

"MY WAYS ARE NOT YOUR WAYS"

BY ELDER CLAYTON M. CHRISTENSEN
Area Seventy
North America Northeast Area



When we encounter roadblocks in our efforts to build the kingdom, the reason often is that our solutions are grounded in the wisdom of men—which is foolishness to God.

Many of the Savior's most profound teachings are counterintuitive. "Love your enemies" is an example. The solutions that our minds are prone to develop are often different from those the Lord would have us pursue. "For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, saith the Lord" (Isaiah 55:8).

When we encounter roadblocks in our efforts to build the kingdom, the reason often is that our solutions are grounded in the wisdom of men—which is foolishness to God (see 1 Corinthians 3:19). In this article I will highlight five of the Savior's teachings that seem counterintuitive to the wisdom of men but that have the potential to help the Church and its Saints grow even stronger.

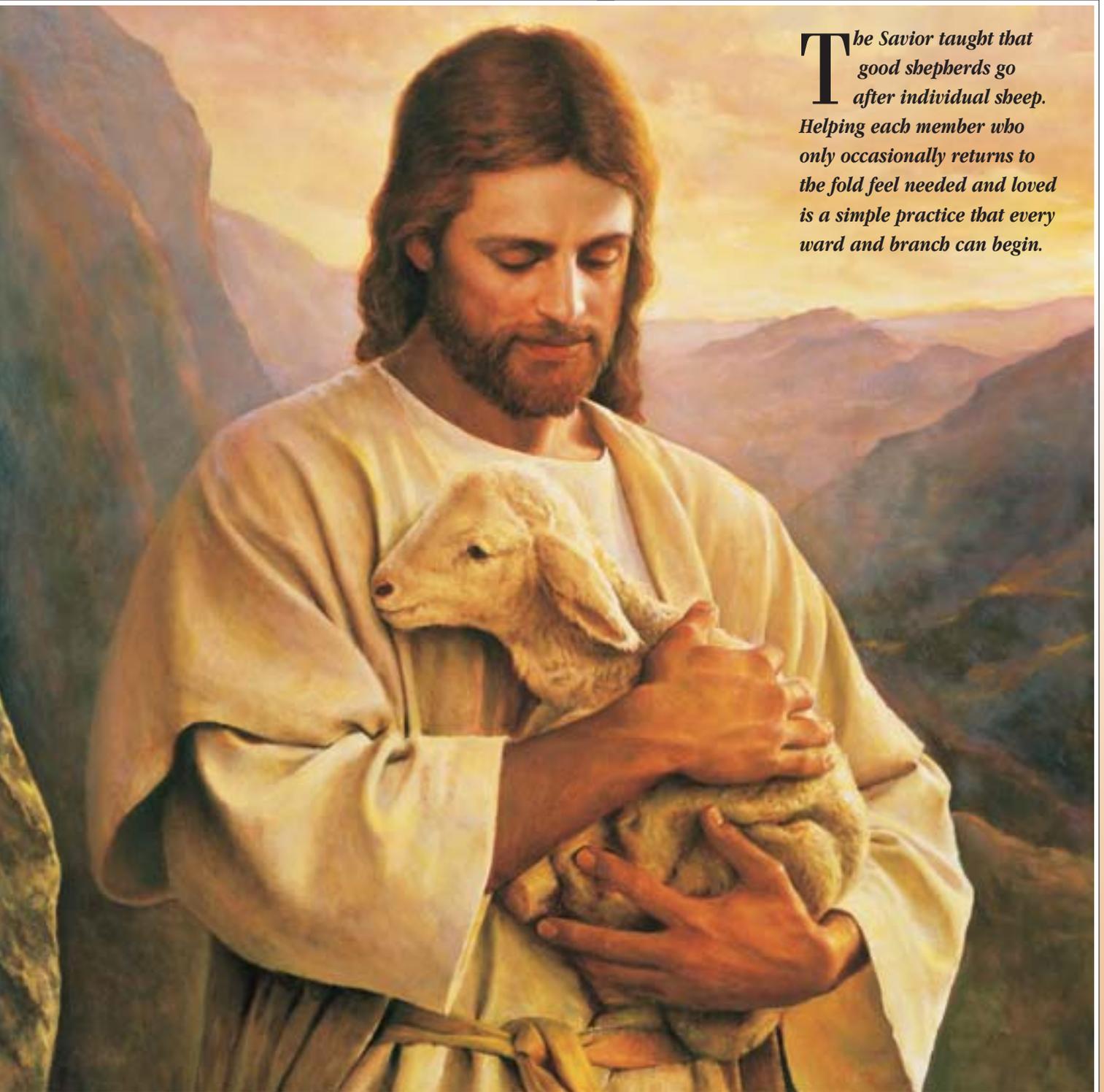
"If a man have an hundred sheep, and one of them be gone astray, doth he not leave the ninety and nine, and goeth into the mountains, and seeketh that which is gone astray?" (Matthew 18:12).

The Savior taught that good shepherds go after individual sheep that don't return to the fold. Yet we frequently focus on the ninety and

nine, leaving those who are lost to continue wandering from the Church. In every sacrament meeting, for example, our clerks count the number of sheep who returned to the fold. They store this number in a safe place for the quarterly report, and then we go home. If we conformed our ways to God's ways, we'd list the names of the individual members who could have returned to the fold on that Sunday but didn't come. Then we'd go find them.

My friend who served as mission president in France instituted a practice like this in one particular district. At the end of Sunday meetings, the branch councils and missionaries together named the members and investigators who could have been there but didn't come. They each took an assignment to contact one of those individuals that same day with this message: "We sure missed you today. Are you OK? It's not the same for the rest of us when you can't come. Can I help? Can you come next Sunday?" Within two years, sacrament meeting attendance in the district increased from 540 to 725—in a region where convert baptisms are infrequent.

We should be careful not to offend members who deliberately do not want to attend. But helping each member who only occasionally returns to the fold on Sunday to feel needed and feel our love is a simple practice



The Savior taught that good shepherds go after individual sheep. Helping each member who only occasionally returns to the fold feel needed and loved is a simple practice that every ward and branch can begin.

that every ward and branch can begin. Many less-active members got that way because they didn't return to the fold one Sunday and nobody seemed to notice.

2 "... by the weak and the simple" (D&C 1:23).

Some wards and branches suffer from inadequate leadership. The reason is often that we rely on the same qualified

people to fill key callings, denying others experiences in which personal growth can occur. When a branch is just emerging and there are no alternatives, leaders extend callings to people who don't fit the traditional mold of talented, capable leaders and invite them to assume important responsibility. During such periods, the branch and its members often grow in exciting ways. Many times, however, there comes a point when a group of talented, experienced

leaders and teachers has coalesced. When there are capable people available to ensure that Church programs run efficiently, we often stop drafting people from the periphery of capability into the positions of responsibility in which they can grow. Because they seem less qualified than those in the experienced core, we leave them on the periphery. The experienced leaders and teachers play musical chairs, exchanging positions of responsibility.

This is not the Lord's way. Building His Church on the backs of the simple and weak (see D&C 1:19) was not a temporary, stop-gap staffing plan to tide the Church over during its early years until enough experienced, committed, qualified leaders had arrived on the scene. The Lord deliberately weakened Gideon's army so that Israel wouldn't get confused about whose power had led them to victory (see Judges 6; 7). None of Jesus's original Twelve Apostles had evidenced adequate experience or commitment when He called them. Enoch, Moses, Samuel, David, Jeremiah, Amos, and Joseph Smith were unqualified by the world's standards when the Lord put them to work. But God transformed them.

We will build greater strength and our wards and branches will grow when we stop relying solely on the strongest members—when the experienced and most talented of our leaders are called to supporting roles, to train and help those who can become strong as they serve in positions into which they can grow.

3 *“For whosoever will save his life shall lose it; but whosoever shall lose his life for my sake and the gospel's, the same shall save it” (Mark 8:35).*

The percentage of potential missionaries who serve missions is considerably less than it should be. Mission presidents also find that many of those who accept mission calls are not prepared for the rigors of the work or to teach the gospel with competence and conviction. We've

CHRIST CALLING PETER AND ANDREW, BY JAMES TAYLOR HARWOOD



None of Jesus's original Twelve Apostles had evidenced adequate experience or commitment when He called them.

raised the bar to improve our missionary work. But this doesn't solve the underlying problem, that we're preparing only a small fraction of the young people on our membership rolls to become committed, courageous missionaries.

Why are we not doing better in this crucial area? One reason may be that the focus of many parents and youth leaders is to help our youth *find* their lives. Too often we define strong youth programs as those with a large “critical mass” of youth, well-planned activities, and opportunities for Latter-day Saint friendships. These are good things to have. But while we work so hard to provide enriching experiences for our youth, we sometimes deny them the most important opportunity of all—the chance to *lose* their lives for the sake of the gospel.

The Savior's formula for converting our hearts to His cause is unambiguous. He instructs us to lose our lives in His service. I recently asked a stake Young Women president how she kept her girls active, given the lack of a “critical mass” in some branches in her stake. She responded: “Their faithfulness has little to do with how many girls there are. What matters is whether they learn to love serving God. I grew up in a little branch. When I was 12 our branch organist moved, and though I could barely play the piano, I was called to be the branch organist. I practiced and practiced those hymns. I wouldn't have thought of missing sacrament meeting, because the branch needed me. At 15 I was called to teach Primary. I loved those kids. Do you think I'd have missed church or done something that would have been a bad example? Never. They needed me. My transition from Young Women to Relief Society was easy and natural because I had learned to love serving the Lord.”

A strong youth program is not defined by the numbers of youth. Nor is it defined by the charisma of youth leaders. Rather, it is one that gives every young person the opportunity to lose his or her life for the sake of the Savior.

In one stake, leaders began a concerted effort to give their young men opportunities to lose their lives in serving the Lord.

A few years ago the Young Men leaders in a ward in the Boston Massachusetts Stake, were troubled. Only 3 of 35 young men on the membership rolls were attending church, and it had been years since anyone from the ward had served a mission. Attempts to reactivate and retain these young men through interesting activities fell short, as activities in Boston's schools and community proved to be formidable competitors for these young men's interests. The stake and ward Young Men leaders then began a concerted effort to give their young men opportunities to lose their lives in serving the Lord. The active young men were given assignments each week to contact quorum members who missed Sunday meetings and to arrange transportation for them to come the next week. The boys who began attending church again were given assignments to contact others who weren't attending. Some were called to take the sacrament to shut-in members each Sunday. One was called to set Duty to God Award goals with each young man and to follow up by tracking progress weekly. Within two years 16 young men

were actively attending the ward's Sunday meetings. Each had a calling that made it important for him to be there.

Children whose families provide opportunities to lose their lives for the sake of the gospel generally aren't those at risk. The youth whose lives leaders need most urgently to influence are those whose parents do not regularly enroll them in the Savior's service. A strong youth program isn't one that coddles these at-risk youth. Rather, it will give them opportunities to sacrifice in the service of God, to feel needed in the Church and feel the Spirit as they serve.

If the reason for attending church between ages 12 and 18 is fellowship and fun, then Relief Society and elders quorum can be a





PHOTOGRAPH BY CHRISTINA SMITH

There is a calling far higher than that of stake president, bishop, or Relief Society president. It is to be a doer of good, a disciple of Christ, an intermediary through whom God answers others' prayers.

shock: they aren't very fun. The burden of adult discipleship looms heavy if young people have never shouldered the Savior's yoke. His message "For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light" (Matthew 11:30) runs counter to the wisdom of man. More of our young people will serve missions and become faithful adults if our ward leaders spot the riskiness of their situation when they are young and invite them to try the yoke on—not just in once-a-year service projects but in serving side-by-side with adults on a weekly basis in callings where they will feel the Spirit as they do the Lord's work.

4 *"Ye must . . . become as a little child, or ye can in nowise inherit the kingdom of God" (3 Nephi 11:38).*

Few of the Savior's statements are as counterintuitive to the wisdom of man as this one—which invites adults to abandon much of what they have learned about the impossible and to trust in God as innocently as little children do. A factor that often seems to restrain the Church's progress is the reluctance of some of our best and busiest leaders to do this.

I learned an important lesson about

becoming like a child in the context of missionary work. Long ago I had concluded that it was quite simple to administer the mechanics of missionary meetings, but I could not *lead* that work with passion and credibility unless I could speak in present-tense verbs and first-person pronouns about finding people for the missionaries to teach. I have learned to use terms that associate me with Mormonism in my conversations—comments about my mission to Korea, my children's missions, my assignments in the Church, my having attended Brigham Young University, and so on. These comments open the door for a conversation about the Church. Most who notice that I have opened this door choose not to walk through it. A few do, however, usually saying, "So you're a Mormon?" I then ask if they'd like to learn more about us.

In my attempt to lead by example a few years ago, I had set October 15 as a goal by which I hoped to find someone for the missionaries to teach. By mid-September, however, I had not been able to find anyone who expressed any interest. I was extremely busy with my employment and my Church calling and simply could see no way to meet any new people by my date of October 15. I began to feel that because I was doing all I could to serve in the Church, it would be OK if just that once I didn't find someone for the missionaries to teach.

Rather than accept this impossibility, however, I felt impressed instead to follow the Savior's command and seek the faith of a little child. I shifted the focus of my prayers and fasting, pleading that because I had no more time to find someone, I needed someone who wanted to know about the Church to cross my path. I pledged that when I met that

person I would invite him or her to come to our home and meet with the missionaries.

On October 12 my wife, Christine, and I spoke at an institute fireside. A sweet, warm spirit was present. Afterward, a Harvard graduate student approached me and asked: “Professor Christensen, I understand that sometimes when someone wants to learn about your church they can meet with missionaries to take lessons. Is there any way I could do this in your home?” I stood there stunned. It was all I could do to not start crying. She had no idea how directly God had answered my pleadings through her.

When Moroni foresaw that many in the last days would believe God had ceased to be a God of miracles (Mormon 9:15–20), perhaps he had in his view not just those of other faiths but some of us as well. When we are doing all we can and our leaders ask us to do even more, miracles are the only option. That is why the Savior asked us to forsake the rational limits of our adult minds and employ the faith of little children instead.

5 *“Inasmuch as ye have done it unto the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me” (Matthew 25:40). “Out of small things proceedeth that which is great” (D&C 64:33).*

Despite the Savior’s assurances that the small things are the big things, many in the Church feel inferior for never having served in presidencies or bishoprics. Others who have served in leadership positions feel “put out to pasture” when given a less-prominent calling.

I once felt passed over when another man was called to a leadership position I had felt I might receive. In the crisis of self-confidence that ensued, I realized that because our minds are finite, we create hierarchies and statistically aggregate people. We perceive stake presidents to be higher than bishops and Primary presidents higher than Primary teachers because they preside over more people.



NAAMAN CURED OF LEPROSY, BY PAUL MANN

Just as Naaman had to overcome initial skepticism when Elisha prescribed a simple cure for his leprosy, we need faith to follow God’s simple instructions—to believe.

But God has an infinite mind. He needs no statistics above the level of the individual in order to have a perfect understanding of what is happening. This means, I realized, that the way God will measure my life is not by the numbers of people over whom I have presided but by the individual people whose lives I have touched with His love and with the gospel of Jesus Christ.

With this sense of my most important calling, I began to fast and pray that God would give me opportunities daily to bless and help people. As I acted upon the promptings I received, it was as if God spoke to me more frequently because He knew I was listening. This period in my life proved to be one of extraordinary spiritual growth. There is a calling far higher than that of stake president, bishop, or Relief Society president. It is to be a doer of good, a disciple of Christ, an intermediary through whom God answers others’ prayers.

We Need Faith

Just as Naaman had to overcome initial skepticism when Elisha prescribed a simple cure for his leprosy (see 2 Kings 5:1–14), we need faith to follow God’s simple instructions—to believe, for example, that if we call upon our youth to lose their lives in the service of the Savior, it will cement them in the Church and not drive them from it. It takes faith to expect that if we call the humblest and weakest to positions of responsibility, God will magnify them to succeed. Can leaders with no free time find people for the missionaries to teach? Will great things result if we release some of the most talented members and call them to bring the love and blessings of God to those of His children who need truth and comfort? It takes faith to take God at His word. But when the forces of evil seem to be standing in our way as we serve in the kingdom of God, may we prayerfully consider solutions that are God’s ways and not man’s. ■