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## **Better Kingdom-Building through Triage**

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## BETTER KINGDOM-BUILDING THROUGH TRIAGE

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Daniel C. Peterson

**Abstract:** *We are called to take the Gospel to the entire world, but our numbers are few and our time and resources are limited. This is where cold calculation can help. A field-surgical technique pioneered during the Napoleonic Wars of the early nineteenth century and refined in the butchery of World War I a century later offers a useful model for making our missionary efforts more efficient and more effective.*

Many years ago in Switzerland, I learned a very valuable lesson from my first missionary companion. I say that I “learned” it, but in this case, I’m afraid that my subsequent behavior has, all too often, been a textbook example of “faith without works.” I’ve put it into practice far too inconsistently.

When I arrived in Switzerland, it evidently wasn’t yet time for missionary transfers. I would eventually be assigned to Burgdorf, the largest town in the Emmental region of the canton of Bern. For about two weeks, though, I remained in the mission home at Pilatusstrasse 11, on a hill overlooking Zürich, and I went tracting every day with a member of the mission home staff, Elder David J. Cannon, who was assigned to be my temporary senior companion.

I very soon saw for myself what I had already been told before arriving in Switzerland, that tracting was hard and frustrating work, that very few of the very few people who were home during the daytime were interested in talking with us. Time after time after time, doors were closed in our faces. Usually politely, but not always.

On a few occasions, though, we were able to speak at least briefly with those we met, and one of those occasions has remained etched rather clearly in my memory.

A man invited us into his apartment and sat us down, obviously quite willing to speak with us. This was exciting. It was such a refreshing change of pace from rejection after rejection after rejection. We began to lay out the story of the Restoration. Soon, though, he interjected his opinion that churches such as ours were all about financial gain — an assertion that he repeated multiple times, quite calmly and in a matter-of-fact tone of voice, while rubbing his thumb and his index and middle fingers together as if he were manipulating cash. He continued to do so even after we indicated that we were serving at our own expense. (He didn't believe us.). All religion was a scam. Our religion was a scam. We were just in it for the money. (Why didn't we just come clean and admit it?)

After ten minutes or so of this sort of exchange, my missionary companion, Elder Cannon, politely thanked him for his time, indicated that we had other obligations, and stood up to go.

Once we were outside, I asked him why we had left. At least this fellow was willing to *talk* to us! We had managed to get through a door!

I've never forgotten what this more experienced missionary told me: Zürich, he said, was a fairly large city, and there were far more people in it than we would ever be able to contact. We had no time to waste on folks who weren't interested, even if they enjoyed arguing with us. We weren't there to argue. We were there to find those who could be benefited by the message that we had been divinely called to bring to them. Maybe that fellow's time would come someday, but it plainly wasn't his time *then*.

I've thought about that simple but important point quite a bit since that day in Zürich. In October 2007, Elder Dallin H. Oaks, then a member of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, delivered a conference talk under the title of "Good, Better, Best" that is closely related to what I want to say here. The opening words of that talk convey an important principle:

Most of us have more things expected of us than we can possibly do. As breadwinners, as parents, as Church workers and members, we face many choices on what we will do with our time and other resources.

We should begin by recognizing the reality that just because something is *good* is not a sufficient reason for doing it. The number of good things we can do far exceeds the time available to accomplish them. Some things are better than good, and these are the things that should command priority attention in our lives. ...

As we consider various choices, we should remember that it is not enough that something is good. Other choices are better, and still others are best. Even though a particular choice is more costly, its far greater value may make it the best choice of all.<sup>1</sup>

A striking illustration from the late Stephen R. Covey has also lingered in my mind long after the first time that I saw it, and I think it relevant here. Whether it occurs in one or more of his books, I cannot say; I remember it from a video recording of one of his lectures.<sup>2</sup>

Imagine yourself standing before a table on which are arranged a large glass jar along with a jug of water, a half dozen fairly large pebbles, a larger number of smaller stones, and a small pail of sand. Your mission, should you choose to accept it, is to put as many of those things as possible into the glass jar.

Going for quantity perhaps, you pour the sand into the jar, and then the multitude of smaller pebbles on top of it, along with the water. So far, so good! But there isn't enough room to put even a single larger stone into the jar.

Alternatively, you start with the larger pebbles first. Then you put in the smaller little rocks and, especially after you shake the jar, they fit rather well in the spaces between the bigger rocks. Then you pour the sand in and shake it and, once more, it fits well into the spaces between the stones. Finally, you pour the water in, and everything is now inside the jar.

Brother Covey's point was that the bigger rocks represent your most important responsibilities or tasks. If you give them your primary attention, you're much more likely to get them done. If, on the other hand, you attend first to the more numerous smaller pebbles and to the vastly more numerous but also vastly smaller grains of sand before you on the table — which is to say, to the innumerable but often trivial matters that come up and distract us daily — the chances of accomplishing your most important tasks and discharging your most significant responsibilities will be greatly reduced.

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1. Dallin H. Oaks, "Good, Better, Best," *Ensign* (November 2007), <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/ensign/2007/11/good-better-best>.

2. For a video of Stephen Covey teaching this principle in a business setting, see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zV3gMTOEWt8>. There are scores of videos available on YouTube that teach the same principles, but to my understanding, Covey was the first.

It's a matter of budgeting time and energy and, sometimes, money. An hour devoted to a television sitcom is one hour less for gardening or spending time with children or doing family history or learning Spanish. The fifty dollars spent on a restaurant meal are fifty dollars that won't go toward the missionary fund or toward a new mattress or fixing a broken bicycle. Not always wrong, of course but, done to excess, potentially destructive of your own goals and priorities.

I spent about two weeks in the mission home with that wise senior companion, Elder Cannon, before being assigned for roughly two months to Burgdorf (where my companion, Elder Friedman, was a convert from Judaism). David J. Cannon remained a friend ever afterward, until his untimely recent death. We served together again as zone leaders based in Ostermundigen, once more in the Canton of Bern, just before he was released from his mission. I was then sent to Interlaken, the principal town in the Bernese Oberland and the gateway to that indescribably beautiful region of the Swiss Alps. Interlaken was a life-changing assignment for me, in many ways. But it was there, too, that certain words of Jesus from the New Testament began to hit me especially hard. I can still recall quoting them in a letter from Interlaken to my parents:

And Jesus went about all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues, and preaching the gospel of the kingdom, and healing every sickness and every disease among the people.

But when he saw the multitudes, he was moved with compassion on them, because they fainted, and were scattered abroad, as sheep having no shepherd.

Then saith he unto his disciples, The harvest truly is plenteous, but the labourers are few;

Pray ye therefore the Lord of the harvest, that he will send forth labourers into his harvest. (Matthew 9:35–38)

We should, of course, pray that God will raise up more and more qualified missionaries to take the news of the Restoration to the world. And we should play our parts in developing and supporting such missionaries, with our children and grandchildren and those for whom we have ecclesiastical responsibility, and in serving ourselves where appropriate.

But we should also see to it that the missionary resources that are already available, broadly understood, are effectively and efficiently used. And this brings me to the medical concept of triage.

In medical practice, the process called triage is applied when the immediate demand for medical resources exceeds their availability — when, that is, demand exceeds supply. In ordinary, unfettered economic situations, of course, prices would rise and thus bring demand and supply back into alignment. While many people might want a three-dollar hamburger, far fewer will pay thirty dollars for the same sandwich. Most of us, though, would not be comfortable allocating emergency medical assistance on that same basis. Not many would endorse a rule that choking restaurant patients who can pay a hundred dollars in cash receive the Heimlich maneuver, while those who can't are left to fend for themselves. One thousand dollars in cash for a defibrillator; two thousand for mouth-to-mouth resuscitation.

To practice triage is to assign priority to the treatment of patients based on the severity of their condition, the urgency of their need for immediate treatment, and their likelihood of recovery with and without treatment. When available resources are insufficient for all to be treated immediately, triage rations patient treatment efficiently. The term *triage* comes from the French verb *trier*, meaning “to separate,” “to sort,” “to select.”

The Merriam-Webster entry for *triage* might also be helpful here:

**1a:** the sorting of and allocation of treatment to patients and especially battle and disaster victims according to a system of priorities designed to maximize the number of survivors

**b:** the sorting of patients (as in an emergency room) according to the urgency of their need for care

**2:** the assigning of priority order to projects on the basis of where funds and other resources can be best used, are most needed, or are most likely to achieve success<sup>3</sup>

Modern medical triage seems to have been invented by a field surgeon named Dominique Jean Larrey amidst the horrors of the Napoleonic Wars in Europe. He apportioned treatment for the wounded according to the urgency and the seriousness of their injuries rather than on the basis of their rank and nationality.<sup>4</sup> A century later,

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3. Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary, s.v. “triage,” <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/triage>.

4. See Panagiotis N. Skandalakis, et. al., “‘To Afford the Wounded Speedy Assistance’: Dominique Jean Larrey and Napoleon,” *World Journal of Surgery* 30, no. 8 (August 2006): 1392–99, <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/16850154/>. An analogous practice, however, seems already to have been in place in Egypt during

during the even worse horrors of World War I, overwhelmed French medical personnel also used the triage technique. Field medics who were responsible for removing the wounded from the battlefield and doctors charged with their care at aid stations behind the front lines afterwards divided the victims into three categories:

- Those who were likely to live, regardless of what care they received.
- Those who were unlikely to live, regardless of what care they received.
- Those for whom immediate care might make a positive difference in outcome.

The analogy to our missionary efforts should, I think, be fairly obvious. Our numbers are small, and we must deploy them in the most efficient and effective way possible. (Wouldn't it be wonderful if every member really *were* a missionary? And, even better, if every member were a really *effective* missionary?) All souls are precious, of course, and every human being on earth is a child of God, but sometimes we need to move on. It may seem heartless to do so, just as it must have been heartbreaking for stretcher bearers and surgeons to move on from those on the battlefields of Europe who could not be helped. But there are people around the world who not only desperately need the message of the Gospel but who desperately want it. They should be our highest priority. The demand is high, but, in a sense, the supply is small. "The harvest truly is plenteous, but the labourers are few."

And yet, every day, I see faithful Latter-day Saints devoting sizable amounts of time and energy online to battling critics who have made it perfectly clear that, for now at least, there is absolutely nothing we can say or do that will convince them to accept the claims of the Restoration or to submit themselves to the requirements of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. And, yes, I'm acutely aware of the fact that I'm among those who are so wasting their time.

I'm trying to change my ways, and I invite others to join me in the change.

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the seventeenth century before Christ: See Joost J. van Middendorp, Gonzalo M. Sanchez, Alwyn L. Burridge, "The Edwin Smith Papyrus: A Clinical Reappraisal of the Oldest Known Document on Spinal Injuries," *European Spine Journal* 19, no. 11 (November 2010): 1815–23, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2989268/>.



For there are many yet on the earth among all sects, parties, and denominations, who are blinded by the subtle craftiness of men, whereby they lie in wait to deceive, and who are only kept from the truth because they know not where to find it. (D&C 123:12)

In a separate brief article, also occasioned by some reflections on my mission to Switzerland back in the late Pleistocene Epoch, I suggest a few ways in which lay members of the Church — even those living in the portions of deepest Utah County where sightings of non-members are comparatively rare — can participate in the missionary effort.<sup>5</sup>

It will probably come as no surprise that, in my judgment, contributing to the work of the Interpreter Foundation is among those ways. I want to express my appreciation here to those who have already made Interpreter's existence and its flourishing possible through their donations of time, effort, and, yes, money. I'm grateful to the authors, copy editors, source checkers, and others who have created this volume, and I especially want to thank Allen Wyatt and Jeff Lindsay, the two managing or production editors for the *Journal*. Like all of the other Interpreter leadership, they serve as volunteers and without financial or other compensation. We could not function without their efforts. And I invite others to join us.

**Daniel C. Peterson** (PhD, University of California at Los Angeles) is a professor of Islamic studies and Arabic at Brigham Young University and is the founder of the University's Middle Eastern Texts Initiative, for which he served as editor-in-chief until mid-August 2013. He has published and spoken extensively on both Islamic and Latter-day Saint subjects. Formerly chairman of the board of the Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies (FARMS) and an officer, editor, and author for its successor organization, the Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, his professional work as an Arabist focuses on the Qur'an and on Islamic philosophical theology. He is the author, among other things, of a biography entitled *Muhammad: Prophet of God* (Eerdmans, 2007).

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5. Daniel C. Peterson, "Preaching the Gospel Where We Cannot Go," *Meridian Magazine*, July 6, 2021, <https://latterdaysaintmag.com/preaching-the-gospel-where-we-cannot-go/>.





