

Line upon Line



Elder Holland: What They Heard is Not What He Said

By [Daniel C. Peterson](#) · September 7, 2021

Cover image via the Church Newsroom.

To read more insights from Daniel, visit his blog: [Sic Et Non](#).

Between my first arrival on campus in the fall of 1970 and my retirement on 1 July 2021—a span of fifty-one years—all but approximately eight years were spent as a member of either the student body or the faculty of Brigham Young University. I say this not for nostalgia’s sake, and not even because my now-advanced age and the sheer length of that elapsed period amaze me, though they do. (Jacob’s words, at the end of his life and of the book that bears his name, in which he writes that “the time passed away with us, and also our lives passed away like as it were unto us a dream” [Jacob 7:26] resonate with me more and more.) I say it because it suggests how very long it has been since I first fell in love with BYU and with the idea of BYU.

Elder Jeffrey R. Holland’s connections with the school, his undergraduate alma mater as well, are far more impressive than mine: Now a member of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, he returned to BYU after earning a doctorate from Yale University. He served as a college dean and then, after a stint as overall Commissioner of Education for the Church, returned yet again as the University’s ninth president. He is currently a member of the BYU Board of Trustees.

Elder Holland recently addressed the 2021 edition of BYU’s annual University Conference, a gathering to which all of the University’s faculty, staff, and administrators—even retirees—are invited. He began and

ended his remarks with his own story of falling in love with BYU—a story that, again, resonates deeply with me.

It's what Elder Holland said between his expressions of affection for BYU, however, that has generated controversy in some circles, and even bitter anger.

He has been called irresponsible, a hater, and a bigot. His speech has been widely portrayed as an angry tirade against gays. When a BYU student was videotaped muttering an anti-gay slur and pouring water on a sidewalk to erase a chalk rainbow, the headline in one national gay publication said that “The incident comes on top of a former Brigham Young University president urging the use of “muskets” to fight LGBTQ+ equality.” It cited the explanation given [by a national gay organization](#): “Elder Jeffrey Holland gave license for such conduct, using dangerous and warlike comments against LGBTQ students earlier this week.”

“It looks like the muskets are out and being used to abuse the LGBTQ community,” said one anonymous critic of the Church on a predominantly atheist message board. “If there is any justice, there has to be a special place in hell reserved for people like Holland.”

I would like to briefly comment on such curious reactions.

What Elder Holland had to say to the University as a whole on 23 August 2021 was, to my mind, strikingly reminiscent of the bracing message that he delivered to BYU's Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship on 10 November 2018—a message that had absolutely nothing to do with homosexuality.

First of all, of course, he asked that employees of the Church's flagship school be personally loyal to the standards and doctrines of the Restoration:

“If we are an extension of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints,” Elder Holland said, “taking a significant amount of sacred tithes and other precious human resources, all of which might well be expended in other worthy causes, surely our integrity demands that our lives be absolutely consistent with and characteristic of the restored gospel of Jesus Christ . . . in harmony with the Lord's anointed, those whom He has designated to declare Church doctrine and to guide Brigham Young University as its trustees.”

However, he also urged BYU employees to teach, to advocate, and, sometimes, to defend those doctrines and standards. He cited a 2004 campus speech in which the late Elder Neal A. Maxwell had said that, in a way, Latter-day Saint scholars at BYU “are a little bit like the builders of the temple in Nauvoo, who worked with a trowel in one hand and a musket in the other. Today scholars building the temple of learning must also pause on occasion to defend the kingdom. I personally think this is one of the reasons the Lord established and maintains this university. The dual role of builder and defender is unique and ongoing. I am grateful we have scholars today who can handle, as it were, both trowels and muskets.”

Like other faithful Latter-day Saints, Elder Maxwell recognized the accuracy of Susan Evans McCloud's hymn lyrics, that

“The truths and values we embrace
Are mocked on every hand.”

He also understood the need to defend them.

I was in the audience for those 2004 remarks, in which Elder Maxwell expressed his appreciation for scholars at BYU who defended the claims, scriptures, and teachings of the Restoration against attack. (As far as I recall, he didn't refer in any way to homosexuality or homosexuals.) The illustration that he used clearly drew upon an account given in Nehemiah 4 (especially verses 16-18). In it, the Jews who have returned from the Babylonian captivity to rebuild Jerusalem and its temple are obliged, because of threats and attacks from

their neighbors, to work with one hand while holding a sword in the other—a defensive measure, not an aggressive one, that plainly has nothing to do with homosexuality.

Elder Maxwell’s modified biblical metaphor was adopted by then-Elder Dallin Oaks in 2017, when he exhorted members of the BYU faculty to increase their defense of the Church and its teachings: “I would like,” he said, “to hear a little more musket fire from this temple of learning.”

Referring to Elder Oaks’s appropriation of the imagery, Elder Holland importantly observed that “He said this in a way that could have applied to a host of topics in various departments”—just as, in fact, Elder Maxwell had applied the musket metaphor more generally.

“But,” Elder Holland continued, “the one he specifically mentioned was the doctrine of the family and defending marriage as the union of a man and a woman.”

This is easily understandable: Issues of gender, sexuality, and the nature of families loom very large today in our culture, law, and politics, and societal trends related to them clearly and increasingly clash with the standards and teachings of the Church. Accordingly, Elder Holland’s own speech alluded fairly prominently to such matters—in, by my quick estimate, four of forty-four paragraphs of the published text:

“I have focused on this same-sex topic this morning more than I would have liked,” he said, adding that “I pray you will see it as emblematic of a lot of issues our students and community face in this complex, contemporary world of ours.”

In other words, the speech was not, as many have claimed, primarily devoted to issues of same-sex attraction. He simply chose gender issues to represent the other areas in which the teachings of the Church come under attack, areas in which some members of the BYU faculty might be well situated to help. And, I add, the speech was neither hateful nor angry; as anyone can learn by simply watching it online:

“My Brethren,” said Elder Holland, “have made the case for the metaphor of musket fire which I have endorsed yet again today. There will continue to be those who oppose our teachings and with that will continue the need to define, document, and defend the faith. But we do all look forward to the day when we can “beat our swords into plowshares, and [our] spears into pruning hooks,” and at least on this subject, “learn war [no] more.””

Specifically referring to those who experience same-sex attraction, Elder Holland said,

“Let me go no farther before declaring unequivocally my love and that of my Brethren for those who live with this same-sex challenge and so much complexity that goes with it. Too often the world has been unkind, in many instances crushingly cruel, to these our brothers and sisters.”

But, he also said, “we have to be careful that love and empathy do not get interpreted as condoning and advocacy, or that orthodoxy and loyalty to principle not be interpreted as unkindness or disloyalty to people. As near as I can tell, Christ never once withheld His love from anyone, but He also never once said to anyone, “Because I love you, you are exempt from keeping my commandments.” We are tasked with trying to strike that same sensitive, demanding balance in our lives.”

Plainly, just as with Elder Maxwell’s 2004 use of the musketry image and Elder Oaks’s 2017 reappropriation of it, the reference is not to military combat, let alone to hateful prejudice or violent bigotry, but to intellectual contestation and reasoned argument—which are, after all, at or near the very core of scholarship and higher education. And what they said was completely consistent with the exhortation of 1 Peter 3:15: “Be ready always to give an answer to every man that asketh you a reason of the hope that is in you with meekness and fear”—or, in the more contemporary language of the English Standard Version, “with

gentleness and respect.”

The Kingdom of God is, always has been, and must always be at odds with the world. And BYU, an integral part of the developing Kingdom, must also be, as Elder Holland said, “unique” and “special.” That—not homosexuality—was what his speech was about. It wasn’t angry or hateful. It has been grievously misrepresented.

I close with heartfelt appeal from an unidentified Latter-day Saint (I came across it at second hand) with which I heartily agree:

“I hate that this topic gets so much attention when there are so many bigger life and death issues going on right now...but the bandwagon keeps making loops. . . . As a member of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, I would like to make one thing very clear. I am not anti gay. I am pro family. There is a difference. Do not assume I won’t love you as you are. Do not assume all church members are the same ignorant individuals. Do not assume I am “brain washed” into believing old traditions. Do not assume you know how I feel, or what I think. Do not assume I would be “disappointed and ashamed” of my child if they were gay. This is not a “with or against me” topic. I believe in supporting perfect doctrine. But, heaven knows I am not even close to perfect. If I can’t even live up to my own idea of perfection, what makes you think I’d ever try to live up to yours? Just because I don’t wave your flag, doesn’t mean I want you to hide who you are in the shadows. Stop turning sincere words spoken by pure souls into some kind of hate speech. Stop trying to brain wash members of the church into believing it’s us against you. Because some of us just ain’t playing the polarization game this time. So, I’ll say it again. I’m not anti gay. I am pro family, pro Mom, Dad and kids in one LOVING home whenever possible. So, please, from one discriminated against group to another, stop polarizing.”

The complete text and video of Elder Holland’s remarks to the 2021 University Conference are available at <https://newsroom.churchofjesuschrist.org/article/elder-jeffrey-r-holland-2021-byu-university-conference>.

For the text of his 2018 speech, see “The Maxwell Legacy in the 21st Century,” on pages 8-21 of the “2018 Annual Report” of the Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship (<https://byumiuploads.s3.amazonaws.com/uploads/2019/06/2018-Maxwell-Institute-Annual-Report-small.pdf>).

For something of my reaction to it, see “The Interpreter Foundation and an Apostolic Charge” (<https://journal.interpreterfoundation.org/the-interpreter-foundation-and-an-apostolic-charge/>).

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