



## What Changed in Prophetic Language, And What Never Will

By Skyler Sorensen

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*Has prophetic language softened? Yes, tone adapts to culture, but doctrine remains exacting and unchanged.*

Reading *The Miracle of Forgiveness* surprised me. I grew up hearing this book used as the quintessential example of gospel bluntness. I also craved that kind of no-nonsense approach to gospel standards and admired it when I encountered it in leaders. Still, even with a high tolerance for directness, I was taken aback by how forthright President Spencer W. Kimball could be. His moral calls were unambiguous, his language arresting. It raised a sincere question: why does prophetic language feel less fiery today? Some say our leaders are too soft now. Others say prophets of the past were too harsh. Which is it?

History shows that prophetic tone has never been static. In the 19th century, Brigham Young's rugged style fit the demands of frontier survival. President Joseph F. Smith spoke with the gravity of one who had personally suffered persecution and loss. In the mid-20th century, President Kimball's direct calls to repentance reflected a culture where plain talk was considered a virtue. Today, President Russell M. Nelson often uses the language of invitation: "Think Celestial," "gain spiritual momentum," "let God prevail." The tone feels warmer, but the content is still exacting. Part of the reason for these shifts may lie in a rhythm we see repeatedly in scripture and history. Prophets often speak with great boldness before a prophecy is fulfilled—Noah warning of the flood, Abinadi confronting King Noah's court. In our own day, decades of clear prophetic warnings about the disintegration of the family may now be giving way to counsel aimed at fortifying those who will listen, even if some interpret that change in focus as a departure from truth rather than prophecy fulfilled. To draw from Noah again, after the flood came and went, his messaging (to those left) likely shifted. Not because eternal truths changed, but because the priorities changed.

Some suggest this more modern shift means the doctrine has changed. However, prophets do not bend doctrine to cultural winds. As the Lord Himself declared, "whether by mine own voice or by the voice of my servants, it is the same" (Doctrine and Covenants 1:38). What may look like softening is more accurately divine accommodation: God, in His mercy, guiding His servants to frame truth in ways that can be received by His children today.

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A style that felt normal to a 1940s farmer might feel abrasive now. Research in [Communication Accommodation Theory](#), developed by Howard Giles in the 1970s, shows that effective communicators instinctively adapt their tone, pacing, and style to their audience to maximize receptivity. Prophets, like other inspired leaders, may adjust their delivery so the message can reach hearts without being rejected at the outset.

There is also a broader cultural shift toward sensitivity in public discourse. [Pew Research](#) surveys over the past decade show that Americans increasingly prioritize "respectful" language and are more likely to view blunt speech as offensive rather than refreshingly honest. Younger generations, in particular, tend to value empathy cues and "emotional safety" in messaging. Whether this is a positive or negative development is

up for interpretation. But against that backdrop, it is not surprising that prophetic language has evolved to meet listeners where they are without abandoning eternal truth.

President Ezra Taft Benson captured the heart of this when he said, “The living prophet is more important to us than a dead prophet. God’s revelations to Adam did not instruct Noah how to build the ark. Noah needed his own revelation. Therefore, the most important prophet, so far as you and I are concerned, is the one living in our day and age to whom the Lord is currently revealing His will for us.” The prophets of the past spoke to the needs of their time; the prophet now speaks to ours. Both deserve to be heard in their own context.

The challenge is that tone and clarity are not the same thing. A gentler delivery can be mistaken for doctrinal compromise, especially on sensitive topics. Take, for example, the Church’s consistent teaching that marriage between a man and a woman is ordained of God and that sexual relations are reserved for that covenant. In earlier decades, such teachings were often delivered with explicit warnings and firm rebukes. Today, they are framed within invitations to live higher laws, sometimes without extended discussion of consequences. The language is pastoral, yet the doctrinal definition of marriage remains precise and unchanged.

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Language naturally evolves, and prophetic word choice evolves with it. Linguistic research by [George Lakoff](#) has shown that small shifts in framing can dramatically influence how a message is received, even when the core meaning is the same. Words like “virtue” and “chastity” still appear, but “sexual purity” or “moral cleanliness” are more common. Even subtle substitutions, such as using “home” in place of “family” in certain contexts, may broaden the resonance of a message to those in varied circumstances while still preserving the underlying doctrine.

There are risks in every approach. If prophetic rebuke feels too sharp, some will dismiss it as unkind. If it feels too gentle, others may miss the urgency. The greater danger, in either case, is to focus so much on the delivery that we fail to hear the substance.

Dismissing Brigham Young's counsel because of his rough edges, or ignoring President Nelson's because it comes with compassion—both risk missing the voice of the Lord.

Scripture shows that the Lord's messengers have always adapted their delivery to their audience. Alma addressed the Zoramites with doctrinal correction suited to their pride and misunderstanding, while King Benjamin spoke to a humble, covenant-ready people with promises of joy. Paul reasoned with the Jews from the scriptures, but with the Athenians he appealed to their altar "to the Unknown God" and quoted their own poets. In each case, the message was the same, but the approach reflected the hearers' readiness.

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Modern prophets do the same. President Gordon B. Hinckley's hallmark optimism fit a global Church coming into public view. President Thomas S. Monson's warmth and personal storytelling reflected a desire to strengthen individual hearts. President Nelson's steady call to "hear Him" combines encouragement with a clear articulation of covenantal obligations. Seen together, these patterns suggest not a departure from truth but a consistent application of prophetic stewardship — to declare God's will in ways the current generation is most able to receive.

The living prophet will always be the most relevant voice for our time. Comparisons across decades can be illuminating, but they can also distract from the revelation God is giving now. Truth is truth, whether it comes as a thundering rebuke or a tender invitation. The question that matters most is not whether we prefer the tone, but whether we will act on the counsel. Ultimately, the Lord directs His servants in how they deliver His word. Tone shifts may reflect both changing circumstances and divine wisdom in preparing His people for what lies ahead.

The next time we hear a prophetic message, it may help to listen with two questions in mind: What is God asking me to do? And am I willing to do it? The answers will matter far more than whether the words stirred us like a trumpet blast or drew us in like a quiet voice.

About the author

## Skyler Sorensen

Skyler Sorensen is a documentarian. He is public about his mixed-orientation marriage, and his story has been covered by the New York Post and Daily Mail among others.