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Gordon Monson: Jeffrey Holland extended a clenched fist instead of an open hand in his BYU speech

The church leader's remarks could pose another obstacle in BYU's search for a new athletic conference



(The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints) Elder Jeffrey R. Holland of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles speaks to faculty at Brigham Young University on Aug. 23, 2021.

By Gordon Monson | Aug. 26, 2021, 7:18 a.m. | Updated: 8:39 a.m.

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OK, let's get all up and personal here.

Heaven help us. Heaven help me.

I've always liked hearing Jeffrey Holland's talks. I respect the man. He emailed me once in response to a column and we exchanged thoughts. Cool. He's into sports. More importantly, the spiritual leader has a way with words that are powerful and emotional and influential, words that speak to the soul, speak to my soul as a believer.

Protesters hold silent rally against Utah's anti-DEI bill

He's a man of God, and I get that. But even men of God sometimes swing and miss or pop up an infield fly when a home run is needed.

He expressed some beneficial and beautiful thoughts in his recent, [now infamous talk at BYU](#), good stuff.

But part of what he said during that speech — at the school’s annual university conference for faculty and staff, emphasizing that BYU and those connected to it should passionately utilize “musket fire” in defending the faith — was unfortunate, an aggressive analogy in a time of disagreement and sometimes divisiveness among orthodox believers and less-traditional believers within The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. It was unnecessary and damaging. It not only widened the gap between those groups inside and outside of the school, as he called for more unity, but also served to distance the university from other universities, the ones that promote both academic pursuits and academic freedom.

There’s a sports angle here.

But first, a question: Isn’t it better to emphasize commonalities rather than differences to bring people together? Better to bring people together than to energize by dividing?

Standing apart, being unique and peculiar, something many in and of the church have championed through the years, should never be used as a weapon, a musket, a hammer, a whatever, in wielding it as a means to separate the flock in righteousness from others. What good does that do? It concurrently sharpens a double-edged sword, making your own, the supposedly devout, feel better, perhaps, and others, the supposedly wayward, feel worse, making them feel not just unworthy, but unwanted.

Holland said that too many at BYU, almost all of whom are, in fact, faithful Latter-day Saints, aren’t falling in proper line with church teachings, or at least aren’t defending them. Some, he said, are criticizing those principles. He chastised those who join in on parades and wave flags supporting causes that run counter to church doctrines.

For a church that sees itself in large measure, or that should, as a hospital for sinners rather than a sanctuary for saints, stressing fellowshiping and missionary efforts to bring folks toward deity, defending truth is less important, less effective than loving people in and into the fold.

What's this got to do with sports?

Holland said essentially that if BYU's stance against same-sex lifestyles is to alienate it from associations with other institutions, so be it.

That's a concept that could adversely affect BYU in many ways, in many environments, but specifically in attempting to associate with athletic conferences. Let's say it the way it is here: BYU is not in the Pac-12 or any other power league as we speak because of, at least in part, its stances that seem intolerant toward aforementioned lifestyles and varying manners of thinking.

With these kinds of talks, just like Holland inferred, you can kiss any chance for such associations goodbye.

While that may not be all that important to some Latter-day Saints, its symbolism sends a detrimental exclusionary message.

Frankly, it's a message that matters more than a game.

In a day and age of inclusion, such stances may, as mentioned, bolster the zealous, but they alienate everyone else, including some of those already inside the faith's chapels, to whom Holland was speaking on this occasion. He warned against "friendly fire" and pointed to a [letter he received from an unnamed person](#) connected with the university who was worried about those at the school who have a more accepting, more expansive view.

That concerned individual wrote, "You should know that some people in the extended community are feeling abandoned and betrayed by BYU. It seems that some professors are supporting ideas that many of us feel are contradictory to gospel principles, making it appear to be about like any other university our sons and daughters could have attended. Several parents have said they no longer want to send their children here or donate to the school."

Hold it. Does that sound like ... how should we say it? ... a bit of an overreaction? Last time anybody checked, parents were lining up to get their kids into BYU and kids were lining up to get in. Many are rejected because their academic record isn't deemed good enough. It's a crowded place. The threat to no longer give money to the school and dial in on that as a major concern is either pathetic or revealing.

Holland acknowledged church leaders don't get many such letters. The question then becomes, why highlight it?

[Regarding that friendly fire](#), Holland said, "From time to time the church, its leaders and some of our colleagues within the university community have taken such fire on this campus. And sometimes it isn't friendly — wounding students and parents of students who are confused about what so much recent flag-waving and parade-holding on this issue means. Beloved friends, this kind of confusion and conflict ought not to be."

His reacting to students at the school and their tithe-paying parents whom he cited as being troubled and afflicted with the pain caused by such liberalism was curious, indeed, considering there are many more at BYU who are pained by the lack of love they're shown by those not just holding onto the iron rod, but swinging it with gusto.

Way back in 1975, I talked with a distinguished professor of religion at BYU who uttered something most profound about the future of the LDS Church. He said he feared fundamentalists more than liberals inside the faith, that they posed greater danger to the "growth and establishment of Zion" because of their staunch, unrelenting, unforgiving ways than the wider approach by progressive thinkers.

Religions, including this one, have strictures and rules, commandments and boundaries, that's all clear for anyone with eyes to see, and it's mostly acceptable. But spreading the gospel of Jesus Christ, which is exactly what the LDS Church wants to do, begins and ends with love. According to the Bible, the two most important Christian commandments are: "Love thy God and love thy neighbor."

It's not, "Defend the truth with a musket."

Those who define love by pulling out and firing that musket are doing religious somersaults. That definition does more harm than good.

Calling out a [former student, a valedictorian](#), who revealed that he's gay during a commencement speech two years ago, as Holland did, saying the student "commandeer(ed) the graduation podium intended to represent everyone

getting diplomas,” as a means of pushing “individual license over institutional dignity,” was harsh and misplaced, not Christlike.

What’s to be feared about a gay man giving the encouraging news to one and all that he could successfully graduate from BYU? Many took that as a moment of enlightenment. Moreover, that student said the talk was preapproved by the school. He commandeered nothing.

And maybe that was what bothered Holland the most.

Meantime, he mentioned how much he and his brethren atop the church love everyone “who live with this same-sex challenge,” saying further that, “Too often the world has been unkind, in many instances crushingly cruel, to these our brothers and sisters.”

But by harping on the topic, the subtle cruelty continues.

“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,” Holland said. “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.’”

But what about the two biggest commandments?

Everything else is second place.

What we're talking about here on the whole simply is understanding, extending it, embracing it. The wave of a flag, supporting the condition for those who are of a certain orientation, lending an open mind to those who want to believe, but who may be on the brink of desperation and expiration, sometimes leading to tragedy, having felt denied and condemned for the way they are, should not be thumped further by unbending doctrine.

The church and its marquee university can do things the way they want. The bigger question is how *should* they do things, given, as they say, that they're God's only true church on the Earth?

What would Jesus do?

Beats me.

I'm just a believer, not an apostle.

Holland trumps me on that account, in that regard.

Hard truth, hard perception of that truth, may be something devout Latter-day Saints want to cling to as some sort of security blanket as they separate themselves from lesser people, from sinners and heathens. But why keep blasting condemnation when kindness softens hearts and has greater effects?

Truth is, the LDS Church, and BYU by extension, finds itself in a deep conundrum. It wants to love all of God's children, but it wants to uphold its rules as they are laid down, as they've always been laid down, by the powers that be, at least the way those earthly powers interpret them. It disfavors and denounces same-sex relations, saying they are against God's way, but it's also commanded by that God to love and embrace and accept everyone. And gay men and women within the church and without it are caught in the vortex, tortured by it, prayerful sons and daughters and moms and dads and brothers and sisters, who are burdened believers, some of whom cannot carry the load.

What do you do with that? What do they do with that? What does anybody do with that?

At the most primary of levels, would the Man Upstairs really have a problem with waving a flag on a college campus, participating in a parade, lending a hand to a brother or sister seeking understanding but facing mostly rejection, trying to have empathy for those who think or act differently?

Who cares what a few fanatically fervent students and parents worry about? They can holster their paranoia and keep their now hesitant donations.

Here's to hoping that the Messiah would stand by what is right while finding a way to unify his flock with compassion and love, with an open palm and not a clenched fist, not dividing it with a musket or a hammer.

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