

Speaking Today

# Criticism

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I am persuaded that many do not understand the Church's teachings about personal criticism, especially the criticism of Church leaders by Church members.

I do not refer to the kind of criticism the dictionary defines as "the act of passing judgment as to the merits of anything." (*Random House Dictionary*, unabridged ed., s.v. "criticism.") That kind of criticism is inherent in the exercise of agency and freedom. In the political world, critical evaluation inevitably accompanies any knowledgeable exercise of the cherished freedoms of speech and of the press. In the private world, we have a right to expect critical evaluation of anything that is put into the marketplace or the public domain. Sports writers, reviewers of books and music, scholars, investment analysts, and those who test products and services must be free to exercise their critical faculties and to inform the public accordingly. This kind of criticism is usually directed toward issues, and it is usually constructive.

My cautions against criticism refer to another of its meanings, which the dictionary defines as "the act of passing severe judgment; censure; faultfinding." (*Ibid.*, s.v. "criticism.") Faultfinding is "the act of pointing out faults, especially faults of a petty nature." (*Ibid.*, s.v. "faultfinding.") It is related to "backbiting," which means "to attack the character or reputation of [a person who is not present]." (*Ibid.*, s.v. "backbite.") This kind of criticism is generally directed toward persons, and it is generally destructive.

Faultfinding, evil speaking, and backbiting are obviously unchristian. The Bible commands us to avoid "evil speakings." (See 1 Pet. 2:1.) It tells us to "Let all bitterness, and wrath, and anger, and clamour, and evil speaking, be put away from you." (Eph. 4:31.) Modern revelations direct us to avoid "backbiting," "evil speaking," and "find[ing] fault one with another." (See D&C 20:53–54; D&C 42:27; D&C 88:124; and D&C 136:23.)

We are given these commandments for a reason. The Apostle Paul advised the Saints to "grieve not the holy Spirit of God" (Eph. 4:30) by evil speaking. Of faultfinders, President Brigham Young said, "The Spirit of God has no place in [such] persons." (*Journal of Discourses*, 8:13.) The primary reason we are commanded to avoid criticism is to preserve our own spiritual well-being, not to protect the person whom we would criticize.

Elder George Albert Smith said this about criticism: "Aren't we rather prone to see the limitations and the weaknesses of our neighbors? Yet that is contrary to the teachings of the gospel of Jesus Christ. There is a class of people who find fault and criticize always in a destructive way. There is a difference in criticism. If we can criticize constructively under the influence of the Spirit of the Lord, we may change beneficially and properly some of the

things that are being done. But if we have the spirit of faultfinding, of pointing out the weaknesses and failings of others in a destructive manner, that never comes as the result of the companionship of the Spirit of our Heavenly Father and is always harmful.” (In Conference Report, Oct. 1934, p. 50.)

More recently, President Gordon B. Hinckley said: “I am not asking that all criticism be silenced. Growth comes of correction. Strength comes of repentance. Wise is the man who can acknowledge mistakes pointed out by others and change his course.

“What I am suggesting is that each of us turn from the negativism that so permeates our society and look for the remarkable good among those with whom we associate, that we speak of one another’s virtues more than we speak of one another’s faults.” (*Ensign*, Apr. 1986, pp. 3–4.)

Does this counsel to avoid faultfinding and personal criticism apply only to statements that are false? Doesn’t it also apply to statements that are true? In a talk I recently gave to Church Educational System teachers, I urged that “the fact that something is true is not always a justification for communicating it.” A letter published in the *New York Times Magazine* described my counsel as “contempt for the truth.” (Feb. 9, 1986, p. 86.) I disagree. I rely on the teaching in Ecclesiastes: “To every thing there is a season, and a time to every purpose under the heaven.” (Eccl. 3:1.) Specifically, there is “a time to speak,” and there is also “a time to keep silence.” (Eccl. 3:7.)

The counsel to mute our criticism is like the counsel the Apostle Paul gave to the Corinthian Saints to abstain from eating meat offered as sacrifices to idols. In truth, he taught, the idol was nothing. But since some of the members were weak and might misunderstand, those who knew the truth needed to “take heed lest by any means this liberty of yours become a stumblingblock to them that are weak.” (1 Cor. 8:9.) A Protestant theologian, Krister Stendahl, concludes: “The gist of Paul’s thought is that integrity is of no value in itself.” (See *Paul Among Jews and Gentiles and Other Essays*, Philadelphia: Fortress, 1976, p. 61.)

The critical consideration is how we use the truth. When he treated this same subject in his letter to the Romans, Paul said, “If thy brother be grieved with thy meat, now walkest thou not charitably. Destroy him not with thy meat, for whom Christ died.” (Rom. 14:15.) A Christian who has concern for others exercises care in how he uses the truth. Such care does not denigrate the truth; it ennobles it.

Truth surely exists as an absolute, but our *use* of truth should be disciplined by other values. For example, it is wrong to make statements of fact out of an evil motive, even if the statements are true. It is wrong to threaten to reveal embarrassing facts unless money is paid, even if the facts are true. We call that crime blackmail. Doctors, lawyers, and other professionals are forbidden to reveal facts they have received in confidence, even though those facts are true.

Just as the principle of justice must be constrained by the principle of mercy (see Alma 42), so must the *use* of truth be disciplined by the principle of love. As Paul instructed the Ephesians, we “grow up into” Christ by “speaking the truth in love.” (See Eph. 4:15.)

In a message titled “Truth—and More,” Elder Russell M. Nelson contrasted the single-minded surgeon who coldly announces the truth about a terminal illness with the compassionate surgeon who mingles that message with assurances of love and support that help the patient and his family handle the truth. Truth is powerful and absolute in its existence, but its

communication should usually be guided by companion principles. “Otherwise,” Elder Nelson observed, “the sword of truth, cutting and sharp as a surgeon’s scalpel, might not be governed by righteousness or by mercy, but might be misused carelessly to embarrass, debase, or deceive others. ... Indeed, in some instances, the merciful companion to truth is *silence*. Some truths are best left unsaid.” (*Ensign*, Jan. 1986, pp. 70–71.)

One who focuses on faults, though they be true, tears down a brother or a sister. The virtues of patience, brotherly kindness, mutual respect, loyalty, and good manners all rest to some degree on the principle that even though something is true, we are not necessarily justified in communicating it to any and all persons at any and all times.

The use of truth should also be constrained by the principle of unity. One who focuses on faults, though they be true, fosters dissensions and divisions among fellow Church members in the body of Christ. The Savior taught: “The spirit of contention is not of me, but is of the devil, who is the father of contention, [who] stirreth up the hearts of men to contend with anger, one with another.” (3 Ne. 11:29.) Paul taught the Romans: “Mark them which cause divisions ... and avoid them.” (Rom. 16:17.) In this dispensation, the Lord commanded that “Every man [should] esteem his brother as himself,” and declared that “If ye are not one ye are not mine.” (D&C 38:25, 27.)

However, this caution to constrain the use of truth provides no justification for lying. The principles of love, unity, righteousness, and mercy do not condone falsehood. The Lord commanded, “Thou shalt not bear false witness” (Ex. 20:16), and he has not revoked that command. When truth is constrained by other virtues, the outcome is not falsehood but silence for a season. As the scriptures say, there is “a time to keep silence, and a time to speak.” (Eccl. 3:7.)

The counsel to avoid destructive personal criticism does not mean that Latter-day Saints need to be docile or indifferent to defective policies, deficient practices, or wrongful conduct in government or in private organizations in which we have an interest. Our religious philosophy poses no obstacle to constructive criticism of such conditions. The gospel message is a continuing constructive criticism of all that is wretched or sordid in society. But Christians who are commanded to be charitable and to “[speak] the truth in love” (Eph. 4:15) should avoid personal attacks and shrill denunciations. Our public communications—even those protesting against deficiencies—should be reasoned in content and positive in spirit.

Does the commandment to avoid faultfinding and evil speaking apply to Church members’ destructive personal criticism of Church leaders? Of course it does. It applies to criticism of all Church leaders—local or general, male or female. In our relations with all of our Church leaders, we should follow the Apostle Paul’s direction: “Rebuke not an elder, but intreat him as a father.” (1 Tim. 5:1.)

Church leaders need this consideration, since the responsibilities of Church leadership include the correction of others. That function is not popular. As the Lamanite prophet Samuel taught, when a prophet comes among us and speaks of our iniquities, we are made angry. We call him a false prophet and “cast him out and seek all manner of ways to destroy him.” (See Hel. 13:26.) But if a man comes among us and speaks flattering words about our behavior and tells us that it is all right to “walk after the pride of [our] own hearts ... and do whatsoever [our] heart desire[s],” “we will not find fault with him.” (See Hel. 13:27, 28.) We will call him a prophet and reward him.

I have given the following counsel to Church members—those who have committed themselves by upraised hands to sustain their church leaders:

“Criticism is particularly objectionable when it is directed toward Church authorities, general or local. Jude condemns those who ‘speak evil of dignities.’ (Jude 1:8.) Evil speaking of the Lord’s anointed is in a class by itself. It is one thing to depreciate a person who exercises corporate power or even government power. It is quite another thing to criticize or depreciate a person for the performance of an office to which he or she has been called of God. It does not matter that the criticism is true. As Elder George F. Richards, President of the Council of the Twelve, said in a conference address in April 1947,

“‘When we say anything bad about the leaders of the Church, whether true or false, we tend to impair their influence and their usefulness and are thus working against the Lord and his cause.’ (In Conference Report, Apr. 1947, p. 24.)” (Address to Church Educational System teachers, Aug. 16, 1985.)

There is nothing new about this counsel. Even though King Saul sought to kill him, David would not allow his companion to strike the king, saying, “for who can stretch forth his hand against the Lord’s anointed, and be guiltless?” (1 Sam. 26:9.) The prophet Isaiah denounced those who “make a man an offender for a word, and lay a snare for him that reproveth in the gate” (Isa. 29:21; see also 2 Ne. 27:32.) (Those who reproveth in the gate in Isaiah’s time were the religious leaders.) This modern revelation from the Doctrine and Covenants is to the same effect:

“Cursed are all those that shall lift up the heel against mine anointed, saith the Lord, and cry they have sinned when they have not sinned before me, saith the Lord, but have done that which was meet in mine eyes, and which I commanded them.” (D&C 121:16.)

The counsel against speaking evil of Church leaders is not so much for the benefit of the leaders as it is for the spiritual well-being of members who are prone to murmur and find fault. The Church leaders I know are durable people. They made their way successfully in a world of unrestrained criticism before they received their current callings. They have no personal need for protection; they seek no personal immunities from criticism—constructive or destructive. They only seek to declare what they understand to be the word of the Lord to his people.

President David O. McKay said this about what he called “murmurers” and “faultfinders”:

“‘Speak not against the authorities.’ What does it mean? Be not a murmurer; that is what it means. It is one of the most poisonous things that can be introduced into the home of a Latter-day Saint—this murmuring against presidents of stakes, high councilors, Sunday School superintendents, etc. ...

“Better stop murmuring and build. Remember that one of the worst means of tearing down an individual is slander. It is one of the most poisonous weapons that the evil one uses. Backbiting and evil speaking throw us into the class of malefactors rather than the class of benefactors.” (*Gospel Ideals*, Salt Lake City: Improvement Era, 1953, pp. 142–43.)

President McKay’s teaching against speaking evil of others is a principle of Christian behavior that applies to all people. But his companion counsel against “murmuring” is a teaching that applies uniquely to Church members and Church leaders.

Government or corporate officials, who are elected directly or indirectly or appointed by majority vote, must expect that their performance will be subject to critical and public evaluations by their constituents. That is part of the process of informing those who have the right and power of selection or removal. The same is true of popularly elected officers in professional, community, and other private organizations. I suppose that the same is true even of church leaders who are selected by popular vote of members or their representative bodies. Consistent with gospel standards, these evaluations—though critical and public—should be constructive.

A different principle applies in our Church, where the selection of leaders is based on revelation, subject to the sustaining vote of the membership. In our system of Church government, evil speaking and criticism of leaders by members is always negative. Whether the criticism is true or not, as Elder George F. Richards explained, it tends to impair the leaders' influence and usefulness, thus working against the Lord and his cause. (In Conference Report, Apr. 1947, p. 24, quoted above.)

The prophet Moses expressed another reason we should refrain from criticizing Church leaders. On one occasion, the whole congregation of the children of Israel became dissatisfied and “murmured against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness.” (Ex. 16:2.)

“What are we, that ye murmur against us?” Moses asked them. “The Lord heareth your murmurings which ye murmur against him: and what are we? your murmurings are not against us, but against the Lord.” (Ex. 16:7–8.) Similarly, when the children of Israel ignored the prophet Samuel's inspired warnings and begged him to appoint a king to rule over them, the Lord directed him to do as they asked, explaining: “They have not rejected thee, but they have rejected me.” (1 Sam. 8:7.)

In these two instances, the Bible teaches that rejection of or murmuring against the counsel of the Lord's servants amounts to actions against the Lord himself. How could it be otherwise? The Lord acts through his servants. That is the pattern he has established to safeguard our agency in mortality. His servants are not perfect, which is another consequence of mortality. But if we murmur against the Lord's servants, we are working against the Lord and his cause and will soon find ourselves without the companionship of his Spirit.

So what do we do when we feel that our Relief Society president or our bishop or another authority is transgressing or pursuing a policy of which we disapprove? Is there no remedy? Are our critics correct when they charge that members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints are “sheep” without remedy against the whims of a heedless or even an evil shepherd?

There are remedies, but they are not the same remedies or procedures that are used with leaders in other organizations.

Our Father in Heaven has not compelled us to think the same way on every subject or procedure. As we seek to accomplish our life's purposes, we will inevitably have differences with those around us—including some of those we sustain as our leaders. The question is not whether we have such differences, but how we manage them. What the Lord has said on another subject is also true of the management of differences with his leaders: “It must needs be done in mine own way.” (D&C 104:16.) We should conduct ourselves in such a way that our thoughts and actions do not cause us to lose the companionship of the Spirit of the Lord.

The first principle in the gospel procedure for managing differences is to keep our personal differences private. In this we have worthy examples to follow. Every student of Church history knows that there have been differences of opinion among Church leaders since the Church was organized. Each of us has experienced such differences in our work in auxiliaries, quorums, wards, stakes, and missions of the Church. We know that such differences are discussed, but not in public. Counselors acquiesce in the decisions of their president. Teachers follow the direction of their presidency. Members are loyal to the counsel of their bishop. All of this is done quietly and loyally—even by members who would have done differently if they had been in the position of authority.

Why aren't these differences discussed in public? Public debate—the means of resolving differences in a democratic government—is not appropriate in our Church government. We are all subject to the authority of the called and sustained servants of the Lord. They and we are all governed by the direction of the Spirit of the Lord, and that Spirit only functions in an atmosphere of unity. That is why personal differences about Church doctrine or procedure need to be worked out privately. There is nothing inappropriate about private communications concerning such differences, provided they are carried on in a spirit of love.

There are at least five different procedures a Church member can follow in addressing differences with Church leaders—general or local, male or female.

The first—and most benign—of the procedures is to overlook the difference. President Brigham Young described his own application of this method in a circumstance in which he felt “a want of confidence” in the Prophet Joseph Smith’s financial management. After entertaining such thoughts for a short time, President Young saw that they could cause him to lose confidence in the Prophet and ultimately to question God as well. President Young concluded:

“Though I admitted in my feelings and knew all the time that Joseph was a human being and subject to err, still it was none of my business to look after his faults. ... He was called of God; God dictated him, and if He had a mind to leave him to himself and let him commit an error, that was no business of mine. ... He was God’s servant, and not mine.” (*Journal of Discourses*, 4:297.)

Elder Lorenzo Snow also observed some “imperfections” in Joseph Smith, but he also reached a positive conclusion about the Prophet:

“I thanked God that He would put upon a man who had those imperfections the power and authority He placed upon him ... for I knew that I myself had weakness, and I thought there was a chance for me.” (Quoted by Elder Neal A. Maxwell in *Ensign*, Nov. 1984, p. 10.)

A second option is to reserve judgment and postpone any action on the difference. In many instances, the actions we are tempted to criticize may be based on confidences that preclude the leader from explaining his or her actions publicly. In such instances there is wisdom in a strategy of patience and trust.

The third procedure, which should be familiar to every student of the Bible, is to take up our differences privately with the leader involved. The Savior taught: “If thy brother shall trespass against thee, go and tell him his fault between thee and him alone: if he shall hear thee, thou hast gained thy brother.” (Matt. 18:15.)

This course of action may be pursued in a private meeting, if possible, or it may be done through a letter or other indirect communication. How many differences could be resolved if

we would only communicate privately about them! Some would disappear as they were identified as mere misunderstandings. Others would be postponed with an agreement to disagree for the present. But in many instances, private communications about differences would remove obstacles to individual growth and correction.

A fourth option is to communicate with the Church officer who has the power to correct or release the person thought to be in error or transgression. The Bible calls this “tell[ing] it unto the church.” (Matt. 18:17.) Modern scripture, in the revelation we call “the law of the Church,” describes this procedure:

“And if he or she confess not thou shalt deliver him or her up unto the church, not to the members, but to the elders. And it shall be done in a meeting, and that not before the world.” (D&C 42:89.)

Note the caution that this remedy is to be private—“not before the world.” This is not done in order to hide the facts, but rather to increase the chance that the correction will improve the life of a brother or sister.

President John Taylor described these last two remedies when he taught how we should sustain a leader:

“But supposing he should ... be found lying or cheating, or defrauding somebody; or stealing or anything else, or even become impure in his habits, would you still sustain him? It would be my duty then to talk with him as I would with anybody else, and tell him that I had understood that things were thus and so, and that under these circumstances I could not sustain him; and if I found that I had been misinformed I would withdraw the charge; but if not it would then be my duty to see that justice was administered to him, that he was brought before the proper tribunal to answer for the things he had done; and in the absence of that I would have no business to talk about him.” (*Journal of Discourses*, 21:207–8.)

There is a fifth remedy. We can pray for the resolution of the problem. We should pray for the leader whom we think to be in error, asking the Lord to correct the circumstance if it needs correction. At the same time, we should pray for ourselves, asking the Lord to correct us if we are in error.

A person who approaches a difference with a Church leader by praying about it keeps himself or herself in tune with the Spirit of the Lord. That person also goes directly to the One who can resolve the problem. It may be resolved by inspiration to the leader or by communication of added understanding, strength, or patience to the person who prays.

All five of these are appropriate options for Church members who differ with their leaders. The preferred course depends upon the circumstances and the inspiration that guides those who prayerfully seek.

By following these procedures, Church members can work for correction of a leader or for change of a policy. Members who do so in the correct spirit will not grieve the Spirit of the Lord. They will not alienate themselves from their leaders or their brothers and sisters in the Church.

Despite the commandments and counsel I have reviewed, we have some members who persistently and publicly criticize Church leaders. What about them?

Throughout our history we have had members who have criticized the Church and its leaders. Church disciplinary action against such members has been rare or nonexistent. Persistent,

public critics punish themselves. By deliberately separating themselves from those who have been called as their leaders, critics forfeit the guidance of the Spirit of the Lord. They drift from prayer, from the scriptures, from Church activity, and from keeping the commandments. They inevitably lose spirituality and blessings. As the prophet Nephi observed, those who succumb to pride and “works of darkness” are on the way to spiritual destruction, “for the Spirit of the Lord will not always strive with man.” (2 Ne. 26:10–11.)

Another consequence of the divine warning against criticizing Church leaders is addressed to those leaders themselves. It stresses their special responsibility in the exercise of their authority. In contrast to government and corporate officers, who can often be high-handed and authoritarian in the use of their powers, Church leaders have strict limits on the way they can exercise their authority. The Lord has directed that the powers of heaven can be exercised only “upon the principles of righteousness” (D&C 121:36)—that is, “by persuasion, by long-suffering, by gentleness and meekness, and by love unfeigned” (D&C 121:41). And this command is enforced:

“When we undertake to ... gratify our pride, our vain ambition, or to exercise control or dominion or compulsion upon the souls of the children of men, in any degree of unrighteousness, behold, the heavens withdraw themselves; the Spirit of the Lord is grieved; and when it is withdrawn, Amen to the priesthood or the authority of that man.” (D&C 121:37.)

Just as our Church leaders’ source of authority is different from that of government and corporate leaders, so are the procedures for correcting Church leaders different from those used to correct leaders chosen by popular election. But the differences are appropriate to the way in which our Church leaders are called and released. By following approved procedures, we can keep from alienating ourselves from the Spirit of the Lord.

This counsel will be anathema to some. I invite those who are troubled by it to consider it in terms of the teachings of the scriptures rather than in terms of their personal preferences or the canons of any particular profession. Those who reject the authority of the scriptures or our latter-day prophets cannot be expected to agree with what I have said. Those who see freedom or truth as absolutely overriding principles in all human actions cannot be expected to be persuaded by the scriptures’ teaching that “knowledge puffeth up, but charity edifieth.” (1 Cor. 8:1.)

Those who govern their thoughts and actions solely by the principles of liberalism or conservatism or intellectualism cannot be expected to agree with all of the teachings of the gospel of Jesus Christ. As for me, I find some wisdom in liberalism, some wisdom in conservatism, and much truth in intellectualism—but I find no salvation in any of them.

The role of a preacher or a practitioner of righteousness is not to be popular with the world or to be esteemed by any particular group, but to be right with God. Isaiah affirmed that fact when he condemned the rebellious “which say to the seers, See not; and to the prophets, Prophecy not unto us right things, speak unto us smooth things, prophecy deceits.” (Isa. 30:10.) It is easy to preach freedom or truth. Praise for those subjects is usually safe and always popular. It is infinitely more difficult to preach how men and women should *use* freedom or truth. The preacher of that message may command respect, but he or she will not win popularity.

I conclude with a message of hope. When Isaiah condemned the critics of his day, he concluded with a prophecy. He said that in time the children of God would sanctify his name



and “fear the God of Israel.” Continuing, he declared, “They also that erred in spirit shall come to understanding, and they that murmured shall learn doctrine.” (Isa. 29:23–24.) In that spirit I pray for the day when all of us will know God and keep his commandments. In that day, as Isaiah foretold, the “king shall reign in righteousness,” and “the work of righteousness shall be peace; and the effect of righteousness quietness and assurance for ever.” (Isa. 32:1, 17.)