AN ESSAY ON SHEPHERDING, WOUNDEDNESS, AND CHARITY

WHEN TEACHING OF CHRIST IS NOT ENOUGH

A Plea to Priesthood Leaders and Councils to Cleanse the Inner Vessel

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Introduction

There are moments in the Church when priesthood leaders and councils must pause to consider whether the culture they are helping shape is fully reflecting the Savior they seek to serve. This kind of examination is not evidence of faithlessness. It is one of the ways faithful people preserve faith, protect trust, and ensure that the name of Christ is not merely spoken among us, but embodied through us.

It is possible for a ward, stake, or council to sincerely teach of Christ and still need to ask whether the Saints are experiencing Christlike love through the way they are seen, heard, pursued, protected, corrected, and comforted.

That possibility should not be treated as an accusation. It should be treated as a sacred leadership question.

The question is not whether Christ is mentioned. The question is whether Christ is being embodied. The question is not whether lessons are taught in His name, but whether councils, leaders, and ministering brothers and sisters are becoming the kind of people through whom His love can actually be felt.

A people can teach of Christ and still fail to love like Christ. A council can speak often of the Savior and still overlook those who are bleeding quietly at the edge of the fold. A ward or stake can organize, administer, plan, report, and testify, while wounded souls experience our culture as cold, avoidant, defensive, or unsafe.

If that possibility offends us, then perhaps it is already doing the cleansing work it was meant to do.

This essay is not an accusation against every priesthood leader, nor is it a claim that every member's pain has been caused by unrighteous leadership. It is not written to condemn good men who labor imperfectly and often invisibly. Rather, it is a plea that priesthood leaders and councils take seriously the possibility that something spiritually dangerous can creep into a people who still speak the language of Christ.

The Savior Himself warned of this condition:

This people draweth nigh unto me with their mouth, and honoureth me with their lips; but their heart is far from me. - Matthew 15:8

The danger is not merely open rebellion. Sometimes the danger is religious fluency without Christlike nearness. Sometimes the lips remain orthodox while the heart has withdrawn from the actual demands of charity.

The Lord also warned of a latter-day condition in which love itself would grow cold:

And because iniquity shall abound, the love of many shall wax cold. - Matthew 24:12

The Doctrine and Covenants repeats the same warning:

And the love of men shall wax cold, and iniquity shall abound. - Doctrine and Covenants 45:27

These warnings should cause priesthood leaders to tremble before assuming, "This is not us." The proper first response is not institutional reassurance. It is examination. It is inward searching. It is the cleansing of the inner vessel.

I. The Mandate to Cleanse the Inner Vessel

The Savior's rebuke to the scribes and Pharisees was not that they lacked religious structure. They had structure. They had scripture. They had religious language. They had public devotion. They had authority recognized within their community.

Yet the Lord said:

Thou blind Pharisee, cleanse first that which is within the cup and platter, that the outside of them may be clean also. - Matthew 23:26

The phrase "cleanse first" matters. The Lord does not begin with appearance. He begins with the inner vessel.

For priesthood leaders and councils, this means we cannot be satisfied merely because meetings are functioning, lessons are being taught, callings are being filled, and ordinances are being performed. Those things matter deeply. But they do not automatically prove that the culture beneath them is clean.

The inner vessel includes motive, reflex, instinct, culture, and unwritten assumptions. It includes the way leaders respond when concerns are brought to them. It includes whether councils are places of revelation or merely places of administrative agreement. It includes whether the wounded are heard or managed. It includes whether painful truth is welcomed as a possible mercy from God or dismissed as disloyalty, contention, exaggeration, bitterness, or emotional instability.

To cleanse the inner vessel is to ask questions that may make leaders uncomfortable: Are we more committed to appearing unified than becoming humble? Are we more practiced in defending the institution than hearing the injured? Do we teach of Christ while failing to pursue as Christ pursued? Do wounded members experience our councils as shepherding bodies or as systems of management?

Do we use phrases about faith, forgiveness, sustaining, and patience to invite healing, or do we use them to quiet disruption?

Do we assume that because a problem has not injured us personally, it therefore cannot be real?

That last question is especially important. A priesthood leader's lack of personal experience with a wound does not logically disprove the existence of the wound. A shepherd standing near the ninety and

nine may not feel the danger of the one who is missing. But the Shepherd's doctrine requires attention to the one precisely because the one is not safely within the leader's immediate comfort.

II. Teaching Christ Must Lead to Becoming Christlike

No faithful Latter-day Saint should diminish the importance of teaching of Christ. Nephi declared:

And we talk of Christ, we rejoice in Christ, we preach of Christ, we prophesy of Christ. - 2 Nephi 25:26

But Nephi's words were never meant to justify speaking of Christ while failing to live His way. To preach of Christ is not merely to mention Him. It is to point souls toward Him by doctrine, covenant, example, and character.

The Savior Himself gave the test:

Therefore, what manner of men ought ye to be? Verily I say unto you, even as I am. - 3 Nephi 27:27

This is the standard for councils. Not merely, "Do we teach correct doctrine?" but, "Are we becoming as He is?"

A council may teach Christ and still need to ask whether it sees like Christ. Does it notice the one who has gone silent? Does it recognize pain before it becomes disruption? Does it discern when anger is grief wearing armor? Does it know the difference between rebellion and woundedness?

A council may teach Christ and still need to ask whether it hears like Christ. Does it listen long enough for the real wound to emerge? Does it allow lament without rushing to correction? Does it hear hard feedback without immediately categorizing the speaker as dangerous?

A council may teach Christ and still need to ask whether it pursues like Christ. Does it leave the ninety and nine? Does it knock again? Does it make visible, costly witness that the absent soul matters? Or does it mistake passive distance for respect while the wounded experience it as abandonment?

A council may teach Christ and still need to ask whether it repents like Christ commands. Does it acknowledge when leaders have erred? Does it apologize where apology is due? Does it correct false cultural assumptions? Does it teach plainly that sustaining priesthood keys does not require silence in the face of unrighteous dominion?

Teaching Christ is not the finish line. It is the beginning of accountability. If we teach Him, we must measure ourselves by Him.

III. The Danger of Assuming the Problem Cannot Be Real

One of the subtle dangers in priesthood leadership is the assumption that our experience represents the whole. If a leader has not personally felt abandoned, spiritually managed, silenced, or harmed by Church culture, he may be tempted to conclude that the issue is exaggerated or isolated.

But the scriptures repeatedly warn against judging only by outward appearance. The Lord told Samuel:

For the Lord seeth not as man seeth; for man looketh on the outward appearance, but the Lord looketh on the heart. - 1 Samuel 16:7

A ward or stake may outwardly appear healthy while certain hearts within it are breaking. The programs may run. The meetings may be full. The testimonies may sound confident. The reports may be positive. And yet some among us may be quietly concluding that the culture of the Church no longer feels like a place where their pain can safely be known.

A priesthood council must be humble enough to believe that unseen suffering may be real.

When someone raises concern about cold love, shallow ministering, breached trust, defensive leadership, or the substitution of cliche for charity, the first response should not be, "That has not been my experience." That may be true, but it is not dispositive.

The better response is: "Tell me what you have seen." "Help me understand where we may be blind." "Is there something in our culture that makes wounded people feel unsafe?" "What do our councils do when someone is too hurt to be pleasant?" "Have we confused teaching of Christ with loving like Christ?"

These are not questions of institutional weakness. They are questions of priesthood strength. A leader who cannot ask them may not yet be ready to shepherd the wounded.

IV. The Last-Days Warning: Love Waxing Cold

The Savior's prophecy that "the love of many shall wax cold" should not be treated as a description of the world only. The Saints are not immune from last-days conditions merely because they possess restored truth.

Doctrine and Covenants 45 places the same warning in the latter-day frame:

And the love of men shall wax cold, and iniquity shall abound. - Doctrine and Covenants 45:27

This warning should cause councils to ask whether cold love has crept into Church culture in respectable forms.

Cold love does not always look like hatred. Often it looks like passivity. It looks like avoidance. It looks like distance renamed as respect. It looks like leaders who do not pursue because they are busy, tired, uncomfortable, or unsure what to say. It looks like members who disappear from each other's lives while everyone assumes someone else is reaching out. It looks like a wounded person being spoken about more than spoken with.

Cold love may still attend meetings. Cold love may still teach lessons. Cold love may still use the name of Christ. Cold love may even sound doctrinal.

But it does not bear burdens. It does not mourn well. It does not pursue the lost until it finds them. It does not stay close when pain becomes inconvenient. It does not risk awkwardness to make love visible.

This is why the warning matters for priesthood leaders. The issue is not whether we believe in charity. The issue is whether charity remains warm in practice.

If the love of men can wax cold in the last days, then priesthood councils must be on guard not only against obvious sin, but against respectable indifference.

V. The Covenant at the Waters of Mormon Is a Leadership Mandate

Alma's covenant at the waters of Mormon provides one of the clearest descriptions of covenant community:

As ye are desirous to come into the fold of God, and to be called his people, and are willing to bear one another's burdens, that they may be light; > Yea, and are willing to mourn with those that mourn; yea, and comfort those that stand in need of comfort. - Mosiah 18:8-9

These are not optional refinements to discipleship. They are part of entering the fold of God.

For leaders, this covenant has particular force. A priesthood leader cannot merely administer belonging. He must model it. A council cannot merely assign ministering. It must become a place where burdens are noticed, named, and carried.

To bear a burden, one must first come near enough to feel its weight.

To mourn with those that mourn, one must resist the urge to explain grief away.

To comfort those who stand in need of comfort, one must ask what comfort is actually needed rather than offering whatever phrase is most familiar.

This covenant exposes the insufficiency of gimmick, cliche, and platitude. A slogan cannot bear a burden. A program cannot mourn. A phrase cannot substitute for a heart willing to enter another person's sorrow.

When councils rely on religious phrasing rather than Christlike presence, wounded members often feel managed rather than ministered to. They may hear words that are doctrinally adjacent to truth, but they do not feel the weight of covenant love.

And when that happens repeatedly, some will conclude that the Church knows how to speak of Christ but not how to love them as Christ would.

That conclusion should grieve every priesthood leader.

VI. Councils Must Not Become Defensiveness Organized

Priesthood councils are meant to be revelatory bodies, not defensive bodies. They are meant to help leaders seek the mind and will of the Lord, not merely preserve existing assumptions.

Doctrine and Covenants 121 teaches that priesthood influence can only be maintained:

By persuasion, by long-suffering, by gentleness and meekness, and by love unfeigned; > By kindness, and pure knowledge. - Doctrine and Covenants 121:41-42

The phrase "love unfeigned" should haunt every priesthood council. Feigned love is love as performance. It is love that says the correct thing while avoiding the actual cost. It is love that maintains an image but withholds the heart.

When a member brings painful concern to leadership, councils must resist the natural impulse to defend. Defensiveness is human, but it is not revelatory. It often asks, "How do we protect ourselves from this accusation?" rather than, "Lord, is there truth here we are required to receive?"

The Savior's standard requires councils to ask inward questions before outward ones. Not first, "Was the delivery ideal?" First, "Is there truth in the concern?" Not first, "Does this person sound angry?" First, "What pain preceded the anger?" Not first, "How do we explain our intent?" First, "What has been the effect of our culture?" Not first, "Are we being attacked?" First, "Are we being invited to repent?"

The natural man in leadership wants to treat hard counsel as danger. The man of Christ must be willing to receive faithful counsel, at times, as mercy.

VII. The Wounded Are Not Always Pleasant Messengers

It is easy to receive concern when it is delivered calmly, deferentially, and in language that protects the comfort of the hearer. But wounded people do not always speak in ways that are easy to receive.

That does not mean every harsh delivery is justified. It does not mean leaders must accept abuse, accusation, or contempt. But it does mean that councils must learn to hear beneath imperfect delivery.

The scriptures are full of painful messages delivered to covenant people. Prophets often sounded disruptive before they were recognized as faithful. The Lord's messengers did not always preserve institutional comfort. They called people to repentance.

Priesthood leaders should therefore be cautious before dismissing a concern because of how it felt to receive it.

If a man asks whether a culture can be changed, he may be asking from the ache of long observation, personal injury, grief for others, or fear that our culture has become too content with shallow love. A defensive answer may confirm the very wound he is trying to name.

A better priesthood response would be:

"We do teach of Christ. But if people are experiencing our culture as less than Christlike, then teaching of Christ must lead us to examine ourselves. Tell us where you believe the gap is."

That kind of response does not surrender priesthood stewardship. It fulfills it. It shows that leaders are not afraid of truth.

VIII. The Difference Between Leaves and Fruit

The Savior cursed the fig tree that had leaves but no fruit. From a distance, it gave the appearance of life. But when the Lord came seeking fruit, He found none.

This image should sober every religious community. It is possible to have leaves without fruit. It is possible to have visible religious activity without the fruit of Christlike love.

Teaching of Christ can become a leaf if it does not produce the fruit of Christlike action. Meetings can become leaves. Programs can become leaves. Statistics can become leaves. Social warmth can become leaves. Public testimony can become leaves.

The fruit is different. The fruit is wounded people being seen. The fruit is absent people being pursued. The fruit is leaders repenting quickly when they err. The fruit is councils that ask whether the one is missing because something in the ninety and nine became unsafe. The fruit is confidentiality protected as sacred. The fruit is faithful dissent treated not as rebellion but as a possible warning voice. The fruit is charity that remains warm when love becomes costly.

The Lord taught:

Wherefore by their fruits ye shall know them. - Matthew 7:20

A council should therefore ask: What fruit is our culture producing in the wounded?

Are they drawing nearer to Christ through our care, or are they learning to seek Him apart from us because our care has become unsafe?

Are they speaking openly because they trust us, or are they silent because they expect to be managed? Are they being pursued, or are they being allowed to disappear? These questions do not weaken the Church. They cleanse the vessel.

IX. Sustaining Leaders Does Not Require Denying Harm

One cultural error that can creep into priesthood settings is the belief that sustaining leaders requires members to minimize or silence concerns about harm. But Doctrine and Covenants 121 teaches precisely the opposite. It teaches that priesthood authority is conditional upon righteousness and that unrighteous dominion causes heaven to withdraw.

The Lord says:

When we undertake to cover our sins, or to gratify our pride, our vain ambition, or to exercise control or dominion or compulsion upon the souls of the children of men, in any degree of unrighteousness, behold, the heavens withdraw themselves. - Doctrine and Covenants 121:37

If priesthood authority can be misused, then faithful members must be allowed to name misuse. If leaders can err, then councils must be willing to hear correction. If love can wax cold, then the Saints must be permitted to say when they have felt its coldness.

A culture that treats all upward correction as disloyalty is not a culture patterned after Doctrine and Covenants 121. It is a culture drifting toward unrighteous dominion.

Sustaining priesthood leaders means upholding them in righteousness. It does not mean pretending that every exercise of authority is righteous simply because it was official. It does not mean calling harm harmless. It does not mean using loyalty as a shield against accountability.

Priesthood leaders should welcome this distinction. It protects them from pride. It reminds them that authority in the Church is not self-justifying. It must remain connected to heaven through humility, meekness, persuasion, and love unfeigned.

X. The Inner Work of Priesthood Councils

If priesthood councils are to respond faithfully to concerns about cold love, platitude, abandonment, and spiritual injury, they must do more than reassure themselves that Christ is being taught. They must ask what kind of people their teaching is producing.

A council might begin with questions such as these: Who in our ward or stake has gone quiet, and have we pursued them? When someone expresses pain with Church culture or leadership, do we listen first or defend first? Do our ministering efforts create real covenant connection, or do they merely satisfy assignment structure? Have we created a culture where wounded people can speak without being labeled contentious? Do we know how to distinguish anger from rebellion, grief from bitterness, and lament from faithlessness? Have we ever used true doctrine in a way that helped us avoid uncomfortable love?

Are there people whose absence we have normalized? Do we teach members that charity requires pursuit, sacrifice, and staying power? Do we model apology and repentance as leaders? Are we willing to hear that some have experienced our culture as spiritually cold even if we have not?

These questions are not administrative. They are spiritual. They invite leaders to seek revelation not only about what to do, but about what to become.

The Lord does not merely need councils that can plan. He needs councils that can see.

XI. What a Christlike Response Might Sound Like

When a member raises a hard concern about the culture of love within a ward or stake, a Christlike leadership response need not be defensive. It might sound like this:

"We are grateful you raised this. We do teach of Christ, but we recognize that teaching Christ is not enough if our people do not feel His love through us. We need to examine whether our councils, ministering patterns, and leadership reflexes are producing the fruits of charity. We do not want to assume that because we have not personally experienced this wound, it is not real. Help us understand where love has grown cold and where we need to repent."

Such a response would not require leaders to accept every accusation without discernment. It would not require abandoning order, discernment, or stewardship. But it would demonstrate humility. It would show that leaders understand the difference between defending themselves and shepherding souls.

The Savior does not ask His shepherds to be fragile. He asks them to feed His sheep.

Conclusion

The central danger is not that the Church will stop speaking of Christ. The danger is that we will speak of Him while failing to love as He loved.

When that happens, gimmick, cliche, and platitude begin to do the work our hearts were meant to do. They stand in for mourning. They stand in for pursuit. They stand in for repentance. They stand in for costly presence. They stand in for charity.

But they cannot save, heal, gather, or shepherd.

Priesthood leaders and councils must therefore cleanse the inner vessel first. They must resist the instinct to assume that a wound is unreal simply because they have not personally felt it. They must be willing to ask whether the love of men has waxed cold in forms so culturally acceptable that we have mistaken them for wisdom. They must measure teaching by fruit. They must ensure that speaking of Christ leads to becoming like Christ.

The Lord's warning remains:

This people draweth nigh unto me with their mouth, and honoureth me with their lips; but their heart is far from me. - Matthew 15:8

No priesthood council should read those words as though they could only apply to someone else. The faithful response is not reassurance. It is repentance.

It is examination. It is cleansing the inner vessel.

It is asking whether our hearts have remained close enough to Christ that the wounded can still feel Him through us.

Because in the end, the Savior will not ask only whether we taught of Him. He will ask whether we loved as He loved.