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Discerning and Meeting Needs: The Essence of Our Ministry

Peter B. Rawlins

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“*Meet the needs.*” This phrase (in its varied forms) is not found in the scriptures, but it has become commonplace in the Church. For example, President Spencer W. Kimball counseled priesthood leaders to “take into account, prayerfully and carefully, the needs of their members and to focus on meeting those basic needs.” He stressed that “our task is to be simple enough to serve our people at the level of their need.”¹ The *Ensign* typically reminds visiting teachers to “prayerfully select and read from this message the scriptures and teachings that meet the needs of the sisters you visit.”² Home teachers are asked to “prayerfully determine the individual and family needs of the members [you] serve. Then . . . plan and work to help meet those needs, providing support and encouragement.”³

Unfortunately, the phrase “meet the needs” may be used so much that we pass over it lightly, without attending to its profound implications. The phrase could become—perhaps *has* become—a mere cliché. In contrast, President James E. Faust taught, “One of the great transcending principles that we teach in the Church is that we’re trying to meet the needs of others. We talk frequently about service.”⁴ Indeed, many of the essential teachings of the Church seem to converge at one point: identifying and meeting needs through dedicated service. We have the formidable duty to diagnose and prescribe.

An emphasis on meeting needs is not merely procedural. Clearly, learning to identify and meet needs is an essential dimension of our ministry as disciples of Christ. Serving and meeting the needs of others

may be classified in two broad categories—*temporal* and *spiritual*, both requiring comparable attention. For example, President J. Reuben Clark Jr. said that the Savior left as a heritage for His Church “the relief of the ills and sufferings of humanity [temporal, physical needs], and the teaching of the spiritual truths which should bring us back into the presence of our Heavenly Father [spiritual needs].”⁵

During the Savior’s ministry, He “went about all the cities and villages” (Matthew 9:35). He was anxiously engaged—He was found out among the people, “teaching in their synagogues, and preaching the gospel of the kingdom” (Matthew 4:23). His teaching was directed at meeting spiritual needs, which He understood so perfectly and discerned so precisely. He also perceived temporal needs and used His power to relieve them. He was found “healing every sickness and every disease among the people” (Matthew 9:35; see also Matthew 4:23–24; Mosiah 3:5–7; 1 Nephi 11:28, 31; Acts 10:38 for descriptions of the Lord’s ministry).

Christ’s ministry is a model for our own. He told the Nephites, “Ye know the things that ye must do in my church; for the works which ye have seen me do that shall ye also do” (3 Nephi 27:21).

A Wide Variety of Needs

God knows our real needs—better than we can possibly know them ourselves. “Your Father knoweth what things ye have need of, before ye ask him” (Matthew 6:8), and He desires to satisfy our needs according to His wisdom. Through His Holy Spirit, He intervenes in our lives to strengthen us in our unique situations. “Likewise the Spirit also helpeth our infirmities: for we know not what we should pray for as we ought: but the Spirit itself maketh intercession for us with groanings which cannot be uttered” (Romans 8:26), or “with striving which cannot be expressed.”⁶ Elder Henry B. Eyring said, “Our Heavenly Father knows us and our circumstances and even what faces us in the future. . . . He has perfect understanding of the feelings, the suffering, the trials, and the needs of every individual.”⁷

Although humans have common needs, desires, and wants, the manifestations of these needs are infinite in number and variety. We all need food to nourish and sustain us, but some may satisfy their hunger with rice, others with pizza. Thus, although our humanity endows us with universal needs, we also encounter astounding diversity in individuals and cultures. Needs are very individual and unique. In addition, people have differing capacities to handle needs by themselves.

Some needs are obvious, especially temporal needs. Some are hidden, such as sin or loneliness and emotional or spiritual needs. Needs

may go unrecognized because of ignorance; a person may not realize that a genuine need is unfulfilled. Needs may be merely a vague, ill-defined feeling that defies verbal descriptions. Needs may also be denied or sublimated—hidden because of pride, shame, or embarrassment.

Needs are time-sensitive. Hunger may dominate our thoughts at one moment, but when that physical need is fulfilled, achievement or entertainment easily redirects our motives, only to be overtaken by fatigue.

We often impose artificial needs on ourselves through indulgence. The needs of the body can mutate into the lusts of the flesh. President Brigham Young said, “I call evil inverted good, or a correct principle made an evil use of.”⁸ Pampered desires become habits, and conquering the habit becomes a new need. Webster’s 1828 dictionary included this couplet under the definition of *want*: “From having wishes in consequence of our wants, we often feel wants in consequence of our wishes.”⁹ Elder Richard L. Evans noted, “It is getting to where our necessities are too luxurious and our luxuries are too necessary.”¹⁰ Similarly, Elder Joe J. Christensen said: “If we are not careful, it is easy for our wants to become needs. Remember the line ‘There, there, little luxury, don’t you cry. You’ll be a necessity by and by.’”¹¹

Psychological and physical needs, however, are often more obvious than our spiritual needs. Just as hunger is merely the symptom of an unsatisfied physical need, so unhappiness, lack of purpose, and gnawing emptiness can be merely the symptoms of unsatisfied spiritual needs. Too many people are like a “hungry man which dreameth, and behold he eateth but he awaketh and his soul is empty; or like unto a thirsty man which dreameth, and behold he drinketh but he awaketh and behold he is faint, and his soul hath appetite” (2 Nephi 27:3).

Our spiritual longings are satisfied through communion with God—spiritual rebirth, which effects a remission of our sins; and spiritual gifts, which enable us to minister with real effect. Yet many people pass through life only vaguely aware that they are spiritually deprived. Certainly we need the proximate peace (see John 14:27) and the fulness of joy (see 3 Nephi 27:10) the Savior has promised. “That divinity within us needs food from the Fountain from which it emanated. . . . Principles of eternal life, of God and godliness, will alone feed the immortal capacity of man and give true satisfaction.”¹²

Gifts of the Spirit

God makes ample provision to meet every unique need and to supply each individual want. Through the Light of Christ, He prompts people to do good. Caring individuals render marvelous service, using

their finely honed talents to meet needs they discern through heightened awareness and sensitive inquiry. Ultimately, however, the profuse variety of personal needs—especially spiritual needs—can be fulfilled only with God’s help and through His power. Only God knows the secret needs of our hearts, and only He has power to satisfy needs, fully and completely. Elder Neal A. Maxwell said, “We live and teach amid a wide variety of individual personalities, experiences, cultures, languages, interests, and needs. Only the Spirit can compensate fully for such differences.”¹³

Thus, God gives spiritual gifts to be used in the service of others. Gifts are given “severally,” or individually, according to God’s will (see Moroni 10:17–18; 1 Corinthians 12:7, 11), and they are given for the profit of all and for the common good (see D&C 46:26). Gifts of the Spirit are manifestations of the gift of the Holy Ghost, which is received by the laying on of hands of those with priesthood authority. They are the signs promised to those who believe (see Mark 16:17–18; 63:9–12; D&C 84:64–73).

We have observed that needs are as individual, as unique, and as varied as the people who have them. They are changing, dynamic, and elusive. They may be fleeting or perpetual. They may be routine, requiring plodding maintenance, or episodic, occurring at irregular intervals. Needs may be intense or mild; they may be predictable or unexpected.

The gifts of the Spirit are measured precisely according to the need. The Prophet Joseph Smith said, “The Lord gave us power in proportion to the work to be done, and strength according to the race set before us, and grace and help as our needs required.”¹⁴ Modest needs call forth seemingly small but discernable allotments of spiritual power, as when Jesus blessed the children (see Matthew 19:13–15). Great needs call forth awesome power, as when the Lord raised Lazarus from the tomb (see John 11). We must not gauge miracles based on our narrow perceptions. “Behold, O Lord, . . . we know that thou art able to show forth great power, which looks small unto the understanding of men” (Ether 3:5). Nor should we become jaded so that we are “less and less astonished at a sign or a wonder from heaven” (3 Nephi 2:1). Grace and power are extended in proportion to the need, and we must learn to recognize God’s influence in our everyday experiences.

This special and particular allocation of spiritual gifts is evidence that God intervenes in our lives and controls conditions according to His wisdom. His gifts are not doled out randomly or capriciously. Elder Bruce R. McConkie taught: “All of the gifts of the Spirit must be dispensed in an orderly way, according to the needs and conditions of the moment.

All the affairs of the earthly kingdom must be administered as changing needs and circumstances require.”¹⁵ God indeed adapts “his mercies according to the conditions of the children of men” (D&C 46:15). God gives precisely what should be meted (measured) to each person at the very moment that it is needed (see D&C 84:85). Elder McConkie also said: “All of those called to the ministry . . . are given the gifts needed to perform the work whereunto they are called. These gifts are always the ones needed for the particular work at hand.”¹⁶ We are commanded to “covet earnestly the best gifts” (1 Corinthians 12:31). The “best gifts” may be those best suited to a particular need. Accordingly, one gift may be best in one circumstance, and another gift may be best in a different situation—and God governs the interaction. Our role is to trust Him to do His work, at His own time, and in His own way.

The abundance of spiritual gifts is also evidence of their divinity. They are, according to Elder McConkie, “infinite in number and endless in their manifestations because God himself is infinite and endless, and because the needs of those who receive them are as numerous, varied, and different as there are people in the kingdom.”¹⁷ God makes lavish provision for our needs when we exercise faith and trust His will. He is “able to do exceeding abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that worketh in us” (Ephesians 3:20).

Ministering to Needs

President Spencer W. Kimball plainly taught a principle that he also exemplified: “God does notice us, and he watches over us. But it is usually through another person that he meets our needs. Therefore, it is vital that we serve each other in the kingdom.”¹⁸ Obviously, needs are met when people respond to the private impulse or formal call to serve. Unfortunately, many people are left in want because those who should have served failed in their duty. Service is the catalyst that combines needs and gifts in an effective—even powerful—interaction.

We must first prepare ourselves to serve by becoming self-reliant, or independent, in solving our own problems. Ideally, the Church should become “independent above all other creatures beneath the celestial world” (D&C 78:14). Through provident living, we are to meet our needs, reduce them, or prevent them from developing. While we strive to become independent, we also recognize that we, as mortals, will always have personal needs of varying intensity. To the extent possible, we forget ourselves—our needs—in the service of others. “Charity means subordinating our interests and needs to those of others, as the Savior has done for all of us.”¹⁹ We see examples such as President Spencer W.

Kimball or President Howard W. Hunter, who served valiantly despite physical hindrances. One missionary serving in a far-off land was asked by her parents what she would like for a small Christmas remembrance. She honestly could not think of a thing; her needs had been utterly eclipsed by her service. “Service changes people. . . . It prompts us to consider others’ needs ahead of our own.”²⁰

Satisfying our own needs, then, is secondary. The world lauds self-fulfillment, self-gratification, self-esteem, and self-respect. All these aims focus on serving ourselves. But the Savior taught that if we are to save our lives, we must lose them (see Matthew 10:39). Thus, we are to prepare ourselves to help meet others’ needs: “Let him labour, working with his hands the thing which is good, that he may have to give to him that needeth” (Ephesians 4:28). Our covenants require us to voluntarily and deliberately take upon ourselves the needs of others (see Mosiah 18:8–10). Their needs become our needs.

Alma taught that the Savior knows how to “succor his people according to their infirmities” (Alma 7:12). This is tantamount to saying that He knows how to succor His people in proportion to their needs and wants. In emulation of the Savior, we go about among the people, “administering to their relief, both spiritually and temporally, according to their wants” (Mosiah 4:26); we “succor those that stand in need of [our] succor” and “administer of [our] substance unto him that standeth in need” (Mosiah 4:16). We are to impart “to one another both temporally and spiritually according to [or in proportion to] their needs and their wants” (Mosiah 18:28). We adapt our compassion to their suffering.

The Prophet Joseph Smith observed that spiritual gifts, like needs, are usually invisible and that “it would require time and circumstances to call these gifts into operation.”²¹ To fulfill our covenants, however, we do not passively wait for time to grant a fortuitous opportunity. Rather, we deliberately and voluntarily invest our time to identify and meet needs. In harmony with doctrinal principles, and in fulfillment of our covenants, we sacrifice our own interests to do things we would not otherwise do. We actually create circumstances when we are anxiously engaged (see D&C 58:27), taking inspired initiative and consecrating our time through service. The resulting circumstances then call into operation those gifts best suited to the occasion. Giving at the right time becomes crucial.

In this way, faith and experience mesh, and our lives are altered by God’s hand. By our faithful actions, we elicit divine intervention. Our daily experiences—how we discern and meet needs—are thus molded by the potter’s hands (see Isaiah 64:8). “The miracles . . . show how the law of

love is to deal with the actual facts of life. Miracles were and are a response to faith, and its best encouragement. They were never wrought without prayer, felt need, and faith.”²² Just as in the early days of the Restoration, today, revelations of divine power, perfectly suited to the conditions we face, are “received in answer to prayer, in times of need, and [come] out of real-life situations involving real people.”²³ Thus, spiritual gifts are no longer abstractions; they take shape as faith-promoting stories that show how gospel power is at work today as it was anciently. The signs that follow faith confirm (establish, corroborate) our faith (see Mark 16:17–20).

We go through life, of course, with purpose and direction. We are to work out our own salvation. But in the process—indeed, as an integral part of the process—we maintain a heightened awareness of those around us. We are alert to others’ needs and are sensitive to their feelings. We develop a kind of peripheral vision, the ability to see what is outside the central area of focus. We prayerfully cultivate the special spiritual gift of discernment, increasing our capacity to recognize by the power of the Spirit the longings and desires in another person’s heart. President J. Reuben Clark Jr. said, “May God bless you always, . . . and, as among your most precious gifts, . . . may He give you entrance to the hearts of those you teach [or serve] and then make you know that as you enter there you stand in holy places.”²⁴

Sow Diligently

The laborer is worthy of his hire, and spiritual gifts are some of the “wages” we receive from the Eternal Paymaster. Elder Bruce R. McConkie explained the passage, “He that reapeth receiveth wages, and gathereth fruit unto life eternal” (John 4:36).

What is the result of preaching the gospel? Who gets the blessings? . . . Of course, the convert gets the blessing; but above that, always it’s the laborer in the vineyard who is blessed. . . .

It isn’t just a matter of laboring here and after a long and diligent period of service receiving a wage, a reward. The people who labor get paid at intervals as time goes on. And where the Lord is the paymaster, they get what they merit and deserve. So you, in the process of doing the things that win you eternal life eventually in our Father’s kingdom, begin here and now to reap the blessings of missionary service. I think that the greatest blessings that you begin to gain day by day and continually are the gifts of the Spirit. . . .

We ought to be seeking the gifts of the Spirit. Every time we get one of the gifts of the Spirit we’re receiving wages. We don’t get them until we abide the law upon which their receipt is predicated.²⁵

We would soon weary of well-doing if we were not rewarded along the way. Spiritual gifts not only help us meet the needs of others but also assure us that God is with us always.

President Brigham Young lamented: “I am satisfied . . . that in this respect, we live far beneath our privileges. If this is true, it is necessary that we become more fervent in the service of God, . . . that we be not slack in the performance of any duty, but labor with a right good will for God and truth.”²⁶ Too often, we fail to receive “wages,” or the gifts of the Spirit, because we do not invest time to create spiritually ripe circumstances. We do not “go about doing good” often enough or long enough. Hence, opportunity passes by unnoticed. Elder Maxwell said: “Opportunities and options abound all about us to ‘bring to pass much righteousness.’ We would be staggered and ashamed if we saw fully the unused and unexplored possibilities for service that surround each of us all of the time.”²⁷

If we neglect our home teaching or visiting teaching, we pass up an opportunity to receive a reward, a spiritual gift. If we turn down a calling or don’t magnify it, we miss an opportunity, and we may never realize it except through nagging feelings of guilt. If we let our fear of public speaking prevail, we do not experience what it is like for the Holy Ghost to give us utterance. If we rely wholly on our skills and talents rather than seek spiritual gifts, we miss the divine aid that compensates for our inadequacies.

And if we miss spiritual gifts because we bypass an opportunity, we miss a central gospel experience. Elder McConkie said: “If spiritual gifts are interwoven with and form part of the very gospel of salvation itself, can we enjoy the fulness of that gospel without possessing the gifts that are part of it? If gifts and miracles shall—inevitably, always, and everlastingly—follow those who believe, how can we be true believers without them? . . . We are commanded to seek the gifts of the Spirit; if we do not do so, we are not walking in that course which is pleasing to Him whose gifts they are.”²⁸

We are admonished to seek spiritual gifts. “Desire spiritual gifts,” and be “zealous of spiritual gifts, seeking that ye may excel to the edifying of the church” (1 Corinthians 14:1, 12). We are to “lay hold upon every good gift” (Moroni 10:30). How do we do so? By fulfilling the conditions that call them forth. As gifts are granted in proportion to the need, so also are they received in proportion to our investment, our service. “He which soweth sparingly shall reap also sparingly; and he which soweth bountifully shall reap also bountifully. Every man according as he purposeth in his heart, so let him give; not grudgingly, or of

necessity: for God loveth a cheerful giver. And God is able to make all grace abound toward you; that ye, always having all sufficiency in all things, may abound to every good work” (2 Corinthians 9:6–8).

The Savior taught, “Give, and it shall be given unto you; good measure, pressed down, and shaken together, and running over, shall men give into your bosom. For with the same measure that ye mete withal it shall be measured to you again” (Luke 6:38).

It would be tragic to miss or reject the proffered gifts: “For what doth it profit a man if a gift is bestowed upon him, and he receive not the gift? Behold, he rejoices not in that which is given unto him, neither rejoices in him who is the giver of the gift” (D&C 88:33).

On the other hand, when we reap spiritual gifts as the natural consequence of our devoted service, we enjoy some of the most satisfying experiences of mortality. We give life to our faith and substance to our covenants. We receive the Spirit as the “earnest of our inheritance” (Ephesians 1:14), meaning that “the Lord gives us his Holy Spirit in this life as a foretaste of the joy of eternal life.”²⁹ We thus have the assurance that the course of our lives is in harmony with God’s will and that we will ultimately receive eternal life, “which gift is the greatest of all the gifts of God” (D&C 14:7).

Divine Grace

With all that has been said about meeting needs, we err if we think we can solve certain needs by our own power alone. The most critical needs are unsolvable by mere human intervention. We can marshal community, Church, or individual resources. We can sacrifice our time, contribute our means, and share our talents. We can empathize and console. But to genuinely and permanently meet another person’s needs, we must lead that person to Christ, our ultimate source of succor.

Because of His atoning sacrifice, the Savior can rightfully “claim of the Father his rights of mercy which he hath upon the children of men” (Moroni 7:27). As the “advocate with the Father” (1 John 2:1), He is “pleading [our] cause before him—saying, Father, behold the sufferings and death of him who did no sin, in whom thou wast well pleased; behold the blood of thy Son which was shed, the blood of him whom thou gavest that thyself might be glorified” (D&C 45:3–4).

This merciful intervention by our Advocate with the Father is not reserved only for a distant afterlife. Christ intercedes on our behalf even now—from day to day and moment to moment—if we will receive Him. When He ascended into heaven, He said, “Lo, I am with you alway” (Matthew 28:20). He is “in [our] midst” (D&C 29:5); His eyes are upon

us, even though we cannot see Him. He will go with us and be our advocate, and nothing will prevail against us (see D&C 32:3). His advocacy can result in present forgiveness, and we can know we are clean before Him (see D&C 110:4–5). He will “console” the pure in heart, and “he will plead [their] cause” (Jacob 3:1). Jesus Christ, our advocate, can do this because He “knoweth the weakness of man and how to succor them who are tempted” (D&C 62:1).

He was not one who could not “be touched with the feeling of our infirmities; but was in all points tempted like as we are, yet without sin” (Hebrews 4:15). He was “made like unto his brethren, that he might be a merciful and faithful high priest” who is able to “succour them that are tempted” (Hebrews 2:17–18). He “descended below all things” (D&C 88:6; see also Ephesians 4:9–10) and experienced the most abhorrent human suffering. “The Son of Man hath descended below them all” (D&C 122:8). In mortality, He suffered “temptations, and pain of body, hunger, thirst, and fatigue, even more than man can suffer, except it be unto death” (Mosiah 3:7). He endured “pains and afflictions and temptations of every kind.” He took upon Himself the infirmities of all mankind “that his bowels may be filled with mercy, according to the flesh, that he may know according to the flesh how to succor his people according to their infirmities” (Alma 7:11–12).

Thus, we are commanded, “Cast thy burden upon the Lord” (Psalm 55:22). We are to cast “all our care upon him, for he careth” for us (1 Peter 5:7). We are to rely on the Lord’s grace, which is “an enabling power,” a “divine means of help or strength, given through the bounteous mercy and love of Jesus Christ.”³⁰

Grace is given abundantly—but not randomly, capriciously, or arbitrarily. To be appreciated, it must be sought, and the act of seeking is faith. “We have access by faith into this grace” (Romans 5:2; see also Ephesians 3:12). Our Lord allows us to approach or communicate with Him on the condition that we exercise faith. Without faith, the grace of Christ would not be appreciated or accepted. “For what doth it profit a man if a gift is bestowed upon him, and he receive not the gift?” (D&C 88:33). Indeed, God is angry with His people “because they will not understand [His] mercies which [He] hast bestowed upon them because of [His] Son” (Alma 33:16).

Conclusion

All people have needs of one kind or another. Through the enabling power of grace, our Savior can grant us spiritual gifts to bless our lives and the lives of others and to guide us back to His presence. The Lord’s

consecrated, covenant servants are the catalysts who bring unmet needs and spiritual gifts together with power and real effect. The interaction can produce some of our most profound and satisfying experiences. **RE**

Notes

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2. "Prepare to Receive Personal Revelation," *Ensign*, September 2003, 71. This is a standard introduction to many visiting teaching messages.
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4. James E. Faust, "Go Bring Them In from the Plains," *Ensign*, July 1997, 2.
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7. Henry B. Eyring, in Conference Report, October 1996, 44.
8. Brigham Young, in *Journal of Discourses* (London: Latter-day Saints' Book Depot, 1854–86), 3:157.
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16. McConkie, *A New Witness for the Articles of Faith*, 360.
17. McConkie, *A New Witness for the Articles of Faith*, 270–71.
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20. Derek A. Cuthbert, "The Spirituality of Service," *Ensign*, May 1990, 12.
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22. Bible Dictionary, "Miracles," 732–33.
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24. J. Reuben Clark Jr., "The Charted Course of the Church in Education," quoted in Boyd K. Packer, *Teach Ye Diligently* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1975), 378.
25. Bruce R. McConkie, "He That Reapeth Receiveth Wages," seminar for new mission presidents, June 21, 1984.
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27. Neal A. Maxwell, *Wherefore Ye Must Press Forward* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1977), 34.
28. McConkie, *A New Witness for the Articles of Faith*, 369.
29. Bible Dictionary, "Earnest," 659.
30. Bible Dictionary, "Grace," 697.