# Bruce R. McConkie's Final Testimony

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*This talk was originally given at the 2006 BYU Easter Conference. For those who would like to read Elder Bruce R. McConkie's final conference address, visit www.lds.org and search for "The Purifying Power of Gethsemane" (*Ensign*, May 1985, 9).*

As he stood to his full height of six feet five inches to approach the rostrum in the old Tabernacle, he was thin, even gaunt—his step measured as if his balance were uncertain. As he faced the congregation, his features were sufficiently jaundiced that many watching on television instinctively reached forward to adjust the color, yet the sound of his voice was measured, deep, and strong. It was the confident, sure sound to which the Saints had become accustomed.

"I feel," he said, "and the Spirit seems to accord, that the most important doctrine I can declare, and the most powerful testimony I can bear, is of the atoning sacrifice of the Lord Jesus Christ." Thus began the final testimony of Elder Bruce R. McConkie of the Quorum of the Twelve. What followed was one of the most electrifying testimonies ever borne from that historic spot from which prophets and apostles had been teaching and preaching since the days of President Brigham Young.

While more than two decades have passed since that solemn testimony was borne, few who were present or within the sound of his voice have forgotten the Spirit and power that attended Elder McConkie's valedictory address. Following his remarks, President Gordon B. Hinckley said, "Thank you, Brother McConkie, for your eloquent and moving testimony given under difficult circumstances."[1]

Virtually every week since that time, I have met individuals who have recounted for me the feelings that were theirs when they heard that testimony. Because those of us who are older treasure good memories and because a generation has now risen who would be blessed by those memories, I will recount some of the events that preceded that occasion. I will confine myself to those parts of the story in which I was a participant.

I will take as a point of beginning Elder McConkie's April 1972 conference address. During that session of conference, an impression was born upon my mind that one of the speakers I was about to hear would identify himself as the one who would fill the next vacancy in the Quorum of the Twelve.

The very nature of such an impression is such that you cloak it in silence. Notwithstanding my efforts to do so, a surprising number of people came to me within the next few days to tell me they also had such an impression. My brothers and sisters each reported having people come to them saying the same kind of thing.

It was in that talk that my father first read in public the words that became the hymn "I Believe in Christ." They are as follows:

I believe in Christ; he is my King!
With all my heart to him I'll sing;
I'll raise my voice in praise and joy,
In grand amens my tongue employ.
I believe in Christ; he is God's Son;
On earth to dwell his soul did come;
He healed the sick; the dead he raised.
Good works were his; his name be praised.

I believe in Christ; oh, blessed name,
As Mary's Son he came to reign
'Mid mortal men, his earthly kin,
To save them from the woes of sin.
I believe in Christ, who marked the path,
Who did gain all his Father hath,
Who said to men: "Come, follow me,
That ye, my friends, with God may be."

I believe in Christ—my Lord, my God!
My feet he plants on gospel sod;
I'll worship him with all my might;
He is the source of truth and light.
I believe in Christ; he ransoms me.
From Satan's grasp he sets me free,
And I shall live with joy and love
In his eternal courts above.

I believe in Christ; he stands supreme!
From him I'll gain my fondest dream;
And while I strive through grief and pain,
His voice is heard: "Ye shall obtain."
I believe in Christ, so come what may,
With him I'll stand in that great day
When on this earth he comes again
To rule among the sons of men.[2]

After that meeting President Harold B. Lee told my father that he had raised the spiritual level of the conference. The special Spirit that attended this talk was apparently intended to announce to many that they were hearing the voice of a prophet and to prepare others to receive him when that call came.

In July of that year, my grandfather, President Joseph Fielding Smith, passed away. His passing elevated Harold B. Lee to the Presidency of the Church; thus, with the reorganization of the First Presidency, a vacancy was created in the Quorum of the Twelve. Dad was asked to speak at President Smith's funeral because of the closeness he had shared with him since the days when he had started courting my mother.

As part of his preparation for that talk, Dad asked me if I knew any stories that he ought to tell about Granddaddy Smith. I had just written a little book about him.[3] When I interviewed my Aunt Edith, she told me a very interesting story about the birth of my grandfather. She said that his mother, Julina, who was the first of Joseph F. Smith's wives (that being in the days of polygamy), wanted very much to present him with a son who could bear his name. Julina, however, remained barren while President Smith's other wives gave birth to sons. Each in turn asked that their son be given his father's name. In each instance President Smith said, "No, the right belongs to Julina."

So it was that Julina poured her heart out to the Lord asking for a son. In doing so, like Hannah of old, she vowed a vow, promising the Lord that if He would give her a son to bear his father's name, she would return the child to Him for His service. So it was that Julina conceived and bore a son destined to bear his father's name and that of the Prophet Joseph Smith and destined to the Lord's service as he labored for some sixty-two years as an Apostle.

Having told that story to my father, I hesitated a little. I had just received a master's degree in history. I was concerned that historians might not think the story good history, its source being an eighty-three-year-old lady. I told Dad of my concerns.

The following day as I took my seat in the Tabernacle next to my brother Mark, I said, "I am a little worried about what Dad might say

today." He said, "Yes, I know. Dad told me. He said, 'But what Joseph doesn't know is that I will know!'"

Dad used the story at the funeral, thus affirming that the Spirit had confirmed that it represented good history, and I learned a lesson that went beyond what I had been taught in the college classroom. In any event, there was an unusual power that attended the talk he gave. It appears that the veil became very thin for him. Dad was invited to speak at the Joseph F. Smith family reunion the following November. On that occasion, he said that President Joseph F. Smith was present at his son's funeral and added, "He was there to display his love and concern for the family."

In the month following the funeral, Dad was assigned to participate in an area conference held in Mexico City. At that conference when the names of the First Presidency and the Quorum of the Twelve were read for a sustaining vote, he distinctly heard his own name read.

In the October 1972 conference, Dad was called to the apostleship. In his maiden address, he chose to identify the special spiritual endowment or gift he had been given relative to bearing witness of Christ. He spoke as follows:

> As members of the church and kingdom of God on earth, we enjoy the gifts of the Spirit—those wonders and glories and miracles that a gracious and benevolent God always has bestowed upon his faithful saints. The first of these gifts listed in our modern revelation on spiritual gifts is the gift of testimony, the gift of revelation, the gift of knowing of the truth and divinity of the work. This gift is elsewhere described as the testimony of Jesus, which is the spirit of prophecy. This is my gift. I know this work is true.
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> I have a perfect knowledge that Jesus Christ is the Son of the living God and that he was crucified for the sins of the world. I know that Joseph Smith is a prophet of God through whose instrumentality the fullness of the everlasting gospel has been restored again in our day. And I know that this Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is the kingdom of God on earth, and that as now constituted, with President Harold B. Lee at its head, it has the approval and approbation of the Lord, is in the line of its duty, and is preparing a people for the second coming of the Son of Man.[4]

When I met my father after that conference, the first thing I asked him was if his call had come in the same manner as that of President Heber J. Grant when he was called to the apostleship. Without hesitation and knowing full well what I had reference to, he said, "Yes."

President Grant's call had come as a result of a council held in the world of the spirits after deliberation on the part of the Prophet Joseph

Smith and President Grant's father, Jedediah M. Grant, who had served as a counselor in the First Presidency to Brigham Young. In the Tabernacle that day, my mother did not hear my father's voice as he talked but rather heard the voice of his father, Oscar W. McConkie.

President Lee let it slip that Dad was not the man he had wanted to call. My uncle Oscar asked Dad if that didn't hurt his feelings a little to know that he was not the Prophet's choice. "Goodness no," Dad responded, "I would much rather know that I was the Lord's choice."

After years of service, in January of 1984, my father underwent exploratory surgery to determine the reason for some spots that had been detected on his liver. It was discovered that his whole system was riddled with cancer. The doctors gave him a matter of weeks to live. Blessings were given, and a quiet miracle was performed. The two or three weeks were extended for some sixteen months. During that time, my brothers and I were privileged to give Dad a special blessing in which the promise and assurance were given that he would live to write every word, teach every doctrine, and bear every testimony he had been ordained in the councils of heaven to do. When President Hinckley blessed him, he simply said, "I seal upon you the blessing given by your family."

Sometime before conference, probably the last Saturday in March, Mother recounted:

> Dad came into the kitchen and said, "Would you like to hear what I have prepared for general conference?" I was making him a pie, because his appetite had begun to go downhill, and I thought maybe he'd like an apple pie. I had the apples all ready to put in it, and I was rolling up the dough, the oven was on, everything was ready, and he came in and sat down and started to read me his talk and the tears streamed down his face. He didn't get more than a couple of sentences out and I thought to myself, "You don't make apple pies when somebody is saying these things to you." So I sat down, dropped everything, and listened to him. I asked him, "How are you going to be able to get up and read this?" Because there he was, having a hard time saying what he was saying because he was so touched. And he said, "I don't know, but I'm going to do it."

On Monday, April 1, my dad's brother Brit gave him a blessing. He said that Dad still had work to do and that the devil had been rebuked. Brit blessed him to have the strength to get through conference. Elder Boyd K. Packer came on Tuesday and blessed him and again affirmed that he had more to do.

On Tuesday evening, April 2, Mother called our home. I answered the phone. I could tell immediately from the sound of her voice that something was seriously wrong. She said, "I called to wish you a happy

birthday," my birthday being the next day. She then explained that Dad's blood tests had come back that day and that they were very bad. "The doctors can do nothing for him," she said. "They told me to take him home and make him as comfortable as possible" for what they said would be the last few days of his life. She told us that Dad had instructed her that the family was to accept the will of the Lord and that they were not to fast and pray anymore for the extension of his life.

As for conference, she explained that the doctors said that he would be too weak to speak and that should he try, he would pass out in front of a national television audience and embarrass the whole Church. "Nevertheless," she said, "your father wants to give that talk. It means more to him than anything he has done in this life, but he cannot even finish reading it to me, as each time he attempts to do so he breaks down in tears."

After Mother's call, with my sister Vivian's help, we contacted my other brothers and sisters to relay Mother's message and to unite the family in a fast—not contrary to his wishes in pleading for the extension of his life but rather that he might be granted both the strength and the emotional control to give the talk he had written.

Wednesday evening, April 3, my wife Brenda and I went up to visit Mom and Dad. He had just returned from his meetings with the Twelve and was exhausted. We visited with Mother while Dad took a nap. Mother insisted on feeding us and cooked some hamburgers. Dad came in and sat at the table with us. This was especially gracious of him because he had no appetite and because the smell of food nauseated him. He also ate a little, which greatly pleased Mother. Brenda gave him a supply of diet supplement pills that were something like an energy bar but smaller. He could eat these because they were odorless. They may have been his primary food supply for the next few days. I remember watching him put one in his mouth just before he got up to speak at conference.

Our prayer was answered. Dad was given both the strength and emotional control to give his talk. When he was called on that Saturday morning, the sixth of April, the Spirit took over, and one of the most powerful talks ever given in the Tabernacle was delivered.

Heaven does not send forth the Spirit to sustain weak doctrines. It is the power of the doctrine that attracts the power of the Spirit. Christ, Elder McConkie declared, died to preserve the truth. "All of the terms and conditions of the Father's eternal plan of salvation became operative," he testified, "in and through Christ's atoning sacrifice." Because He died, we have a plan of salvation! Because He died, our righteous

deeds will rise with us in the Resurrection. Because He died, we, by obedience to the laws and ordinances of the gospel, may lay claim to a fulness of all that the Father has.

With great emotion, Elder McConkie spoke of the "three gardens of God—the Garden of Eden, the Garden of Gethsemane, and the Garden of the Empty Tomb." He taught us that Eden was "a paradisiacal state," one in which there could be no death, no procreation, and no probationary experiences. It was from such a state, he explained, that Adam and Eve stepped down to become the "first mortal flesh on earth."

"Thus, Creation is father to the Fall; and by the Fall came mortality and death; and by Christ came immortality and eternal life. If there had been no fall of Adam, by which cometh death, there could have been no atonement of Christ by which cometh life," he declared.

With trembling in his voice, he concluded, "And now, as pertaining to this perfect atonement, wrought by the shedding of the blood of God—I testify that it took place in Gethsemane and at Golgotha, and as pertaining to Jesus Christ, I testify that he is the Son of the Living God and was crucified for the sins of the world. He is our Lord, our God, and our King. This I know of myself independent of any other person. I am one of his witnesses, and in a coming day I shall feel the nail marks in his hands and in his feet and shall wet his feet with my tears. But I shall not know any better then than I know now that he is God's Almighty Son, that he is our Savior and Redeemer, and that salvation comes in and through his atoning blood and in no other way."[5]

On Sunday, April 14, Elder Packer came and blessed Dad for the final time. Elder Packer said that the promises given in the previous blessings were fulfilled in Dad's conference address and that it was a miracle we had had him this year. Before this blessing, Dad had rested on his bed during the day with his clothes on, refusing to make the concession to his illness by remaining in bed. He had also refused to eat in the bedroom. Regardless of how bad he felt, he would come to the kitchen to make the attempt to eat. After Elder Packer's blessing, Dad turned to Mother and said, "Do you know what he did?" Mother told him she would try to live to be an honor and credit to him. He cried.

Elder Packer visited with Mother and left. His instructions to the family were in like manner not to resist the will of the Lord. When they had left the room, Dad got up and with what little strength he had, undressed, pulled the covers back, and got into bed, thus signaling that the battle was over. Thereafter he refused food but did take a little water. On April 19, 1985, thirteen days after his conference address, he passed away while the family knelt at his bedside and prayed that his

spirit might be released. His final instruction to his wife and family was to "Carry on." RE

## Notes

1. Gordon B. Hinckley, in Conference Report, April 1985, 12.
2. Bruce R. McConkie, "I Believe in Christ," *Hymns* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1985), no. 134; originally given in Conference Report, April 1972, 133–34.
3. Joseph Fielding McConkie, *True and Faithful: The Life Story of Joseph Fielding Smith* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1971).
4. Bruce McConkie, in Conference Report, October 1972, 21.
5. McConkie, in Conference Report, April 1985, 11–12.