

Ezra Taft Benson (1899-1994), thirteenth President of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, was noted for his extensive Church service and his distinguished career in government. He served forty-two years as a member of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles and was U.S. secretary of agriculture for eight years in the administration of President Dwight D. Eisenhower. As [President of the Church](#), he repeatedly bore witness that the [Book of Mormon](#) is the major instrument to bring the members of the Church and the world to Christ, and he admonished the Saints to strengthen their families and to preserve their God-given freedoms.

President Benson was born August 4, 1899, in the small rural community of Whitney, Idaho, the oldest of eleven children born to George Taft Benson, Jr., and Sarah Dunkley. He was named after his great-grandfather, Ezra T. (Taft) Benson, an apostle, who entered the Salt Lake Valley with the first Mormon pioneer company in July 1847. The pioneer Ezra T. was the son of John Benson, Jr., and Chloe Taft of Mendon, Massachusetts. John Benson, Sr., was an officer during the American Revolution.

Ezra Taft Benson was reared on the family farm in Whitney, driving a team of horses at the age of five, milking cows, and thinning sugar beets. He entered grade school at the age of eight. "Be as careful of the books you read as of the company you keep" was the counsel that governed his reading habits (Dew, p. 24). In addition to the scriptures, he read Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*; biographies of George Washington, Benjamin Franklin, and Abraham Lincoln, and success stories by Horatio Alger. His grandparents gave him a two-volume set by Orison S. Marden, *Little Visits with Great Americans* (1905), which he devoured.

Increased responsibility was thrust on him as a youth when his father was called as a missionary to the Northern States Mission, leaving behind his wife and seven children; the eighth was born while he was in the mission field. A spirit of missionary work enveloped the home, and all eleven children eventually served at least one full-time [mission](#).

In 1914, Ezra entered the Church-sponsored Oneida Academy in Preston, Idaho, graduating in 1918. That year as Scoutmaster, he led his Scouts into choral competition and won the Cache Valley chorus championship. Also during that year he enlisted in the military service just before the close of World War I.

As a young man, he developed a love for the land and for the Lord, two fundamental influences in his ensuing life. He felt that the basic ingredient for successful farming was intelligent, hard work. To increase his agricultural skills, he took correspondence courses and began attending the Utah State Agricultural College (now Utah State University). He accepted a mission call to England in 1921, where he served as Newcastle Conference clerk, Sunderland Branch president, and president of the Newcastle Conference, which included all of northern England. Upon his return, he soon enrolled at Brigham Young University, where he was president of the Agriculture Club and Men's Glee Club and was named the most popular man on campus. He graduated with honors, majoring in animal husbandry with a minor in agronomy.

He married Flora Smith Amussen in the Salt Lake Temple on September 10, 1926. She was the youngest child of Carl Christian Amussen, a Danish convert who crossed the plains and became a prominent Utah jeweler, and Barbara McIsaac Smith. Flora attended Utah State Agricultural

College, where she served as vice-president of the student body, took the lead in a Shakespearean play, and won the women's singles tennis championship. She served a mission in the Hawaiian Islands.

Of his wife, President Benson said, "She had more faith in me than I had in myself" (Dew, p. 96). One Church leader commented that if there were more women in the Church like Sister Benson, there would be more men in the Church like Brother Benson. They became the parents of six children—Reed, Mark, Barbara, Beverly, Bonnie, and Beth.



The Benson family in 1943 at the time of Elder Benson's call to the apostleship: Ezra and his wife, Flora Amussen Benson, with their children (left to right) Bonnie, Mark, Barbara, Beverly, and (standing) Reed.

Benson received a research scholarship to Iowa State College, where he obtained his master's degree in agricultural economics on June 13, 1927. He returned to the family farm, which he and his brother Orval had purchased from their father, and on March 4, 1929, was appointed Franklin County agricultural agent. He helped farmers solve their problems by setting up demonstration farms, inviting in specialists, teaching crop rotation, and introducing improved varieties of grains.

In 1930, he was promoted to agricultural economist and marketing specialist for the University of Idaho, with offices in the state capitol in Boise. Traveling throughout Idaho, he encouraged farmers to work cooperatively in producing and marketing their goods. For five years, he served as the executive secretary of the Idaho Cooperative Council. He took a leave in 1936 for additional graduate study, attending the University of California in Berkeley on a fellowship awarded by the Giannini Foundation for Agricultural Economics. Soon after his return to Boise, he was called by the Church in November 1938 to serve as stake president. In April 1939, he became executive secretary of the National Council of Farmer Cooperatives at its headquarters in Washington, D.C. The council represented some 4,000 cooperative purchasing and marketing organizations involving almost 1.6 million farmers. Ezra Benson represented cooperatives before committees of Congress and served on a four-man national agriculture advisory committee to President Franklin D. Roosevelt during World War II.

On June 30, 1940, the Church called him as the first president of the Washington, D.C., stake, and on July 26, 1943, he was called to the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles. He was sustained in that position at the October general conference and was ordained an apostle by President Heber J. Grant on October 7, 1943.

In December 1945, following the devastation of World War II, President George Albert Smith called Elder Benson to be the European [mission president](#). His faith in the Lord, administrative skills, and experience in dealing with government helped him accomplish the four-point charge given to him by the [First Presidency](#): "First, to attend to the spiritual affairs of the Church in Europe; second, to work to make available food, clothing, and bedding to our suffering Saints in all parts of Europe; third, to direct the reorganization of the missions of Europe; and, fourth, to prepare for the return of missionaries to those countries" (IE 50 [May 1947]:293). He was among the first American civilians to administer relief in many of the devastated areas. During his first five months in Europe, he visited over one hundred cities in thirteen countries. Within ten months, he completed his mission, having distributed ninety-two boxcar loads of food, clothing, bedding, and medical supplies; reopened missions with new mission presidents and full-time missionaries; and given the Latter-day Saints in Europe a renewed spirit of hope.

In 1952, following the counsel of President David O. McKay, Ezra Taft Benson accepted the Cabinet position of secretary of agriculture in the Eisenhower administration. His selection was greeted with widespread approval. In his "General Statement on Agricultural Policy," he said, "The supreme test of any government policy, agricultural or other, should be 'How will it affect the character, morale, and well-being of our people?' ...A completely planned and subsidized economy weakens initiative, discourages industry, destroys character, and demoralizes the people" (Benson, 1962, p. 602).

He assumed office when farm income was declining and wartime legislation was piling up surpluses in government warehouses, inviting increased government controls of agriculture. He worked to reverse that course, winning significant legislative victories in spite of intense political opposition.



U.S. President Dwight D. Eisenhower looks on as Supreme Justice Fred M. Vinson administers the oath of office to Secretary of Agriculture Ezra Taft Benson in January 1953.

He became known for his integrity, and friend and foe alike acknowledged that he was a man of religious principles who stood by his convictions despite political pressures. He traveled hundreds of thousands of miles, carrying his farm message throughout the nation and the world, and aggressively encouraged consumption of U.S. farm products. He authored three books, *Farmers at the Crossroads* (1956), *Freedom to Farm* (1960), and *Crossfire: The Eight Years with Eisenhower* (1962).

He served eight years in the Cabinet, meeting with heads of state and agriculture leaders and farmers in over forty nations. He had discussions with such leaders as Chiang Kai-shek, Nehru,

Khrushchev, King Hussein, and David Ben-Gurion. During this time, his example and activities brought positive and widespread attention to the Church. President David O. McKay said that Secretary Benson's work in the Cabinet would "stand for all time as a credit to the Church and the nation" (Benson, 1962, p. 519).

With the encouragement of President David O. McKay, a major thrust of Elder Benson's many Church and civic addresses pertained to freedom and the threats to it. The substance of those messages is found in his books *The Red Carpet* (1962), *Title of Liberty* (1964), and *An Enemy Hath Done This* (1969). In Church general conference in April 1965, he warned, "To have been on the wrong side of the freedom issue during the war in heaven meant eternal damnation. How then can Latter-day Saints expect to be on the wrong side in this life and escape the eternal consequences?" (IE 68 [June 1965]:537).

President Benson's international stature helped to facilitate the acceptance and growth of the Church throughout the world. He dedicated several nations to the preaching of the gospel, established the first stakes in many countries, and supervised various areas of the world. He served as chairman of Quorum of the Twelve committees and sat on numerous boards.

In December 1973, Ezra Taft Benson became president of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles. His executive abilities were again demonstrated in this calling. A great spirit of unity was manifest, and he measured proposed policies or procedures by the yardstick "What is best for the kingdom?" (Petersen, p. 3).

Brigham Young University honored him by establishing the Ezra Taft Benson Agriculture and Food Institute in 1975 to help relieve world food problems and raise the quality of global life through improved nutrition and enlightened agriculture practices.

Many national and international citations and awards, including a number of honorary doctorate degrees, were bestowed on him. From the Boy Scouts of America he received the Silver Beaver, Silver Antelope, and Silver Buffalo; he served on their National Executive Board. On April 1, 1989, he was presented world Scouting's highest award, the Bronze Wolf. During his ninetieth birthday celebration, the President of the United States conferred upon him the Presidential Citizens Medal, naming him "one of the most distinguished Americans of his time" (Church News, Aug. 5, 1989, p. 4).

Upon the death of President Spencer W. Kimball, Ezra Taft Benson became President of the Church on November 10, 1985, at the age of eighty-six. At that time he delivered a statement reiterating the mission of the Church—to preach the gospel, perfect the Saints, and redeem the dead—and reaffirming that the Church is led by the Lord Jesus Christ. He selected as his counselors in the First Presidency Gordon B. Hinckley and Thomas S. Monson. The new First Presidency soon issued a special invitation to those members who had ceased activity or become critical of the Church to "come back" (Church News, Dec. 22, 1985, p. 3), and they opened the temples to worthy members married to unendowed spouses.

In a solemn assembly at general conference April 6, 1986, he was sustained by Church members as the prophet, seer, and revelator, and President of the Church. In his opening address at that conference, President Benson stressed the need to "cleanse the inner vessel (see Alma 60:23), beginning first with ourselves, then with our families, and finally with the Church" (Ensign 16 [May 1986]:4). In commencing that cleansing, he declared, "The Book of Mormon has not been, nor is it yet, the center of our personal study, family teaching, preaching, and missionary work. Of this we must [repent](#)" (Ensign 16 [May 1986]:5-6).

In his concluding address of the conference, he said, "The Lord inspired His servant Lorenzo Snow to reemphasize the principle of tithing to redeem the Church from financial bondage.... Now, in our day, the Lord has revealed the need to reemphasize the Book of Mormon to get the Church and all the children of Zion out from under condemnation—the scourge and judgment" (Ensign 16 [May 1986]:78; see D&C 84:54-58). To that end, his address "The Book of Mormon Is the Word of God" was repeated in regional conferences throughout the Church. This emphasis greatly accelerated the distribution and reading of the Book of Mormon and "brought more souls to Christ, both within and without the Church, than ever before" (Ensign 18 [Nov.



Elder Benson, with LDS Scout leader Bertram Stokes, greets Scouts from throughout the British Mission at a gathering in the Birmingham District (c. 1946).

1988]:4).

Continuing to help set the Church in order and perfect the Saints, he delivered another landmark address entitled "Beware of Pride" and gave separate messages to the children, young men, young women, single adult brethren, single adult sisters, fathers, mothers, and the elderly.

Throughout the years, the home and family were the center of many of President Benson's conference messages, such as his widely broadcast address "Our Homes—Divinely Ordained" (IE 52 [May 1949]:278-79, 332-33) and his frequent reference to his goal that there be "no empty chairs" in the family circle in the next life (Dew, p. 363). He has manifested a great love for the children and youth of the Church.

He was President during the Bicentennial of the U.S. Constitution and, as one of its greatest defenders, he delivered messages honoring this divine document and its inspired framers (The Constitution: A Heavenly Banner, Salt Lake City, 1986).

During his presidency, new temples were announced and several were dedicated, and missionary work expanded around the world with special opportunities being afforded, particularly in Eastern Europe, in countries previously closed.

For nearly fifty years his thousands of speeches stressed mankind's three great loyalties—loyalty to God, loyalty to family, and loyalty to country. His life has been exemplary in striving to live those loyalties as a prophet, a patriarch, and a patriot.