



When Prophets Speak Meekly and Still Pierce the Heart

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What does righteous rebuke look like today? Elder Holland, as an example, battles ideas, not people, and always points to Christ.

In our polarized culture, it has become commonplace to demonize or ridicule anyone who holds a different perspective. Such an approach, however, is inconsistent with the Savior's example and teachings. I was struck recently with the following guidance from a revelation given to Joseph Smith:

He that speaketh, whose spirit is contrite, whose language is meek and edifieth, the same is of God if he obey mine ordinances (Doctrine and Covenants 52:15).

Do these traits characterize the media we consume? Do they characterize our own speech?

As we ponder such vital questions, it is important not only to consider this verse in isolation and in the abstract. Concrete examples play an important role in helping us to define and visualize these traits. The Savior is the perfect example of these principles, as He is in all things. He acknowledged His dependence on the Father, taught the Father's teachings, and did His will in all things.

His example helps us to make sense of the guidance quoted above. His example also provides some perhaps counterintuitive insights about the nature of meekness and edifying language. Clearly it does not mean validating everyone and everything, or He never would have said things like, "Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye devour widows' houses, and for a pretence make long prayer: therefore ye shall receive the greater damnation!" (Matthew 23:14). Meekness, apparently, includes courageously defending divinely inspired standards of goodness.

But what does that look like in the 21st century? Christ's example remains relevant to us, but it can be hard to visualize how He might speak in our culture, the norms of which differ tremendously from those of the first-century Middle East. There is not always a clear or obvious answer to the question "What would Jesus do?"

However, one of the messages of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is that He has not left us with only ancient examples. He lives. He continues to call prophets and apostles. Through them, He gives us both teachings and examples that help us to come to know Him. Any of the Latter-day prophets and Apostles are excellent examples of the principles identified above.

I have learned a great deal about them from President Jeffrey R. Holland. In the nearly thirty-one years in which he has served in the Quorum of the Twelve, he has given sixty

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sermons at General Conference. Studying the content of his sermons has helped me awaken to faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. Studying the style of his sermons has given me important insights into how I can apply the Savior's teachings and example in the way I speak.

President Holland's speaking style is distinctive partly because of his agonistic tone. Agonistic comes from the Greek word, ἀγών, anglicized as "agon," which means a struggle, contest, or conflict. We use this root in English when we refer to the main character of a story as a protagonist and the one who opposes him or her as the antagonist. In most of his sermons, President Holland sets up an antagonist that he battles with his words. I can identify an antagonist in forty-eight out of his sixty General Conference addresses. The sense of struggle makes for an exciting speaking style and probably contributes to the fact that his sermons are well-loved by many members of the Church, myself included. He has memorably taught and testified about [battling against doubt](#), [lust](#), [sexual immorality](#), [envy](#), feelings of being [abandoned by God](#), existential [meaninglessness](#), dismissive attitudes about [mental health problems](#), [perfectionism](#), apathy for [the poor](#), the social trend of [fatherlessness](#), unrealistic standards of [beauty for women](#), and [the idea](#) that The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is [not Christian](#).

One of his repeated targets is rote religious practice, going through the motions without real or complete devotion, [an attitude he battled](#) in his second General Conference as a member of the Quorum of the Twelve in 1995, in two different sermons about the Church's programs for seeing to the needs of its members, [one in 2016](#) and the [other in 2018](#), and in his most recent General Conference [address in April 2025](#). Variations on this theme show up throughout the years in addresses that rebuke a [lack of focus on Christ](#), "[comfortable Christianity](#)," and [cynicism](#) that prevents complete devotion.

President Holland's choices of antagonists are instructive. His antagonist is never a person or group of people, but always an attitude, misconception, or sin. His agonistic approach does not excite anger at external enemies. Rather, it encourages introspection that leads to personal reformation. He reminds people of the importance of their commitments and creates a sense of urgency. He presents a positive agon, one that builds up ("edifies") rather than a destructive one that turns people against each other.

President Holland's decision not to engage external enemies as antagonists extends even to Satan. In a [2011 General Conference address](#), he affirmed that, "Satan, or Lucifer, or the father of lies —call him what you will—is real, the very personification of evil," and also states, "We don't talk about the adversary any more than we have to, and I don't like talking about him at all."

In fact, President Holland tends to avoid referring to Satan at all. Only in that 2011 sermon, "We Are All Enlisted," does he use the name Satan in his own words. Any other time he has used that name in General Conference, it is embedded in a quotation from another source. In the rare times that he does reference the devil, President Holland prefers using the pre-mortal name Lucifer, or [titles](#) such as "the adversary," "[arch deceiver](#)," "the [father](#) of all lies," and, [most colorfully](#), the bilingual, "el diablo, the diabolical one, the father of lies and lust." Other times, he refers to him in general terms, for example, "remember that there is a force in the universe determined to oppose every good thing you try to do." He has never made Satan an antagonist. He merely warns of the adversary's role in encouraging sin and negative attitudes and the consequences of succumbing to temptation. President Holland has never set himself up as a champion who engages the adversary in single combat. Such a stance would be prideful and would forget the fact that it is our Savior who eternally bruised the serpent's head. In Latter-day Saint popular culture, however, we have sometimes assigned President Holland the role of champion, including in a [meme](#) that circulated a few years ago that says, "When Satan goes to sleep at night, he checks under his bed for Elder Holland." While amusing, this meme presents a characterization of President Holland that he himself deliberately avoids. I believe that we should follow his example both in not presenting him in such a role and in not presuming it for ourselves. We cannot fight with Satan as we would fight with a mortal enemy. The true struggle is internal. We win only by practicing and teaching repentance, faith in Christ, and obedience to His laws and ordinances.

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While President Holland frequently wrestles with an antagonist, his tone is not typically combative. In twelve of his General Conference sermons, he totally avoids an agonistic approach. He has spoken on [motherhood twice](#) in General Conference, and both times

he did not identify or battle an antagonist. It seems to me that, in this case, an agon with sin would have distracted from the powerful tribute to women and the Savior. Such reasoning also applies to what seems to me his most uncharacteristic sermon, “[Songs Sung and Unsung](#).” A plea for unity, this message culminates with the following passage:

And someday I hope a great global chorus will harmonize across all racial and ethnic lines, declaring that guns, slurs, and vitriol are not the way to deal with human conflict. The declarations of heaven cry out to us that the only way complex societal issues can ever be satisfactorily resolved is by loving God and keeping His commandments, thus opening the door to the one lasting, salvific way to love each other as neighbors.

It makes sense to avoid even metaphorical conflict in a message about belonging that decries divisive rhetoric. President Holland knows when to tread lightly.

Most of President Holland’s non-agonistic talks were given in the first half of his tenure in the Quorum of the Twelve. In the last fifteen years, when he has treaded lightly, he has done so by setting up an agon and at the same time deemphasizing it. I call this technique “soft-pedaling.” President Holland uses various techniques to soft-pedal, including introducing his antagonist by using subjective, [personal rhetoric](#) rather than absolute statements; presenting the antagonist by quoting or paraphrasing someone else (as he does by quoting Elder Neal A Maxwell with regard to “comfortable Christianity” in “[Waiting on the Lord](#)”), using images or stories that [emphasize discussion](#) rather than conflict, confrontation or struggle.

The soft-pedaling technique that President Holland uses most often—in what I count as thirteen different sermons—is waiting to introduce his antagonist until after he has delivered over half of his sermon. Instead of building towards a powerful climax, such talks tend to focus on comfort and empathy. A characteristic example is “[Because of Your Faith](#),” a moving tribute to the efforts of church members to provide Christlike service. Implicit in the sermon is an agon with the idea that the unsung service of ordinary church members is somehow inferior to that of visible leaders. President Holland introduces this idea over halfway through the sermon by expressing gratitude, “to the near-perfect elderly sister who almost apologetically whispered recently, “I have never been a leader of anything in the Church. I guess I’ve only been a helper,” I say,

“Dear sister, God bless you and all the ‘helpers’ in the kingdom.” Some of us who are leaders hope someday to have the standing before God that you have already attained.” A more direct agonistic treatment may have led to a powerful climax that would have displayed President Holland’s speaking powers, but doing so would have detracted from the idea that the contributions of others are at least as valuable as his. The soft-pedaling allows him to focus on others and, therefore, corresponds with the rhetorical purpose. President Holland sets an example by not only matching the style of his sermons to the message of the Savior but by focusing on the needs of his audience in terms of both content and style.

As an interesting note, all six General Conference addresses during the pandemic years of 2020-2022 are soft-pedaled. I cannot identify a rhetorical reason within these sermons for soft-pedaling. He may have done so because of the timing, or perhaps for other historical or biographical reasons that are outside the scope of my study.

As disciples of Jesus Christ, our central message is Him—His life, His teachings, and His redemptive mission. That message needs to be the central focus of both what we say and how we say it. We can learn much about how to do this by studying the sermons of President Holland. At their most fiercely agonistic, they follow the scriptural admonition to “rend that veil of unbelief” (Ether 4:15), trying to remove the sins, attitudes, and misconceptions that prevent us from drawing closer to God. At their gentlest, they comfort and provide encouragement. But all his sermons focus on the Lord, Jesus Christ. His 1995 sermon, “[This Do in Remembrance of Me](#),” has a passage that helped me in my teenage years develop faith in the Savior:

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To those who stagger or stumble, He is there to steady and strengthen us. In the end, He is there to save us, and for all this, He gave His life. However dim our days may seem, they have been darker for the Savior of the world.

In fact, in a resurrected, otherwise perfected body, our Lord of this sacrament table has chosen to retain for the benefit of His disciples the wounds in His

hands and His feet and His side —signs, if you will, that painful things happen even to the pure and perfect; signs, if you will, that pain in this world is not evidence that God doesn't love you. It is the wounded Christ who is the captain of our soul—He who yet bears the scars of sacrifice, the lesions of love and humility and forgiveness.

Those wounds are what He invites young and old, then and now, to step forward and see and feel (see 3 Ne. 11:15; 18:25). Then we remember with Isaiah that it was for each of us that our Master was “despised and rejected ...; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief” (Isa. 53:3).

I have come to know the Savior, and the quote above was one of the catalysts for that process.

President Holland has never made his messages about himself. Like John the Baptist, his stance is, “He must increase, but I must decrease” (John 3:30). In a world filled with selfish self-promotion as well as heated diatribes, I want to better follow that example.



Jeffrey R. Holland

Here is a list of President Holland's antagonists, listed by talk from most recent to earliest. Only talks given in General Conference after his call to the Quorum of the Twelve are included.

[“As a Little Child”](#) April 2025—Vanity/ Rote religious practice

[“I am He”](#) October 2024—a Dumbed-down version of the Savior

[“Motions of a Hidden Fire”](#) April 2024—No main antagonist

[“Lifted Up Upon the Cross”](#) October 2022—Divided between 1) the cross as a symbol of Christianity, and 2) Comfortable Christianity (Soft Pedaled)

[“Fear Not, Believe Only”](#) April 2022—Divided between: 1) Discouragement, and 2) Suicide (Soft Pedaled)

[“The Greatest Possession”](#) October 2021—Incomplete devotion (Soft Pedaled)

[“Not as the World Giveth”](#) April 2021—Kind of scattered, but he does have an agon with Compromising our covenants (Soft Pedaled)

[“Waiting on the Lord”](#) October 2020—Comfortable Christianity (Soft Pedaled)

[“A Perfect Brightness of Hope”](#) April 2020—“Religious Deficiencies” in the Latter Days (Soft Pedaled)

[“The Message, the Meaning and the Multitude”](#) October 2019—religious culture and practice without focus on the Savior.

[“Behold The Lamb of God”](#) April 2019—irreverence (Soft pedaled)

[“The Ministry of Reconciliation”](#) October 2018—contention

[“Be with and Strengthen Them”](#) April 2018—rote performance of duty (especially Home Teaching)

[“Be Ye Therefore Perfect—Eventually”](#) October 2017—toxic perfectionism

[“Songs Sung and Unsung”](#) April 2017—None

“Emissaries to the Church” October 2016—rote performance of duty

“Tomorrow the Lord Will Do Wonders Among You” April 2016—discouragement (rooted in something related to perfectionism)

“Behold Thy Mother” October 2015—None

“Where Justice, Love and Mercy Meet” April 2015—existential meaninglessness

“Are We Not All Beggars?” October 2014—apathy for the poor.

“The Cost—And the Blessings—of Discipleship” April 2014—comfortable Christianity

“Like a Broken Vessel” October 2013—mental health challenges/attitudes about mental health

“Lord, I Believe” April 2013—doubt

“The First Great Commandment” October 2012—looking back (to the former life, before conversion)

“The Laborers in the Vineyard” April 2012—misperceptions about the justice of God (based on 1) envy, 2) bitterness, 3) feeling that you are irredeemable)

“We Are All Enlisted” October 2011—incomplete devotion

“An Ensign to the Nations” April 2011—comfortable Christianity (Soft Pedaled)

“Because of Your Faith” October 2010—the idea that the contribution of ordinary members is lesser (Soft Pedaled)

“Place No More for the Enemy of My Soul” April 2010—lust

“Safety for the Soul” October 2009—hearts failing in the last days, despair, and despondency

“None Were with Him” April 2009—feeling that God has abandoned you

“The Ministry of Angels” October 2008—fear, discouragement

“My Words...Never Cease” April 2008—the idea that The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is not Christian

“The Only True God and Jesus Christ Whom He has Sent” October 2007—the idea that The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is not Christian

“The Tongue of Angels” April 2007—unkind words.

“Prophets in the Land Again” October 2006—no central antagonist (though a brief agon with 1) —the idea that the leaders of the Church are out of touch, and 2) the idea that it is possible to go too far away from the saving grace of God)

“Broken Things to Mend” April 2006—the idea that we are broken beyond repair

“To Young Women” October 2005—unrealistic standards of beauty (Soft Pedaled)

“Our Most Distinguishing Feature” April 2005—the doctrine of the Priesthood of All Believers (Soft Pedaled)

“Prophets, Seers and Revelators” October 2004—none

“Abide in Me” April 2004—casual commitment (Soft-pedaled)

“The Grandeur of God” October 2003—misconceptions about the nature of God

“A Prayer for the Children” April 2003—cynicism or skepticism, incomplete devotion

“Called to Serve” October 2002—none

“The Other Prodigal” April 2002—jealousy, envy

“Like a Watered Garden” October 2001—none

“Witnesses unto Me” April 2001—none

“Sanctify Yourselves” October 2000—amusement (Soft Pedaled)

“As Doves to Our Windows” April 2000—ingratitude

“An High Priest of Good Things to Come” October 1999—hopelessness

“The Hands of the Fathers” April 1999—fatherlessness

“Personal Purity” October 1998—sexual Immorality

“A Teacher Come from God” April 1998—uninspired teaching

“He Hath Filled the Hungry with Good Things” October 1997—spiritual emptiness, focus on temporal things

“Because She is a Mother” April 1997—none

“The Peaceable Things of the Kingdom” October 1996—none

“A Handful of Meal and a Little Oil” April 1996—none

“This Do in Remembrance of Me” October 1995—taking the Sacrament lightly (rote religious practice)

“Our Priesthood Legacy” April 1995—none

“Miracles of the Restoration” October 1994—none

About the author

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he shares three sons and a love of nature, music, and good books.