We can simply know that we will not be led astray, but here we are counseled that we should “test all counsel”. Could it be that we can't blindly follow, that there is more involved? Apostle Charles W. Penrose tells us that it is very wrong to simply follow or “tamely and blindly submit to a man because he has a portion of the priesthood.”[12]

Remember that Brigham Young said the Almighty would “never suffer you to be led astray”[5], but he told the saints just 6 weeks before, “I am more afraid that this people have so much confidence in their leaders that they will not inquire for themselves of God whether they are led by Him. I am fearful they settle down in a state of blind self-security, trusting their eternal destiny in the hands of their leaders with a reckless confidence that in itself would thwart the purposes of God in their salvation, and weaken that influence they could give to their leaders, did they know for themselves, by the revelations of Jesus, that they are led in the right way. Let every man and woman know, by the whispering of the Spirit of God to themselves, whether their leaders are walking in the path the Lord dictates, or not. This has been my exhortation continually.”[13]

Which Brigham are we suppose to believe? Could it be that the Saints had a hard time believing his first statements in January of 1862 and so he came back with his statements in February with an assurance to make them feel better, but that was completely opposite from his earlier declaration. Let us see if we can find other scriptures and statements that will help us understand true doctrine.

Joseph Smith told the Relief Society that they should trust the Lord and not depend on the prophet. “ if the people departed from the Lord, they must fall--that they were depending on the Prophet, hence were darkened in their minds.”[14] Harold B. Lee has stated, “It is not to be thought that every word spoken by the General Authorities is inspired, or that they are moved upon by the Holy Ghost in everything they speak and write. Now you keep that in mind. I don't care what his position is . . .”[15]

Will God let the prophet lead us astray? In Deuteronomy it explains that God will allow a prophet to lead us astray to “prove” us as to whether we will follow the Lord.

1 If there arise among you a prophet, or a dreamer of dreams, and giveth thee a sign or a wonder,

2 And the sign or the wonder come to pass, whereof he spake unto thee, saying, Let us go after other gods, which thou hast not known, and let us serve them;

3 Thou shalt not hearken unto the words of that prophet, or that dreamer of dreams; for the Lord your God proveth you, to know whether ye love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul.

4 Ye shall walk after the Lord your God, and fear him, and keep his commandments, and obey his voice, and ye shall serve him, and cleave unto him. (Deut. 13:1-4)

This explains that God does allow prophets to lead people astray to test the people to see if they “love the Lord your God with all your heart and soul . . . walk after the Lord your God” It is God we are suppose to follow, not a man.

J. Golden Kimball talks about the honor that he gives to president Joseph F. Smith, but he admonished the saints, that “he was human just like the rest of us. I want to learn the lesson, Cursed be the men who trust in man”[16]

“Cursed is he that putteth his trust in man, or maketh flesh his arm” (2 Ne 28:31)

Brigham Young cautioned, “I do not wish any Latter-day Saint in this world, nor in heaven, to be satisfied with anything I do, unless the Spirit of the Lord Jesus Christ, the spirit of revelation, makes them satisfied.”[17] Harold B. Lee taught that it is “not only important that there be revelation to his Church through his mouthpiece, the one who held the keys, but his Church must also be founded on personal revelation.”[18] He is telling us that it isn't enough to just rely on the inspiration of our prophets.

“And whatsoever they shall speak when moved upon by the Holy Ghost shall be scripture, shall be the will of the Lord, shall be the mind of the Lord, shall be the word of the Lord, shall be the voice of the Lord, and the power of God unto salvation.” (D&C 68:4.)

In speaking about this scripture, J. Reuben Clark Jr. commented, “The very words of the revelation recognize that the Brethren may speak when they are not “moved upon by the Holy Ghost”; yet only when they do speak as “moved upon” is what they say considered scripture. No exceptions are given to this rule or principle. It is universal in its application. The question is, how shall we know when the things they have spoken were said as they were “moved upon by the Holy Ghost”? I have given some thought to this question, and the answer thereto, so far as I can determine, is: We can tell when the speakers are “moved upon by the Holy Ghost” only when we, ourselves, are “moved upon by the Holy Ghost.” In a way, this completely shifts the responsibility from them to us to determine when they so speak.”[19]

I remember that I first heard about this statement from J. Reuben Clark Jr., in a religion class at BYU. Some time after I returned from my mission in 1970 I took that Religion 333, “Teachings of the Living Prophets” We used a text book that had been published in 1970. For today's students, that 323 page book has been replaced by a much nicer student manual of less than 100 pages (with twice the number of words per page)

One of the things that is not found in the new manual that was in my manual was a section titled: “What Are the Guidelines Necessary to Understand When the Words of Modern Prophets Constitute Scripture?” The section ended with this statement:

In summary, we learn from the foregoing material, that there are four fundamental guidelines in

understanding how modern prophet's words may constitute scripture. First, that everything taught should be couched in the scriptures; second, the "one exception" who can teach and speak beyond the teachings in the standard works is the prophet, seer, and revelator; third, that a General Authority has to "speak by the power of the Holy Ghost" before his words are the same as scripture; and fourth, that members of the Church must so live that the Holy Ghost can bear witness to them that the teachings of the authorities constitute scripture. (*Teachings of the Living Prophets*, 1970, p. 150)

It was sound advice when this was taught in 1970. It is still good advice for today. It is important for us to be close to the Spirit so that we are always guided to the truth. I don't know why that isn't emphasized anymore. However, we can still take this as a valid principle—we should be open to what the Spirit tells us and listen when the Spirit witnesses to the truth in what we read or hear. I think it would be a mistake to discard this important advice and replace it with a simple notion that allows our spiritual muscles to atrophy as we are repeatedly told that all we have to do is “Follow the Prophet.”

But our goal isn't just finding the truth. We want to return to our Father's presence. The scriptures tell us what happens to those who claim that they were following a prophet whether it was Paul or Moses or Enoch or even Christ. It tells us that they go to the Telestial Kingdom.

And the glory of the telestial is one, even as the glory of the stars is one; for as one star differs from another star in glory, even so differs one from another in glory in the telestial world; For these are they who are of Paul, and of Apollos, and of Cephas. These are they who say they are some of one and some of another—some of Christ and some of John, and some of Moses, and some of Elias, and some of Esaias, and some of Isaiah, and some of Enoch; But received not the gospel, neither the testimony of Jesus, neither the prophets, neither the everlasting covenant. Last of all, these all are they who will not be gathered with the saints, to be caught up unto the church of the Firstborn, and received into the cloud. (D&C 76:98-102)

It isn't enough to be lulled into security with the phrase that we are following the prophet. What the Lord requires of us is to take the Holy Spirit for our guide. That is what separates the wise and foolish virgins at his coming.

The question isn't whether we should “Follow the Prophet” as they give us council from the Spirit—of course we should. But we have to be careful not to adopt this mantra that blinds us to the more important and challenging goal of preparing ourselves so that we are in tune with the Spirit. The danger is when we allow ourselves to be “led astray” by thinking “all is well in Zion” because we are Following the Prophet. Instead we should seek for personal revelation and take the Holy Spirit for our guide.

And at that day, when I shall come in my glory, shall the parable be fulfilled which I spake concerning the ten virgins. For they that are wise and have received the truth, and have taken the Holy Spirit for their guide, and have not been deceived—verily I say unto you, they shall not be hewn down and cast into the fire, but shall abide the day. (D&C 45:56-57)

1. History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 7 Vols. 4:581
2. Joseph Fielding Smith, *Doctrines of Salvation*, comp. Bruce R. McConkie, 3 vols., (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1954–56), 203)
3. Harold B. Lee, Improvement Era, Jan. 1969, p. 13
4. Orson Pratt, JD, vol. 7, p. 373.
5. Brigham Young, Feb. 23, 1862 JD, v. 9, p. 289
6. Wilford Woodruff, *The Discourses of Wilford Woodruff*, pp. 212-13
7. Joseph F. Smith, JD 24:192
8. Harold B. Lee, *Teachings of Harold B. Lee*, pp. 535-536
9. Joseph Fielding Smith, (General Conference, April 1972)
10. Heber J. Grant as quoted by Marion G. Romney (Conference Report, Oct 1960, p. 78)
11. Ezra Taft Benson, (General Conference, Oct. 1966)
12. Apostle Charles W. Penrose, (Millennial Star, v. 14, no. 38, pp. 593-595)
13. Brigham Young, (Jan. 12, 1862 JD vol 9, p. 150)
14. Joseph Smith Jr., (Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith, p. 237)
15. Harold B. Lee, (*The Place of the Living Prophet, Seer, and Revelator* [address delivered to seminary and institute of religion faculty, 8 July 1964], p. 14.)
16. J. Golden Kimball, (October 1912 conference)
17. Brigham Young, (JD v. 3, p. 45)
18. Harold B. Lee (General Conference Oct. 1953)
19. J. Reuben Clark Jr., (Church News. 31 July 1954)