



BYU President Ernest L. Wilkinson at his desk, May 1959. Courtesy BYU Archives.

The Calling of BYU

Ernest L. Wilkinson

The Challenge in a Changing World Environment

As school begins this year, we see signs on every hand that we are living in a universe, not just a world, of change and ferment. Our modern vocabulary is filled with terms unknown a few years ago, but now on the lips of every literate person. This is truly a scientific and complex environment--one fraught with great potentials for good but beset with grave dangers as well.

We humans have left evidence of our existence in the implements we used, the cities we built, our burial places, memorials, public structures, roads, and irrigation canals; yes, in the civilizations we built--some of which we destroyed from without and others that disintegrated from within. Our mode of travel and transport has been extended from foot to flight and from muscle-bound back to mighty and versatile machine. The fantastic means of communication today are miraculous compared with the primitive grimace, gesture, and grunt.

Our material and physical state has been advanced from an animal existence to the luxury of thermostatically controlled, air-conditioned, soap-scented, fluorescent-lighted, push-button comfort. We are clothed in synthetic fabrics of rainbow hues; amply nourished, replete with vitamins; irradiated, inoculated, and chlorinated.

Today's concerns, in America at least, are more likely to be those of obesity and geriatrics than starvation and pediatrics. In short, to "live like a king" has lost its appeal. Regal luxury has become commonplace--and free from a king's responsibility!

The prophetic novels of Jules Verne or Edward Bellamy seemed fantastic to their early readers. Today so many scientific marvels have become reality that the speed of sound is a unit of aircraft velocity, and the speed of light a term in the equation of space travel. The electron and

the atom are hard at work in our service, and the fourth dimension is no longer a science-fiction nightmare.

The sky is no longer the limit. The real limit, today, is only the boundary of our vision and ability, and both are a measure of our training for the future. It was recently observed that of all the scientists who have ever walked the earth 90 percent are living today! Furthermore, it is estimated that during the past decade more learned data has been accumulated than during all the preceding period of recorded history! Undoubtedly, we are living in a stunning era of accelerated knowledge. In reality, we are in danger of being "submerged" by data--of all kinds, in all fields of leadership. But this staggering challenge, instead of discouraging our pursuit of knowledge, must inspire us to greater intellectual mastery.

The True Books of Education

American education is but a mirror for our culture. We cannot expect our educational system to be pluperfect when we ourselves tolerate a growing contempt for work, barbarous music and art, a sensual and sensational press, tawdry drama, and corrupted media of communication. We might fight constantly against the rising obscenity and growing vulgarity of our society. BYU should be in the vanguard of those who would fight for the highest standards in life--including those of the intellectual order. What, then, can be done at this institution?

I would submit that we should persistently struggle for greater academic attainment. We need a toughened attitude toward our curriculum, on the part of both teachers and students. We also know that greater application of reasoning power is obtained where the challenge is most severe and exciting. There is no doubt in my mind that we should do everything possible on this campus to stimulate the latent intellectual talent of our students.

We should sponsor an enthusiastic revival of stern, conscientious study habits. Brigham Young's definition that "education is the power to think clearly, to act well in the world's work, and the power to appreciate life"¹ must never be forgotten at this institution. Students should be taught how to think, encouraged to actually do some thinking, and inspired to take action on the results of their thinking, and then taught a reverence for and appreciation of life in all its component parts. Above all, we must remember that quality, not quantity, is the true yardstick of education. American schools, on all levels, must continue to stress training for citizenship and character because these are the qualities essential to freedom.

But a delicate balance is required. We minimize the stern and exacting disciplines at our own peril in an age fraught with unimaginable danger. However, if in the process of emphasizing these disciplines we lose sight of the more subtle qualities absolutely necessary to human freedom, we may reap the bitter harvest of trading shadow for substance. Our citizenship and character training can never become so nebulous as to lose significant meaning, nor can it be discarded as a mere "frill." We need both specialized and generalized outlooks on life and its challenges. We should not be forced to choose between but should strive for quality in both approaches to education.

Above all else, we must remember that the youth we teach here will be the future leaders of the Church, the nation, and the world. We must not fail them! Let us provide them with the intellectual tools they will need to meet the test of their times.

The Emphasis on Spiritual Truth

This age-old dilemma of knowledge, which can elevate and at the same time submerge us, confronts us on many fronts. Uppermost, of course, in our minds is the urgent crisis of

civilization itself that is inherent in the existence of nuclear research. But if the others are less serious, they are by no means simple. As medicine and nutritional science progress, the general population and proportion of older people rise. Shifts to new automated technology bring temporary unemployment and make certain skills obsolete. Increasing leisure, accompanied by lack of inspiration for its intelligent use, nourishes frustration and dilutes spiritual values. The horrible prospect of a future society resembling George Orwell's 1984 cannot be ignored or taken lightly.

But growth of knowledge, no matter how rapid and how spectacular, even though sometimes misapplied, can never become a threat to true education if accompanied by constant critical vigilance and by a never-ending process of sifting which will separate the universal principle from the practical application and the firm truth from the wild guess. However, this sober task is becoming increasingly difficult. Society demands vast numbers of people trained in a vast variety of skills. In response to this sharp demand, universities tend to multiply their course offerings, to sponsor specialized projects, and are inexorably forced to train rather than educate the students.

We are tempted to tell our students that the field they want to study has grown so enormously and has become so complex and so intricate that they must specialize as soon as possible. We suggest, further, that once embarked upon the process of specialization, they will have little or no time for anything else, and it will take all their time to keep up with the developments in their own specialty. After some years of this brainwashing process, decorated perhaps with the "Order of the Ph.D.," young scholars will go out to attempt to contribute to the growth of knowledge in their specialties, while at the same time forgetting the other values of life. I submit that this type of counsel should never be given on this campus! As I see it, the true purpose of education in the Latter-day Saint environment is not to awe or frighten with vastness and complexity, but rather to impress with the simplicity that comes from real insight--not to depress and discourage students by the bewildering array of data, but to bring order out of the chaos of information and inspire them with the great spiritual principles which bring harmony, order, joy, and happiness in human life.

We must therefore teach our students about the divine nature of man. Each human being has a tremendous potential for good or evil. But we should recognize that evil does not automatically disappear because we have higher standards of living or better housing or that it will disappear with socialized medicine. On the contrary, the evil in the world could very well increase! All around us, in today's public drama, we see vigorous activity apparently geared to the premise (which I consider false) that the best policy is that which is directed solely toward the pursuit of a higher standard of living. Is this the way life should be? I think not! "For what is a man profited, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul? or what shall a man give in exchange for his soul?" (Matt. 16:26).

In considering the awesome importance of the BYU teacher in this learning process affecting our students, I sincerely believe that these scriptures are also very relevant here: "And they shall also teach their children to pray, and to walk uprightly before the Lord" (D&C 68:28). "Let him that is ignorant learn wisdom by humbling himself and calling upon the Lord his God, that his eyes may be opened that he may see, and his ears opened that he may hear" (D&C 136:32).

O that cunning plan of the evil one! O the vainness, and the frailties, and the foolishness of men! When they are learned they think they are wise, and they hearken not unto the counsel of God, for they set it aside, supposing they know of themselves, wherefore, their wisdom is foolishness and it profiteth them not. And they shall perish.

But to be learned is good if they hearken unto the counsels of God. (2 Ne. 9:2829)

At BYU we have a twofold responsibility--a grave responsibility which demands a great deal of our faculty and staff:

1. Proper academic development--to meet the tests and challenges of the world.
2. Proper spiritual development--to meet the basic inner needs of the students and help them understand their relationship to others and to God, the Heavenly Father.

Five Steps to Insure an Optimum Environment

It is especially important that faculty and staff remember this responsibility always. Each classroom, each office, and each workshop should be affected strongly, in its own way, by the gospel of Jesus Christ. This attitude of basic reverence for eternal principles should be the hallmark of BYU.

Basically, our university, in attempting to teach students that each of us, as a son or daughter of God, is a free agent with unlimited possibilities for eternal development and in constantly emphasizing a never-ending search for truth and a proper understanding of that truth, should be keenly interested in supporting certain steps, taken to insure the optimum environment.

The first step is that of strong encouragement for the proper development of a deep-seated interest in LDS spiritual values. Superficiality should not be tolerated. Thorough understanding of one's religious perspective is essential.

On this subject, I get from time to time reports that a student's testimony has been impaired or actually destroyed by some thoughtless or irreverent teacher. On investigation I occasionally find the accusation to be true. In those rare and unusual cases where I have found such a deed to have been done purposely and premeditated by the teacher, we have had to terminate his or her services. Obviously, the teacher had no testimony of the divinity of our restored gospel and therefore either came to our faculty under false pretenses or apostatized after arriving. Sometimes, however, a teacher will carelessly affect the life of a young student by destroying the bridge which supports the student's testimony without at the same time providing a stronger and more enduring bridge in its place. Admitting that the testimonies of some students are immature and indeed sometimes not solidly based, we must never be guilty of impairing their faith in an all-wise creator and in the divinity of the restored gospel. It is our duty to improve and enlarge, not impair or crush, the testimonies of our students. I urge all of you to give serious consideration to this duty that none of us by flippant comment, sarcastic innuendo, or irreverent attitude, or otherwise, be guilty of depriving students of the motivating spiritual power which their parents probably sent them here to obtain and retain. Such irresponsible conduct in this institution is tantamount to blasphemy.

In the meetings of the board of trustees, President David O. McKay has often suggested that the greatest opportunity for a teacher at this institution is to teach some principle of the gospel in a class in chemistry or geology or sociology. In that respect, we have more freedom of speech in this university than we would have in a public institution, for there we would be forbidden to teach Mormon doctrines.

The second step is that of a constant emphasis upon the basic religious nature of all knowledge. To accept the common authorship of God for all spheres of learning is the cornerstone of LDS education.

The acceptance of this truism comes to us direct from the Doctrine and Covenants:

And I give unto you a commandment that you shall teach one another the doctrine of the kingdom. Teach ye diligently and my grace shall attend you, that you may be instructed more perfectly in theory, in principle, in doctrine, in the law of the gospel, in all things that pertain unto the kingdom of God, that are expedient for you to understand; Of things both in heaven and in the earth, and under the earth; things which have been, things which are, things which must shortly come to pass; things which are at home, things which are abroad; the wars and the perplexities of the nations, and the judgments which are on the land; and a knowledge also of countries and of kingdoms. (D&C 88:7779)

The founder of this institution preached the same doctrine: "Every accomplishment, every polished grace, every useful attainment in mathematics, music, and in all science and art belong to the Saints, and they should avail themselves as expeditiously as possible of the wealth of knowledge the sciences offer to every diligent and persevering scholar."² Again: "There is nothing I would like better than to learn chemistry, botany, geology, and mineralogy, so that I could tell what I walk on, the properties of the air I breathe, [and] what I drink."³ Again: "Let them also learn all the truth pertaining to the arts and sciences, and how to apply the same to their temporal wants. Let them study things that are upon the earth, that are in the earth, and that are in the heavens."⁴And finally:

We should be a people of profound learning pertaining to the things of the world. We should be familiar with the various languages, for we wish to send [our people] to the different nations and to the islands of the sea. We wish Missionaries who may go to France to be able to speak the French language fluently, and those who may go to Germany, Italy, Spain, and so on to all nations, to be familiar with the languages of those nations.

We also wish them to understand the geography, habits, customs, and laws of nations and kingdoms, whether they be barbarians or civilized.⁵

The third step is a determination to place LDS religious values in all of the activities of the institution--not merely in the academic field, but also in the nonacademic areas. Are we truly living up to the gospel of Jesus Christ in all of our various facets of university life? It is essential that all of us, faculty and staff, recognize this responsibility.

The fourth step is a definite program to combat effectively those aspects of university life on all levels which tend to create a secular environment. No LDS institution can possibly give aid and comfort to those persons or forces which are obviously inimical to the highest ideals of the Church.

The fifth step is a recognition that the university has an obligation to produce students who are fully appreciative of the principles of the Latter-day Saint faith and of their roles in the universe as sacred and independent individuals. Brother Maeser gave utterance to this thought when he said, "There is a Mt. Sinai for every child of God, if only he can be inspired to climb it." All students should therefore be encouraged to recognize the great inherent power which they possess as human beings and as children of God. But this is not the only result. Individuals who go forward from BYU should also realize that individual strengths are not to be used for themselves alone. Through the spiritual influence of the campus community, they should have acquired the vision and the inspiration to be concerned about others, to be truly interested in rendering service wherever it is needed.

The Faculty as Examples of Spiritual Strength

In practical effect, this means that each of us at BYU should be a living and walking example of the gospel of Jesus Christ. We should strive as mightily as we can to live up to the principles of the Church every day of the week and not just on the Sabbath. For good or for ill, we stand as

examples before our students. Any member of the faculty or staff who may scoff at and deride spiritual values is impairing his or her usefulness at this university. Though he or she clothes skepticism in brilliant and fascinating verbiage, he or she will ultimately be an unhappy person in this particular campus community. Further, what can a student's evaluation be when he or she observes that some of us pay only nominal attention to the spiritual principles that the institution publicly espouses? I strongly declare that once we become associated with this institution we also carry upon our shoulders the responsibility of exemplary living. This may not be easy, but it is certainly a realistic factor in our lives. If we treat this obligation lightly, we could unwittingly, as well as deliberately, offend or disillusion a student to the point that he or she finds it very difficult to gain or retain a testimony of the faith.

I confess to you that as I prepared this address and wrote these words I was almost afraid to utter them, for I know I do not fully measure up to this test. But I hereby pledge myself to make a more strenuous effort to approach the proper standard, and I hope that others of you will do so, also. Although I have now been here for nearly twelve years, never have I felt so keenly the responsibilities of my office and the need for spiritual guidance. I therefore pray humbly for that strength and for your spiritual support.

Students cannot truly succeed in this modern world--by the gauge of the whole being--without the firm support of religious devotion. Their physical achievements of the future, no matter how impressive from the secular viewpoint, are but a mockery if they fail to recognize their deep obligation to God the Father. If students do not become deeply aware of the great personal need for spiritual motivation and do not work actively to obtain it, then our world is truly lost! Thus the obligation upon us, who deal so intimately with the youth of today, is indeed sacred and of preeminent importance.

The Faculty as Counselors

We should give loving attention to each student in our charge. I implore all of you as you are engaged in counseling students to take this responsibility to heart. These young men and women need guidance and counsel every step of the way. I'm not advocating pampering, but I feel that we should do everything in our power to avoid the pitiless and coldly impersonal attitude so prevalent on the campuses of many large universities. Each student is significant not only as a human being, but particularly as a brother or sister and as a child of God. With our spiritual background, we should not only be concerned about the students assigned to us, but also feel a personal responsibility for the success or failure of each student so assigned. And this concern must be expressed in kindness and understanding. The late John C. Swensen often told of his becoming so discouraged as a young student that he decided to return home. On his way to the railway station, he met Karl G. Maeser. Sensing the worried expression on the boy's face, Brother Maeser put his arm around him, spoke a word of encouragement, and John C. turned around and came back to the campus. In his lifetime, Brother Swensen in turn gave encouragement to hundreds of his students. I hope you will do likewise.

I recognize, of course, that time is often short and that students sometimes do their best to avoid faculty counseling. But this is an important and valuable work--not only from the viewpoint of the university, but also from that of the Church itself. Please strive constantly to draw close to your students; give them spiritual food along with academic advice. They will remember you, for good or otherwise, throughout their lives. It is a serious undertaking. Without faculty counseling, we cannot possibly succeed. With it, we can save hundreds of students each year.

One of the most thrilling examples of the type of student produced at the "Y," through our secular and spiritual environment, is that of a young English immigrant who first enrolled at Brigham Young Academy in 1876. Two years later, at the age of sixteen, he graduated and immediately joined the faculty as an instructor in elementary science, Latin, and English.

With the friendly encouragement of Dr. Karl G. Maeser and President John Taylor, the young Englishman journeyed back East and engaged in further study at Lehigh University and John Hopkins University. Thus, he was among the very first LDS students to obtain advanced training at eastern universities. Returning to the "Y," the young scholar was appointed as professor of geology and chemistry. Later he became assistant to Brother Maeser. While serving in this capacity, he was appointed to the school's board of trustees. Having tremendous civic vigor, he also served as Provo City councilman, alderman, and justice of the peace.

Later, this English scholar was called to the position of president of the Latter-day Saints College in Salt Lake City. And five years later, he became president and professor of geology at the University of Utah. In 1911 he was called to the Council of the Twelve, and Dr. James E. Talmage served in this office with great ability and inspiration until his death in 1933, at the early age of seventy-one. One of the treasured memories of my life is that he officiated at the marriage ceremony of Sister Wilkinson and myself.

I am convinced that Elder Talmage's life and his outstanding accomplishments were influenced to a marked degree by his experiences at the "Y" and by the counsel and encouragement he received from Dr. Karl G. Maeser. In this respect, I sincerely exhort each of you to remember that there may be many other "James Talmages" in our student body. I am sure none of you realized that an Iranian student who attended here a relatively few years ago would in a few years become the largest producer of insurance for Metropolitan Life Insurance in the country. That happened last year. Remember always the great contributions which these young people may make both to the world and to the Church in years yet to come. We cannot, in all conscience, ignore the remarkable potential of our students. An effective advisement program, which can succeed only with your wholehearted cooperation, is a big step in the direction of developing this latent power of our youth.

In this connection, one of the more grievous problems related to student advisement is that dealing with dropout rate. Although there is no reasonable doubt about the value of a college education, many students do not remain in college for the standard four years. Obviously, some of these young people drop out because they cannot do the work. But there are often other, somewhat intangible explanations. Nevertheless, regardless of cause, we must be concerned about the dropout problem and the resulting economic loss both to the student and to society as a whole.

The BYU Stakes

I am very happy to note the continuing success and wonderful influence of the stakes of the Church on our campus. These three stakes, with their various wards, have given all of our students opportunity to participate in meaningful religious activity. In this particular era of history, filled as it is with confusion and uncertainty, the Church needs to be close to its young people. Our various campus stakes and wards certainly provide a chance for each individual student to contribute his or her share in building up the kingdom.

We must strive to enhance the work of the BYU stakes. Every faculty and staff member should be willing to cooperate cheerfully with the program of the Church on our campus.

In this regard, I honestly believe that a remarkably high degree of cooperation already has been attained. But we need to work at it and keep the overall level continually high.

Gratitude and Appreciation

In conclusion, permit me to express my personal affection and gratitude to each of you. Brigham Young University is certainly a large university with an attractive campus and modern buildings. But all these advantages, while extremely significant, mean virtually nothing unless they are bolstered by the devoted, dedicated efforts of our faculty and staff. I know you have given freely of your devotion and dedication--often at considerable personal sacrifice--to the "Y". What progress we have achieved here is due largely to the outstanding contributions you have made--individually and as a group--to the improvement of our academic standards and the personal interest you have shown in guiding our students into proper, wholesome channels.

I heartily urge you to continue the fine record which you have already made. We need your help to fulfill the great and stimulating destiny of BYU.

This address was given at the annual faculty workshop at Brigham Young University on September 18, 1962. Ernest L. Wilkinson served as president of Brigham Young University from 1949 to 1971.

NOTES

¹LeGrand Richards, *A Marvelous Work and a Wonder* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1958), 384.

²Brigham Young, in *Journal of Discourses*, 26 vols. (Liverpool: F. D. Richards, 185586), 10:224, April and May 1863 (hereafter cited as JD).

³Young, in JD, 16:170, August 31, 1873.

⁴Young, in JD, 8:9, March 4, 1860.

⁵Young, in JD, 8:40, April 8, 1860.