

# Ministering with the Character of Christ

## ROBERT S. WOOD

Thank you, Elder Carlson. Well, you're really a good-looking group, and also very intimidating. Why, this is a large and intelligent and good-looking group of people. I'm just delighted to be with you.

Well, I've been given the task of stating the theme of the seminar over the next several days. And the theme, in fact, has really been defined for us by President Nelson, which is ministering, and ministering in the Lord's way. So what I'd like to do to begin with is to ask you, how do you see your role as set-apart chaplains? As ministers in the Lord's way? Anybody have any thoughts? Let's start there. Anybody want to start the first thing and tell me, how do you view yourself? What does it mean to be a minister in the Lord's way? You as chaplains. I don't want you to all speak at once, now.

There we go. Right here.

**AUDIENCE:** I've been asked several times by members of the ward, just exactly what is a chaplain? Because they think I quit the Church and started my own church. But I tell them basically what a chaplain is: it's a home teacher that shows up.

**ROBERT S. WOOD:** Not bad.

**AUDIENCE:** And that's really the way I look at it. In crises, I try very, very hard to show up and try and make a difference. And I try to bring it to be worthy of the Spirit and bring the Spirit with me when I arrive.

**ROBERT S. WOOD:** Wonderful. Wonderful presentation. Any other thoughts? There we go.

**AUDIENCE:** Well, since it was right here. As a chaplain, I think we aren't supposed to have agendas, but I find that impossible when we are on the Lord's errand. So I guess the most succinct way I could say it is, I'm trying to be a blessing to everyone I meet.

**ROBERT S. WOOD:** Great.

**AUDIENCE:** That's my one and only agenda.

**ROBERT S. WOOD:** That's wonderful. That's wonderful. Any other thoughts? Right back here, I can see. No, right there; OK.

**AUDIENCE:** As a health-care chaplain for hospice, I have a lot of resistance from members of the Church to accept a female chaplain. They think, military—weird. I have a home teacher—well, hopefully, a ministering brother. But anyway, my walk is to meet them where they are, and to pray for them.

**ROBERT S. WOOD:** OK, so you meet people where they are and pray with them. Good. Super.

**AUDIENCE:** I'm a law-enforcement chaplain, and I feel that ministering is doing whatever needs to be done when it needs to be done. So, I responded on a scene where the father had passed away and the wife was at the kitchen table with the 7-year-old daughter, crying. And she asked me, she said, "Does it make me a bad person to want to do my dishes and take a shower?" And I said, "No." And I tried to calm her down, as she was sobbing, obviously. And so I said, "Why don't you go shower, and I'll sit with your daughter." And she said, "Oh, I don't have any towels. They're down with my husband." And so I went down in the scene and got the towels, came up. She showered, and I looked around the kitchen—she was real worried about her husband's family showing up and the house being a mess. So,

as a chaplain, I cleaned the kitchen, did the dishes, and talked to the daughter. And it's just doing whatever needs to be done in that moment. However we can help the officers and the public.

**ROBERT S. WOOD:** That's wonderful. That's great. OK. Well, let's hear from one more person. Anybody else? Right back there. Right in the back. Clear in the back.

**AUDIENCE:** As a minister representative of Jesus Christ, even when I'm working with people who may or may not believe in Jesus Christ, I feel my primary mission is to make sure that they know that they're loved. And if that means that I'm able to tell them or reassure them how much God and our Savior love them, then that's wonderful. But sometimes, it's just reassuring them that I love them. That somebody cares about them right now.

**ROBERT S. WOOD:** Wonderful. Well, these are wonderful responses. I could just sit down right now, and I think you've covered the territory extraordinarily well.

As I meditated on this, first of all, I said, well, how do I know how to minister in the Lord's way? As I say, how do I minister in the way that Jesus Christ ministered? And where do I go to find that out? Now, it's obviously, you go to the Gospels. But it's well beyond that, because the Lord appears throughout all of scripture. And therefore, virtually the entire corpus of scripture itself defines how we minister in the Lord's way. So I asked myself the question, to whom do we minister? And what do we do? And how do we do it?

Now, to whom. I sat down and began to make a list. Well, we minister to the marginalized and the proud and the arrogant. We minister to the despised, and we minister to the comfortable and self-satisfied. We minister to the sick and the afflicted, and the healthy and the strong. We minister to the bereaved, and we minister to the insouciant. We minister to the weak, and we minister to the powerful. We minister to the devout, and we minister to the hypocrite. We minister to the ignorant, and we minister to the learned. Obviously, we minister to everybody, as everybody are children of our Heavenly Father, and He wants them back.

Christ Himself said most significantly, "I came not [in the world to curse] the world, but to save the world" (John 12:47)—all the world. What's interesting, he had ministered not only to those who were aggrieved or sick or ill or the marginal parts of society. Have you ever thought about the fact that Christ also ministered to the Pharisees? He was ministering to the Pharisees. He ministered to them, as well as to the woman taken in sin, which also led me to the next question. Well, he must have ministered in somewhat different ways and used somewhat different language, in terms of how he ministered to those people.

So you take people as they are and where they are, and you minister to them, whoever they are. What's most remarkable is, the Lord asked us to minister to those who hate us and those who spitefully use us. You are ministers to, in effect, even those who are seeking to destroy that which is most sacred and that which is best in mankind. That's what it means to love thy enemy. Now, this may be the most difficult of all the counsels and commandments that the Lord has ever given, but indeed, it is the foundation of everything that we do. We reach out to all.

Now, what do we do when we reach out to all these people in their different conditions? Well, first of all, you relieve immediate distress. You relieve immediate distress. Whatever that distress might be, whatever the situation might be, you start with where people really are. And then, in the process, you extend their vision and provide hope, and ultimately faith.

You know, Christ not only, in His ministry, ministered such as He did with the woman taken in sin. By the way, He did give her counsel. He did call her to repentance. But He did it in a remarkable way. Woman, where are the accusers? They're not there. Neither do I accuse thee. Therefore, go and sin no more. What a gentle way, a marvelous way to call this woman, in her distress, really, to a higher level.

Now, He was somewhat harsher with the Pharisees as He reached out to them. But I believe He was reaching out to them. And as you know, one of the elite of the day visited Him in darkness—Nicodemus. And what's interesting is, progressively over time, Nicodemus himself came out of the darkness, even to the point that he provided the tomb in which the body of Christ was to be laid. So He was reaching out even to those who were most antagonistic.

Now, how do we do that? First of all, we need to listen. We live in a society which progressively is forgetting how to listen. Just listen to where people are coming from. Try to, in effect, understand where they are. First of all, define that before you, in effect, jump into whatever counsel or whatever activity you may engage in. And be very sure not to pigeonhole people. Never, in effect, say, oh, yeah, I know what he's like. I know what she's like. And they fit in this little category. And therefore, this is what I'm going to do. Never pigeonhole anybody.

By the way, the greatest teaching on that I received in this very room many years ago from then Elder, now President, Dallin Oaks. And we were talking about a very difficult subject which had to do with disciplinary councils. And as you know, bishops and branch presidents, stake presidents, have responsibility sometimes to discipline the members of the congregation to decide what needs to be done, even including, perhaps, even their very membership in the Church. And he said, well, how do we do that? He said, well, first of all, let me explain to you the common law. And of course, as you know, President Oaks is a very distinguished attorney. Once a member of the Supreme Court of the state of Utah, professor at the University of Chicago. So he explained to us the common law.

He said, what you do is you take the current situation and you look at the precedents that's been established. And you try to apply the precedents. You may have to make a little bit of change in order to establish a further, if you will, amplification of the precedent for the future. He said, that's the way the law is developed. He said, do you all understand that? And all of us out there said, yes, we understand that. He said, well, forget it. Forget it. That is not the way we minister. We take every individual individually. They do not stand in the line of precedents at all.

And then he said, every bishop has the responsibility, first of all, to protect the innocent—that's critical. To make sure that, in fact, the reputation of the Church is maintained. He said that after that, the crucial issue is to reconcile that person to their Heavenly Father. That's the sole object of a disciplinary council, is to bring about reconciliation as they are at this very moment in their current situation. And there are no precedents. And therefore, any decisions taken in earlier councils have no bearing whatsoever on what you're about to do because you're taking the individual and saying, how can I reconcile you to your Heavenly Father?

I think that covers ministry in a remarkable way, and I was really taken with that teaching. And I've always been impressed with him. And I was impressed when you said you cleaned up the kitchen. Sometimes that's how we start our ministry. We clean up the kitchen. Ammon, as you recall, he worked for King Lamoni, and he guarded his sheep and so forth. And before he ever got a chance to preach the gospel to Lamoni, he was actually taking care of his sheep, and securing him against robbers, etc., etc.

And so remember where Brigham Young was once asked, well, what do we do with the Indians? He said, first of all, take care of the material needs. If they're hungry, feed them. You start there. And so that's where we start. People in their immediate circumstances—it may be a very nitty-gritty operation. And then you, in effect, in the process, you inspire change. You help deepen faith. You generate hope. And by the way, in all of this, you respect agency. When you minister, you do not compel. People must, in fact, men and women must decide on their own what they're going to do, and you continue to strive with them.

You know, I've always been a great believer in the principle of free agency. I must say, I had some doubts about

it when I had teenagers. And I've often said, I've always wanted to write a book entitled *Free Agency and How to Enforce It*. And I'm sure all of us have had this sentiment on many occasions. But the fact is, the only thing we can do to entice people to change sometimes, to find comfort, to deepen faith, is through love. We must love them even as Christ loves us, in whatever our circumstances are.

By the way, we also, above all things, must be led by the Spirit—indeed, the Spirit of the Holy Ghost itself. You know, there's really no better analysis of how to minister than in the 121st section of the Doctrine and Covenants. I could just read that, sit down, and that would take care of everything. And you have cited it so many times. Let me cite it once again.

“No power or influence can or ought to be maintained by virtue of the priesthood, only by persuasion, by long-suffering, by gentleness and meekness, and by love unfeigned; by kindness, and pure knowledge, which shall greatly enlarge the soul without hypocrisy, and without guile—reproving betimes with sharpness, when moved upon by the Holy Ghost; and then showing forth afterwards an increase of love toward him whom thou hast reprov'd, lest he esteem thee to be his enemy; that he may know that thy faithfulness is stronger than the cords of death. Let thy bowels be full of charity towards all men, and to the household of faith, and let virtue garnish thy thoughts unceasingly” (verses 41–45).

And then—I love this—“then shall thy confidence wax strong in the presence of God; and the doctrine of the priesthood shall distil upon thy soul as the dews from heaven. The Holy Ghost shall be thy constant companion, and thy scepter an unchanging scepter of righteousness and truth; and thy dominion shall be an everlasting dominion” (verses 45–46), and without compulsion—without compulsion—you shall lead all men to Christ.

In a real sense, I don't think we can improve very much upon that revelation to the Prophet Joseph Smith.

Now, have you ever thought about how you minister to people who truly are enemies? By the way, I'm here to tell you that some people are enemies. We, in our modern age, want to make everybody sick rather than evil. We do not recognize that there are enemies in the world, truly enemies. But we are counseled, nonetheless, to love them—to, in effect, reach out to them and to minister to them.

And I've thought long and hard, how to minister to people whom I know who are not particular enemies but are truly antagonistic. And I recall an example many, many, many years ago—decades now—when I was given a call from Arnold Resnicoff, whom many of you may know—a chaplain. He was Ronald Reagan's favorite chaplain. He himself was a rabbi, but Ronald Reagan liked to travel with him all the time. And he had a responsibility at the chaplain school, which was in Newport. And he called me on several occasions. He said, “Look, can you come over and talk to our chaplains who are coming in about the Latter-day Saints?” And so I was happy to do that.

And I must say, at the end of every presentation, I would give everybody a copy of the Book of Mormon and explain a little bit about what it was. And then I would say to them, “There's something else about this book you ought to be aware of that many Latter-day Saints don't fully appreciate. I think this is one of the best commentaries ever written on the Bible.” I said, “You read this, and I think you'll understand the Apostle Paul even better.” And so I felt that would probably entice various of the chaplains to might actually read it.

Any case, I remember, on one occasion, when there was a chaplain not sitting but standing in the back of the room. His arms were folded. His legs were spread. His jaw was set. And I realized that I was not favorably impressing this chaplain. Indeed, he came up afterward and thrust his finger into my chest, and he said, “Dr. Wood, you people are not Christians.” Well, how was I to minister at that point? I'll tell you how I did it. I've often reflected if it's in the Lord's way or not. But I said, “Look, I'm not even going to talk to you until you read the Book of Mormon. Read the Book of Mormon, and then come back and tell me that we're not Christians.” Now, I don't know if that's the

Lord's way or not, but I saw him a little bit as a Pharisee at that moment.

Well, a year later in my office, the phone rings, and guess who it was? My good chaplain friend, who is now out in California. And he called up, and this is how the conversation began: "Bob, how are you?" None of this Dr. Wood stuff. And then he said, "I just wanted to call you and tell you that I've now read the Book of Mormon several times, and I've concluded you people are Christians. And I wanted to let you know that." And I said, "I'm so glad. I will spread the word. Thank you so much."

And then he said, "You know, this fellow Alma, gosh, he is really good. You know, he's given me insights into the writings of the Apostle Paul in ways that I had never thought of before." And he said, "And you know what? I also found out for the first time that Latter-day Saints, they do believe in the doctrine of grace." He said, "So I think it's all right for you people to begin to sing 'Amazing Grace.'"

Now, by the way, I should tell you that later, when he retired—this is generally not the outcome—but when he retired later, he and his family actually were baptized into the Church. And I remember he called me and said, "You know, I've been offered a major pulpit out here in California." He said, "But I can't take it, because my family and I are going to be baptized." And I said, "Well, we can give you a pulpit. We just don't pay as much."

In any case—but sometimes, you don't always take it on the chin. Sometimes part of ministering in the Lord's way is to speak the truth, to speak it with love, but to speak it directly. And I think we need to think about how to stand forth in deed as witnesses of Christ Himself. I've always been very impressed with how we as a Church have handled that musical, *The Book of Mormon*.

Now, I know a family—how many of you seen that musical? OK. What did you think of that musical?

**AUDIENCE:** [INAUDIBLE]

**ROBERT S. WOOD:** Now, the music is really quite engaging. I must admit, I've heard some of the music—I haven't seen it, but I've heard the music, and it's really insulting. It's truly demeaning. And of course, if you knew the authors and some of the things they've done in the past, you would realize that that's their stock-in-trade. Now, we could put protesters out there. We could, you know, just send letters to the *Washington Post* and the *New York Times*, and we could, in effect, organize an Anti-Defamation League all of our own and really go after some of these people. Because the Latter-day Saints, particularly in this country, are not a small minority anymore. We are a minority, but we're not a weak minority. So there are lots of things you could have done.

So what did we do? We had the missionaries passing out little cards saying, now that you've seen the musical, would you like to read the book? Would you like to read the book? And we now even have put our ad in the playbill for that very musical. Now that's ministering. That is part of ministering. We did not react in a way, in effect, which, in effect, exacerbated a quarrel. But we, in effect, reacted in a loving and a gentle way, but a very direct way, as to, look, why don't you find out what we're really all about?

Now, many of the things that we stand for today, and you stand for, as chaplains are for, aggressively and increasingly are not accepted by the world. We believe such unusual things as that a marriage is between a man and a woman. And that basically, that marriage is a holy sacrament. And that we have responsibilities and obligations within that covenantal relationship, which is not only between a man and a woman, but also between them and Heavenly Father.

Now, this is not a popular belief. We have views on chastity. We have views, in fact, on how we should conduct our lives. There are many views that we have and that many other, by the way, of other faiths share with us. But they are not the dominant theme in many of our societies, particularly our Western societies. But we are going to continue

to reach out to all people. We will not abandon the faith, but we will exemplify the faith by how we live and how we present ourselves.

Now, if you're going to be a chaplain—or anybody else in the Church, for that matter—if you're going to minister, you always must minister from higher ground. You must minister from higher ground. You can never bring somebody up unless you are standing on higher ground. And the key aspect of ministering, for all of us, is who we are in our personalities, in our character, in our family. How do we, in effect, change our own lives to show forth in our very countenance the image of Jesus Christ?

Elder Maxwell—excuse me—Elder Bednar recently made a presentation to a leadership group. And he cited a sermon that was given some years ago by Elder Neal Maxwell. And I thank Frank for bringing this to my attention, as a matter of fact. It's a wonderful piece. He quotes Elder Maxwell, who said, "Jesus' character necessarily underwrote His remarkable atonement. Without Jesus' sublime character there could have been no sublime atonement! His character is such that He '[suffered] temptations of every kind' (Alma 7:11), yet He gave temptations 'no heed' (Doctrine and Covenants 20:22). Someone has said only those who resist temptation really understand the power of temptation. Because Jesus resisted it perfectly, He understood temptation perfectly, hence He can help us. The fact that He was dismissive of temptation and gave it 'no heed,' reveals His marvelous character, which we are to emulate" ("O How Great the Plan of Our God!" [address to Church Educational System religious educators, Feb. 3, 1995], 6).

Now, commenting on that, Elder Bednar said, "[One of the greatest indicators of righteous] character is the capacity to recognize and appropriately respond to other people who are experiencing the very challenge or adversity that is most immediately and forcefully pressing upon us" ("The Character of Christ" [address given at the Brigham Young University–Idaho Religion Symposium, Jan. 25, 2003]). Therefore, character is demonstrated by looking, turning, and reaching outward when the instinctive response of the natural man in each of us is to turn inward, to be self-centered and self-absorbed and selfish. The Savior of the world is the source of the standard and the ultimate criterion of moral character and the perfect example of charity and consistency. That, indeed, is what it is to minister in the Lord's way.

Finally, some years ago, the first time I served as a bishop in Charlottesville, Virginia, I was a young assistant professor at the time—actually, I guess I'd just been promoted. Anyway, I was a professor at the University of Virginia, struggling very, very hard to deal with a very dynamic ward. And I was really busy. I was busy in my profession. I was busy at church. I had a young family. I was very, very busy. And a retired—released, rather—stake president moved into our ward from another stake. And one day—somewhat critically, I could tell—he said to me, "Bishop," he said, "what do you do to stay close to the Lord?" I was a little bit insulted. I mean, what do you mean, what do I do? I'm killing myself. I'm counseling with people. I'm going to the hospital. I mean, holy mackerel, what more could I possibly do?

And then, I thought, you know, he's right. I'm so busy—so busily engaged even in good works that I cannot hear the voice of God. I cannot hear the voice of God. I haven't got time to listen. And so, I thought, and I remembered that Christ himself—remember? He withdrew. He withdrew on occasion. In fact, the beginning of His ministry, He withdrew.

Sometimes we, in order to maintain our equilibrium to minister successfully, we need to withdraw. We need an eye on the course. What I began to do is, early in the morning, I would, in effect, withdraw. And I would, in effect, meditate upon the scriptures themselves and open myself up to hearing the word and the will of God. Do not get so

involved and so overwhelmed that somehow you block out that still, small voice, that guidance of the Holy Ghost, which can help us know what to do. And as we do that, we'll come closer and closer not only to our Heavenly Father but to those to whom we minister in the way that Christ would have us minister.

And of that I bear witness in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.