

Development of the Understanding Necessary

Remarks by Elder Amasa M. Lyman, delivered in the Bowery, in Great Salt Lake City, General Conference, Oct. 9. 1865.

I am happy to meet with you, my brethren and sisters, this morning, and I simply give expression to my feelings, in repeating what has been expressed by others, that this Conference has been to me one of interest—richly instructive and edifying.

In the admonitions that have been imparted we have been led to see, what in us is weak, dark, and should be improved. And in addition to that, the instructions have been rich in suggestions as to the ways and means by which we can secure to ourselves the blessings of that much needed improvement. While I have listened, the inquiry has risen in my mind as to how we, the people of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, could substantially and profitably pursue the labors devolving upon us and honestly continue the struggle to become what we are denominated—Saints.

In the admonition that has been imparted we were truthfully told, that we were as yet only in part what we should be as Saints; that with all our labors and experience, with all the advantages for acquiring knowledge that have characterized our history thus far, we have yet much to learn. This truth, it appears to me, should be impressed upon the minds of all who think and reflect. It is one that is evinced in our conduct and actions as a people. There is no one feature in our history that is rendered more distinct or plain to be read and comprehended by the reflecting mind than this—that we, in all our learning, learn but slowly, and have as yet learned comparatively little of that large amount that may be learned, and that we yet manifest in our lives but a small degree of that perfection that should characterize us as the children of God, as the people of the Saints of the Most High, who are blessed with the light of the Gospel, ministered to them continually in simplicity and in truth. All our meetings, like the present, where there is congregated together the largest representation of the people of God to be met with in any one place, still continue to be characterized by instruction and teaching on those principles that it has ever been the object of our heavenly Father, and of his servants, to impress upon the minds of the Saints.

Now, how shall we, as the servants and ministers of God, expect to see in ourselves, and in the people to whom our ministrations extend, a permanent and progressive improvement, as the fruits of our labors, unless we, to some extent, justly and truthfully comprehend the principles that are involved in the work that is devolved upon us? It appears to me, as but consistent and truthful, that the enlightenment of the people and the development in them of the knowledge necessary for their blessing and exaltation, should legitimately follow the development of knowledge and a just comprehension of truth in those who minister to them.

Well, we are almost all teachers and preachers; in some relationship in life, in some position in the community, we all put on the character of teachers; and when we take into account the sum of the evils that exist as barriers between us and the enjoyment of a fulness of happiness, when we consider what these are, to remove, conquer, and overcome them should be our labor. And if the knowledge of God, of truth, and of the principles of the Gospel is necessary to the accomplishment of this work, it should be our business, as servants of God and of the people, to learn this lesson ourselves; for it is evident to my mind that our attention and devotion to the truth and to such a course of action as the knowledge of the truth would suggest to us, is that which should regulate us in life, and the extent of our devotion to this is always marked and determined by our appreciation of its value.

If we, as a people, were capable of appreciating, and had justly estimated the counsels that have been imparted to us continually in relation to what is denominated our temporal salvation, our devotion to the advice would have produced far different results. There would not have been, as there is today, a feeling to expostulate with the people on the necessity of laying up and securing to themselves bread against a time of want. There would not be the empty granaries and the comparative lack of that which should exist in abundance among the people.

I do not know what name men may give to the causes that have induced this condition of things. In my mind there exists but one general reason—our lack of comprehending the truth in relation to the nature of the work in which

we are engaged; and that with all our opportunities of acquiring knowledge and getting understanding we are, as has been truthfully told us in the fatherly admonitions imparted to us during this Conference, only just beginning to be Saints—only just entering on that work, the consummation of which will make of us that kind of a people for whom the Lord says it is his business to provide.

Now, perhaps, we may have been to some extent presuming too much upon the kindness, charity, and goodness of our heavenly Father. We may have fancied, perchance, that he is pledged to preserve us irrespective of the course that we pursue, simply because we have supposed that we are Saints, because we have been baptized into the Church. But this truth cannot be too forcibly impressed on our minds—that if it is the business of the Lord to provide for his Saints, it is our business exclusively so to live that the Lord may have Saints for whom to care and provide, whom He may protect, and who may securely rest beneath the shadow of His wings, enjoying the blessings of His protection against evil.

But what is it that will constitute us Saints? A knowledge of the work we have to perform, and then a faithful, humble, undivided, and unreserved devotion to its accomplishment. That will constitute us Saints; that will constitute us teachers in the midst of the people; that will constitute us a people to whom the ministrations of the Priesthood will extend as a fountain of blessings.

The attainment of this knowledge, the possession of this rich understanding, is that to which you and I must reach ere we are established in the truth beyond a chance of becoming unsettled. This is the way it appears to me. My paths may be crooked, and my efforts to attain to this position and condition may be feeble, and not only feeble, but they may be characterized by a corresponding amount of improprieties and inconsistencies; but this is what appears to me to be the great object that is before me, that invites my exertions, induces me to labor and struggle—not till I am worn out, but until I find the realization of my brightest hopes in the possession of that which I seek.

As the Gospel presents itself to me, as the work of God is spread out before my mind, so I judge of it, so I appreciate it, so I talk about it, so I recommend it to you, my brethren and sisters.

“Well,” says one, “when will we learn?” That depends altogether upon ourselves. “Why,” says one, “will not the Lord have something to do with it?” The Lord has to do with it; and if we would be more careful about what we should do, instead of troubling ourselves about what the Lord should do, it might perhaps result in bringing us to the enjoyment of greater and richer blessings. Why, the Lord knows what to do, and He has no need of our instruction. The Lord is supposed, by me at any rate, to be fully up to all that devolves upon Him in relation to ourselves. The Lord is waiting for us to come along; He is only waiting for us to come up to that which it is our privilege to enjoy.

Some people may suppose, perchance, that the channels of knowledge are not open to all the people, as they are to the few. Some may cherish the idea that position, or place in the Church and kingdom of God may make a vast difference in the attainment of the blessings requisite to our happiness, and to our acceptance with God, and to our progress as Saints in the way of life. Position may make vast differences, perchance; but I do not know of an individual so low, I do not know of an individual so poor, but what the fountains of knowledge are as accessible to him as to the highest, as well to the last as to the first. It is not from the fact that the fountain of knowledge is only open to the teachers among the people, that they occupy their position. The teachers in the midst of the people are something like what we see in our schools. You go into our schools, and if the teacher has a large number of pupils in charge, he very likely will have recourse to this bit of policy—he takes some of his most advanced scholars and gives them the position of teachers amongst their schoolfellows and associates. Well, does this exalt them above the character or capacity of pupils? No! They are still learners in the school, and it is just as necessary for them to continue their labor for the acquisition of knowledge as before. This is the character of the teachers in Israel; that is, as I view it. This is the way I view myself as a teacher in the midst of Israel—as one upon whom has devolved the duty of extending the principles of salvation to those around me. When I labor to teach or instruct, I do not feel that they whom I am instructing need instruction any more than I do myself. I feel that all the necessity that may exist for any increase of wisdom, knowledge, and understanding in reference to the humblest soul in the

kingdom of God, exists in all its force for me.

Well, with this feeling I look upon the work of God, I think of it, I study about it, and then I make my efforts for the accomplishment of the duties that seem to devolve upon me. And when I get to know more and become wiser with that increase of wisdom, I shall not need to tell anybody, it will be evinced in increased propriety of action to the accomplishment of what I seek to accomplish. What duty, then, devolves upon us as the ministers of God—the Priesthood dispersed and living among the people? Why, we should seek for the development in ourselves of that knowledge without which we tell the people that neither they nor we can be exalted to glory and greatness.

“But,” says my brother, “we must tell the people they should be correct in the duties of life in its multiplied details.” Yes, this is good; this must be; but what is it that will correct all these matters? My neighbor kindly takes me by the hand today and says, “Brother Lyman, you can walk in this, that, or the other direction, it is safe.” It may be ground that I have not explored and do not understand, and I feel that his direction and instruction are a blessing to me. So is that a blessing which shall lead and guide the people until the “day shall dawn, and the day star shall arise in their hearts,” whether it be the kindly instruction of teachers who live in their midst, and with whom they meet and associate from time to time, or whether it be the suggestions of the written history of those who have long since passed away, it makes no difference. The history or record contained in the Bible presents an example of the right, and it is suggestive of right to those who read it, and upon the same principle that what could be said to you by the living teacher is suggestive of the truth.

Now, this appears to be what we need; we want to have understanding developed within us. Well, what is it? Perhaps if I were to describe my notions and views of things, it would not be the same as if described by some other man. One of the ancient apostles spoke of understanding in such a way that we can judge something of what his views were in regard to it. Said he, “We know that Jesus has come.” It was a great question in New Testament times among the immediate successors of Jesus—“Has Jesus come, or has he not?” “Has Jesus been and died, or is it an imposture?” the same as it is about the Saints now—“Is this the work of God or is it an imposture?” Well, now, says the apostle, “When that the Son of God has come and has given us understanding to determine between those that serve God and those who do not.” This is what we want; we want understanding, that we may know for ourselves that this is the work of God. Why? Until this is developed within us there is a chance for uncertainty to hang around and cling to us, and a possibility that our feet may be moved from the path of rectitude and truth. We may be like men whom I have seen that have traveled for a score of years with, and have labored in the Church, and have suffered—that is, about as far as men have suffered who have not died—and then, after the expiration of this time, we find them floating off to the east and to the west, to the north and to the south. “Why, good brother, what is the matter? I did not believe you would ever have left the Church.” “Ah!” said he, “I have not found it what it was said to be.” Such individuals have not understanding developed within them; they do not know that this is the work of God. The apostle in ancient times knew that Jesus had come, because of the gift of understanding by which he was able to determine for himself. It is this understanding that, when developed in the mind or soul of a man, sets aside all uncertainty and silences all doubt. Uncertainty departs from the mind at once, and the soul settles in unbroken, undisturbed tranquility and repose, so far as the nature of the work in which it is engaged is concerned, and the language of that soul is, “I know that this is the work of God.”

Now we, as the ministers of God, called from among the people to labor among them, should remember all the time, that it is our first great duty to learn ourselves, to obtain knowledge and understanding ourselves, and then to use all the judgment and understanding with which God may favor and bless us, to enlighten the people and to lead them onward.

But, says one, the people have been taught for years, and they have not yet learned; when will they learn? I will tell you. When they have been taught long enough they will learn. How? Just as you and I when we went to school. We had to study our lessons until we could master them, and then that labor was completed.

I am glad of this continuous principle that seems to mark the character of the work of God. If we do not learn in two, five, ten, twenty, or thirty years the truth that would make us free, still the opportunity is open, still the chance is afforded us to learn and to mend our crooked ways. This is why I love the Gospel; this is what first fixed a

deep and abiding regard for it in my affections—the mercy that was in it, the kind forbearance, that seemed to have a life like the life of the Almighty—eternal, that would never die.

Let us be encouraged to hope for such an increase of intelligence among the people—the fruit of the labors and ministrations of the ministry in their midst, as shall develop increasing perfection of action among the people, and by-and-by they will know enough of themselves to adopt such a policy as would enrich and save them temporally.

Well, says one, would they not get spiritually saved if they were not temporally saved? I do not know. I want to be saved, and I would like to be temporally and spiritually saved. If there should be any difference between them, I want them both. This is the salvation before us. If we had that spiritual salvation which, in the language of the Savior, constitutes eternal life—the knowledge of God, an understanding of the principles of salvation, if we had a sufficiency of divine wisdom, in that light would vanish all these dark clouds that exist around us as so many drawbacks to our prosperity and to our progress in the way of life. In that light we would be able to appreciate the value of doing right, above that of doing wrong. This is the way the matter appears to me, and I look forward to the time when the Saints will be all they should be, as Saints. I hope and labor for it, and there is no feeling in my soul but what reaches forward with hopeful confidence to a time when the last dark cloud shall be moved from the minds, not of everybody, but of the Saints with whom our labors in this work begun, and with whom we have been associated the last thirty years of our lives; of the Saints with whom we have endured toil, with whom we have been driven, and in whose fate and fortunes we have shared. We expect it for them, we hope for it for them, and we labor for it for them. Will not you labor with us? We tell you that to know God is eternal life, which is simply repeating the truth declared by the Savior of the world; and while we impress this repeatedly, again and again, on your minds, and bring it to your attention, will not you unite with us in struggling for the acquisition of that knowledge for yourselves? Why, says one, can't you get it for us? No; it is all I can do to get knowledge for myself. Well, but, says one, can't you impart to us? I can do what I am doing this morning—making the best effort in my power, within the compass of my ability, to awaken such trains of thought and reflection in your minds as will lead you to seek after the truth, and seeking, find it. If what I have learned, if the little knowledge I possess should have enlightened any other mind than mine, or could be possessed by any other individual than me, without his action being required for its attainment, things would be different from what they are. Our Father has fixed it so that we might live, and find the elements of happiness and joy for ourselves; and when they were acquired, they would be ours to possess, fixed within, the treasure of our own souls, forever ours, constituting our happiness with all its eternal increase and greatness.

Let us wake up and feel that we are the children of God, and that as God's children, the object of our being here is to find and realize within ourselves that development of our natures that we inherit from our Father and God, that will exalt us till we can be fit associates for Him, that between Him and ourselves there may exist all that wealth of harmony that will constitute the happiness of heaven, the bliss, and glory of the saved and sanctified.

Well, now, to acquire this, what is the labor before us? What is necessary? That we turn from evil. Well, how shall we know evil? Why our evils are pointed out continually, not only by the feeble dawnings of light within us, but by the light of that inspiration that burns in the hearts of the servants of God, making their comprehensions of truth reach incomparably beyond those who have not in such a way devoted themselves to the acquirement of knowledge. In that light our weaknesses and follies are brought to our understanding, that we may see them, and that seeing and comprehending we may go to work and regulate our actions so that when God blesses, aids, and strengthens us, we may acquire that knowledge that will exalt us above the influence of the ignorance that is around us.

Now, my brethren and sisters, having expressed these few thoughts, I hope that we may be able to go away from this Conference to our respective homes to live and labor in the great work of our Father, and that when the half-year shall have passed away, and we are again assembled in this capacity, that we may feel, and not only feel, but that it may be true, that we are a wiser and better people than today; and that we may entertain more truthful conceptions of God and the character of his work, and be acting in a manner better calculated to please Him and to secure His blessings upon us, than today.

That this may be our happy lot, and that God's blessings may attend our every exertion for the development of Zion on the earth, is my prayer, in the name of Jesus. Amen.