A COMPANION ESSAY ON TRUTH AND DISCIPLESHIP

BEFORE THE ANGER

Tone, Chronology, and the Responsibility to Hear What Was Said

A considered treatment of anger, dismissal, reciprocal responsibility, and the danger of allowing a speaker's eventual tone to erase the history that preceded it.

> *"If you want to know whether my tone was really the problem, do not begin with the moment I finally became angry. Go back and examine what you did with my words while I was still speaking gently."*

September 2026

In Brief

There is wisdom in the familiar admonition, “It is not what you say, but how you say it.” Words can wound unnecessarily. Anger can obscure truth. Harshness can turn correction into humiliation, and intensity can make another person defensive before he has seriously considered what is being said. Scripture repeatedly counsels gentleness, patience, meekness, persuasion, and love. A soft answer can indeed turn away wrath. There are times when a person has something important and true to say but says it so poorly that his manner becomes an unnecessary obstacle to being heard.

Any serious treatment of communication must concede this. But a true principle can be misused.

There are circumstances in which “It is not what you say, but how you say it” ceases to be an invitation to communicate better and instead becomes a way of avoiding what has been communicated. It can move attention from the concern to the person raising it, from substance to temperament, and from the history of the conflict to its most emotionally visible moment.

When that happens, the statement no longer means simply, “You could have said this better.” It begins to mean, “Because you did not say this perfectly, I do not have to answer what you said.” Those are not the same proposition.

Sometimes the deeper truth is more uncomfortable still: the objection was never primarily to the manner in which the concern was expressed. The objection was that the concern was expressed at all.

Scripture recognizes both sides of this problem. The Lord requires persuasion, long-suffering, gentleness, meekness, love, kindness, and pure knowledge from those who would influence or correct another; even reproof with sharpness is bounded by the Holy Ghost and followed by an increase of love (Doctrine and Covenants 121:41-44). Yet scripture also records hearers who resisted correction whether it came sharply or without sharpness, and others who treated the messenger as an enemy because he told them the truth. The doctrinal question, therefore, is not whether tone matters. It does. The question is whether tone can be made to carry a moral burden scripture itself does not place upon it.

1. Begin at the Beginning

One of the easiest ways to misunderstand a conflict is to begin the story too late.

A person finally becomes angry. His voice rises. His language becomes sharper than it should. Frustration that has accumulated over months or years becomes visible in a few minutes. Those few minutes are memorable because anger is easy to see.

Then the entire history of the disagreement is interpreted through that moment. “He is angry.” “He is too intense.” “He does not know how to communicate.” “He would be heard if only he approached

people differently." Perhaps there is truth in some of those observations. But they answer only one part of the question.

The more important inquiry may be: What happened before the anger?

Was the concern initially raised quietly? Was it explained carefully? Was it raised more than once? Were questions asked rather than accusations made? Was patience exercised? Was the substance actually considered? Or was the speaker repeatedly ignored, dismissed, minimized, ridiculed, characterized, or told in various ways that the problem was not the issue he was describing but the fact that he continued to describe it?

Chronology matters because causation matters. The fact that a person eventually communicated poorly does not establish that poor communication caused the conflict. The poor communication may have occurred after the conflict had existed for a very long time.

That distinction should not excuse the later anger. Each of us remains accountable for our own words. But accountability requires an honest accounting of the whole event, not merely its most convenient portion.

There is a difference between saying, "I became angry, therefore my anger was justified," and saying, "I became angry, and I should examine that honestly; but my anger did not create the problem, and it does not erase what happened while I was still speaking calmly." The first can be rationalization. The second can be moral clarity.

2. The Test of the Earlier Voice

There is a simple way to determine whether tone was truly the central problem: examine what happened when the tone was good.

If a person says essentially the same thing gently, respectfully, privately, patiently, and repeatedly, yet the substance is still ignored, then it becomes increasingly difficult to maintain that communication style was the principal obstacle.

That leads to a question worth asking in nearly every prolonged conflict: Would the substance have been seriously considered if it had been delivered perfectly?

If the answer is yes, then better communication may genuinely have changed the outcome. But if experience demonstrates that the concern was already communicated well and repeatedly produced dismissal, avoidance, or ridicule, then the later complaint about tone deserves closer examination.

This is the principle around which the matter can be understood: If you want to know whether my tone was really the problem, do not begin with the moment I finally became angry. Go back and examine what you did with my words while I was still speaking gently.

That question restores the part of the story most easily forgotten. What happened to the first attempt? And the second? And the third? What happened before frustration became visible?

If those earlier efforts were genuinely heard and considered, then perhaps the later anger was unnecessary. But if those efforts disappeared into silence, dismissal, mockery, or institutional indifference, then the history tells us something important. It suggests that the later tone may have become a convenient explanation for a resistance that existed long before the offending tone appeared.

3. The Moral Illusion of Calmness

There is another mistake hidden within many discussions of tone: the assumption that calmness is evidence of righteousness.

It is not.

A person can behave badly with an extraordinarily even voice.

A person can dismiss another calmly. He can ridicule politely. He can manipulate without raising his volume. He can threaten consequences with perfect composure. He can distort another person's position while smiling. He can exercise authority unjustly while sounding measured and reasonable. He can refuse for years to answer a legitimate concern and never once lose his temper.

None of these things becomes virtuous merely because they are done quietly.

Conversely, a person can become visibly angry while identifying something that is substantially true.

That does not make every expression of anger appropriate. Scripture warns repeatedly against uncontrolled wrath. James teaches that we should be “swift to hear, slow to speak, slow to wrath” because “the wrath of man worketh not the righteousness of God” (James 1:19-20). That warning deserves to be taken seriously.

But James does not teach that the calmest person in the room is necessarily the righteous one. Nor does scripture equate emotional intensity with falsehood.

Nephi makes a related distinction. After his brothers complained that he had spoken “hard things,” he answered that “the guilty taketh the truth to be hard, for it cutteth them to the very center” (1 Nephi 16:1-3). That passage should not be used carelessly to label every offended hearer guilty or every forceful speaker righteous. Its narrower lesson is important enough: the experience of a message as hard does not, by itself, establish that the speaker communicated wrongly. Sometimes what feels harsh is the manner. Sometimes it is the truth being encountered.

The Savior Himself taught with perfect meekness, yet meekness was never weakness, timidity, or unwillingness to confront wrongdoing. He could speak tenderly to the wounded and witheringly to

hypocrisy. His moral authority did not arise from maintaining one emotional register in every circumstance. It arose from perfect love, perfect truth, and perfect alignment with His Father.

The lesson is not that our anger should be compared casually to His. It should not. The lesson is that tone is not a reliable substitute for moral judgment.

A soft voice can carry a hard wrong. A raised voice can carry a neglected truth. Neither volume nor composure determines the merits.

4. When Tone Replaces Substance

This is where the present argument intersects with the principle developed in *When Truth Is Allowed to Correct Us*.

When someone raises a proposition, the first obligation is to determine whether the proposition is true, false, incomplete, or mistaken. Evidence should be examined. Assumptions should be tested. Reasoning should be evaluated. Consequences should be considered.

Attacking the person rather than addressing the proposition is intellectually inadequate. But tone can become another way of accomplishing essentially the same evasion.

Instead of saying, “You are wrong because your reasoning fails here,” the response becomes, “You are too angry.” “You are too intense.” “You are not approaching this correctly.” “You need to learn how to communicate.” Those observations may occasionally be warranted. Yet even when they are warranted, they do not answer the argument.

A man may be arrogant and correct. He may be gracious and wrong. He may be angry and correct. He may be calm and wrong. Character and communication style matter greatly in human relationships, but neither provides a logical answer to the proposition being discussed.

This is why a criticism of tone should never be permitted to dispose automatically of substance.

A mature response can hold two truths simultaneously: “You should not have spoken to me that way,” and “Now let us examine whether what you said is true.” Nothing prevents both from being addressed. Indeed, fairness may require it.

Paul put the problem in a single question: “Am I therefore become your enemy, because I tell you the truth?” (Galatians 4:16). The question exposes a recurring temptation to convert unwelcome correction into a judgment about the relationship or the messenger. Instead of deciding whether the statement is true, the hearer begins deciding what kind of person would say such a thing.

The account of Ahab and Micaiah makes the same point in another form. Ahab did not complain that Micaiah lacked tact. He said, “I hate him; for he doth not prophesy good concerning me, but evil” (1

Kings 22:8). Before Micaiah even spoke, a messenger urged him to make his words agree with the favorable words of the other prophets (1 Kings 22:13-14). The objection was not merely to delivery. The desired condition was agreement. That distinction matters whenever “how you said it” is invoked after the same unwelcome substance has already been resisted in gentler forms.

5. The Disappearing Chronology

The phrase “It is not what you say, but how you say it” becomes particularly destructive when it rewrites causation.

Imagine a person who raises a concern gently and receives no meaningful response. He raises it again. Nothing. He becomes more direct. He is told that he is making too much of the issue. He explains why it matters. He is characterized as negative. He persists. He is told that he always seems to have a problem. He becomes frustrated. Eventually his frustration becomes anger.

Now, finally, everyone becomes intensely interested in the interaction. But they are interested only in his anger.

The original concern becomes secondary. The repeated dismissals disappear. The earlier efforts at restraint are forgotten. The final emotional reaction is treated not merely as an unfortunate development but as an explanation for everything that preceded it.

The chronology has been reversed. A consequence is made into a cause.

This can be profoundly disorienting to the person experiencing it, especially if he is conscientious enough to examine himself honestly.

He remembers becoming angry. He knows that some of what he said could have been said better. He recognizes his own imperfection. And because that part of the accusation is true, he may begin accepting the larger accusation: Perhaps the entire problem really was me. Perhaps none of this would have happened if I were gentler. Perhaps they would have listened if I had been more patient. Perhaps my intensity caused all of it.

Self-examination is a virtue. But self-examination becomes distorted when only one participant is expected to perform it.

The proper question is not merely, “How did I eventually respond?” It is also, “How was I responded to before I eventually reacted?” Both belong in an honest account.

6. When the Earlier Voice Is Denied

There is a more difficult form of the same problem: the person who seems unable to recognize that the concern was ever expressed well.

Sometimes this reflects memory rather than malice. The emotional climax of a conflict can become so vivid that it colors everything that came before it. A fixed impression of the speaker - angry, difficult, intense, disloyal - can become a lens through which even earlier restraint is remembered as aggression. In other cases, acknowledging the earlier calmness would require the hearer to confront an uncomfortable fact: the concern was presented reasonably and still was not answered.

Whatever the cause, the effect can be profoundly distorting. If every earlier attempt is retroactively classified as hostile, then the speaker is placed under an impossible standard. He cannot point to a calmer conversation as evidence that he tried another way, because the other person reserves the right to redefine that conversation after the fact.

At that point, “how you said it” is no longer a behavioral standard. It has become an interpretive veto. The issue is not whether the speaker used particular words, raised his voice, accused unfairly, or violated some identifiable rule of respectful communication. The issue is that the hearer experiences the disagreement itself as improper and therefore remembers nearly every form of dissent as defective.

This is where the experience can become genuinely disorienting. A conscientious person may revisit his words, admit real failures, and still find that no amount of evidence establishes that he ever spoke acceptably. The standard becomes self-sealing: if he disagreed, he must have been harsh; if he insists that he was not harsh, the insistence itself becomes further evidence that he does not understand his own behavior.

It is important not to call every such failure deliberate gaslighting. People can sincerely misremember, defend themselves unconsciously, or become trapped in narratives they no longer know how to question. But sincerity does not make the resulting account accurate. And when a person repeatedly denies observable earlier restraint in a way that causes the other to doubt his own memory of events, the effect can resemble gaslighting even when the intention is uncertain.

A personal experience has made this distinction unusually concrete for me. During Church service, I became concerned that a personal symbol associated with a local leader was appearing in youth settings in a way I feared could draw religious attention toward the individual rather than toward Christ. Because I knew and loved the man, and because I knew both that the symbol carried deep meaning for him and that a challenge to it could readily be received as personal, I took unusual care with the conversation. I approached him privately. I deliberately kept my manner gentle and my words focused on the concern rather than on him. I vividly remember doing so. I did not shout, insult him, or speak in anger.

The following day he came to my home, visibly wounded by the conversation. He told me that I had cut him deeply, that no one had ever spoken to him that way, and that at times he wondered whether I knew him at all. I told him that I loved him and that my purpose had not been to injure him, but to warn a brother about something I believed mattered.

Years passed. Earlier this year, after he had become the first counselor in the stake presidency, he appeared at my porch and then came into my home. My bishop was present. Referring back to that same years-old conversation, he characterized it in emphatic but colloquial terms as the most severe verbal reprimand he had ever received. The later description mattered precisely because it did not match a conversation I remember with unusual clarity. I had not accidentally stumbled into gentleness; I had chosen it in advance because I knew the subject was sensitive and could easily be received personally. Whatever else may be disputed about that conversation, I know that its tone was not severe. It was private, careful, and gentle.

His pain was real. But the depth of his pain does not, by itself, establish that the manner of my speech was harsh. Nor does the fact that, years later, he remembered the conversation as an extraordinary reprimand establish that it was delivered that way. Emotional impact and communicative misconduct are not the same thing. A person can experience correction as severe because the subject reaches something important, threatening, embarrassing, or deeply personal. If the strength of that experience is later treated as proof of the speaker's tone, the hearer's memory can gradually convert, "That was very hard for me to hear," into, "You spoke to me badly."

That is one way the earlier voice can disappear even when there was no later angry voice to contrast with it. The hearer remembers how strongly the words landed; with time, the intensity of that memory can become part of the account of how the words must have been delivered. Years later, the emotional memory may be expressed as a settled description of the speaker's manner. The speaker may then be told that he never knew how to speak well when what the record actually establishes is that his words were difficult to receive. This is why the experience of correction must not be confused automatically with the manner of correction.

Healthy repair requires enough shared reality for both people to say, “Yes, you raised this differently before,” or, “Yes, I can see that your anger came later.” Without that minimum capacity, the conflict cannot be honestly reconstructed. It can only be narrated by whichever person claims authority over what the other person’s tone supposedly was.

If speech that was private, sincere, and reasonably delivered is later remembered as hostile merely because it was painful to receive, then “how you said it” is no longer a stable standard for communication. It has become a way of making the speaker permanently wrong.

7. The Grain of Truth

This is one reason the misuse of tone criticism can become so psychologically confusing. It often contains a grain of truth.

Perhaps the speaker really did become too sharp. Perhaps he used words he later regrets. Perhaps anger diminished his ability to persuade. Perhaps he allowed accumulated frustration to become contempt. Those things should be acknowledged.

Christian discipleship does not permit us to excuse our own conduct merely because another person behaved badly first. Doctrine and Covenants 121 is especially important because it refuses both extremes. It makes persuasion, long-suffering, gentleness, meekness, love unfeigned, kindness, and pure knowledge the ordinary conditions of righteous influence. Yet it also allows "reproving betimes with sharpness" when moved upon by the Holy Ghost, followed immediately by an increase of love (Doctrine and Covenants 121:41-44). The revelation therefore neither canonizes softness nor licenses uncontrolled anger. It demands disciplined correction governed by truth, the Spirit, and charity.

But notice what honest repentance does and does not require.

It may require me to say, “I was wrong to speak that way.” It does not require me to say, “Therefore the thing I was speaking about was imaginary.”

It may require, “I allowed anger to control me.” It does not require, “Therefore your conduct toward me was acceptable.”

It may require, “I should have communicated better in that moment.” It does not require, “Therefore I had never communicated well before that moment.”

One can repent of a reaction without surrendering the truth that produced the concern.

A truthful criticism of tone can become a false account of causation when the grain of truth is allowed to swallow the entire history. That is where discernment is required.

8. The Responsibility of the Hearer

Most teaching about communication focuses upon the responsibility of the speaker.

Speak gently. Choose your words carefully. Do not accuse unnecessarily. Control anger. Listen before responding. All of that is wise.

But communication has two moral participants. The hearer also has obligations.

He must be willing to listen before the speaker reaches desperation. He must resist the temptation to dismiss concerns merely because they are inconvenient. He must distinguish discomfort from

wrongdoing. He must not require endless gentleness from another person while offering endless indifference in return. He must consider the possibility that persistence exists because the issue remains unresolved.

And when another person's frustration begins increasing, he should sometimes ask not merely, “Why are you becoming angry?” but also, “What have I failed to hear?”

This does not transfer responsibility for one person's anger onto another. Every adult remains responsible for his own conduct. But human beings affect one another.

Repeated dismissal has consequences. Ridicule has consequences. Stonewalling has consequences. Refusing to engage legitimate concerns has consequences. Leadership exercised without meaningful listening has consequences.

A doctrine of personal responsibility that recognizes only reactions while ignoring provocations is incomplete.

If I am responsible for the harm caused by my anger, another person may also be responsible for the harm caused by his dismissal. These truths do not cancel one another. They complete the moral picture.

9. When No Tone Is Acceptable

Perhaps the clearest evidence that tone was never truly the central issue appears when every form of expression eventually becomes objectionable.

Speak softly, and nothing happens. Speak repeatedly, and you are obsessive. Speak plainly, and you are too direct. Speak forcefully, and you are angry. Ask uncomfortable questions, and you are contentious. Persist after receiving no answer, and you are unwilling to let things go.

Eventually the range of acceptable speech becomes so narrow that the only completely acceptable communication is silence.

At that point, “It is not what you say, but how you say it” has ceased to function as guidance about communication. It has become a veto.

The speaker is theoretically permitted to disagree, but no practical form of disagreement survives the standard being imposed upon him.

Mormon described a far more extreme society than the ordinary relationships considered here, so the comparison should not be inflated. Even so, the communication pattern he records is striking. “When I speak the word of God with sharpness,” he wrote, the people became angry; “when I use no sharpness they harden their hearts against it” (Moroni 9:4). The response changed with the manner of delivery,

but the rejection remained. Scripture therefore gives us at least one unmistakable example in which changing the tone did not cure the refusal to hear.

Samuel the Lamanite describes a related cultural failure. When a prophet testified of the people's sins, they became angry, cast him out, and discredited him; when a man spoke flattering words and said that all was well, they received and elevated him (Helaman 13:26-28). Again, ordinary disagreement should not be casually equated with the corruption Samuel confronted. The principle is narrower: a community can become so resistant to correction that the acceptable messenger is the one who does not meaningfully correct. In such a culture, criticism of tone may conceal a deeper preference for reassurance.

This is especially dangerous wherever there are differences in authority, status, social belonging, or institutional power. The person with greater power often has the luxury of remaining calm precisely because he does not need to persuade anyone. He can simply decline to engage.

The person without that power may have only his voice.

If the powerful person can ignore gentle speech and then disqualify forceful speech because it is forceful, he possesses an extraordinarily effective means of insulating himself from correction.

That should concern any community committed to truth.

10. Anger Is Not the Goal

None of this is an argument for cultivating anger. Quite the opposite.

Anger often carries costs. It can introduce exaggeration into an otherwise sound argument. It can tempt a person toward contempt. It can injure relationships that might otherwise be repaired. It can make people who ought to listen less capable of hearing.

The Christian ideal remains higher.

Paul counseled believers to speak “the truth in love” (Ephesians 4:15). Doctrine and Covenants 121 joins persuasion and long-suffering with gentleness, meekness, kindness, pure knowledge, and love, while permitting Spirit-directed reproof and requiring an increase of love afterward (Doctrine and Covenants 121:41-44). The purpose of correction is not conquest. It is truth joined to charity.

But “speak the truth in love” contains two obligations. Love matters. So does truth.

It would be a strange interpretation of Christian meekness to require such gentleness that truth can be indefinitely ignored. And it would be an equally strange interpretation of charity to place the entire burden of relational peace upon the person who keeps identifying an unresolved wrong.

Sometimes peace requires the speaker to become gentler. Sometimes peace requires the hearer finally to listen. Usually it requires both.

11. A Better Standard

Instead of repeating automatically, “It is not what you say, but how you say it,” a better response to difficult speech might begin with several questions.

Is what was said true? Was it previously expressed differently? What happened when it was? Have I answered the substance, or only reacted to the delivery? Did this person's intensity appear suddenly, or did it develop after repeated failed attempts to be heard? Is there something in my own conduct that contributed to this exchange? And even if the speaker communicated badly, what obligation remains upon me to address the underlying concern?

Those questions demand more humility than simply criticizing tone. They require both parties to examine themselves. They preserve accountability without sacrificing truth. And they prevent one badly handled moment from becoming the authorized history of everything that came before it.

12. Before the Anger

There are times when the statement “You could have said that better” is exactly right. We should be humble enough to hear it.

But there are also times when that sentence is profoundly incomplete.

The person who finally became angry may need to repent of anger. The person who ignored him while he was gentle may need to repent of something too.

One failure does not erase the other. Nor should the visible failure automatically be treated as the greater one merely because it was louder.

If we genuinely care about truth, reconciliation, and Christian charity, then we must resist the temptation to begin the story at the point most favorable to ourselves.

The scriptural pattern is therefore more demanding than either “tone does not matter” or “tone is all that matters.” The speaker must govern himself. He must seek persuasion rather than compulsion, charity rather than contempt, and truth rather than the satisfaction of anger. The hearer must govern himself too. He must not mistake discomfort for proof of mistreatment, make an enemy of the person who tells him truth, or prefer flattering reassurance merely because correction is unpleasant. Both stand accountable before God for what they do with truth when it arrives.

We must go back. Back before the raised voice. Back before the sharp words. Back before frustration overwhelmed restraint. Back to the first concern, quietly spoken.

And then we must ask the question that determines whether “how you said it” was ever really the problem:

“What did we do with the truth while it was still being spoken gently?”

For if we repeatedly refused to hear a whisper, we should be very careful about making the eventual shout the whole story.

Scripture References

Proverbs 15:1
The power of a soft answer to turn away wrath and the responsibility to govern speech.

James 1:19–20
Being swift to hear, slow to speak, and slow to wrath; human wrath does not produce the righteousness of God.

1 Nephi 16:1–3
Truth experienced as hard; the hearer’s experience of a message as painful does not by itself establish wrongful delivery.

Galatians 4:16
The danger of treating a truthful messenger as an enemy because he tells an unwelcome truth.

1 Kings 22:8, 13–14
Ahab’s rejection of Micaiah and the pressure placed upon the prophet to make his message agree with more favorable voices.

Moroni 9:4
A people who resist the word both when it is spoken with sharpness and when it is spoken without sharpness.

Helaman 13:24–29
Rejecting corrective prophets while rewarding flattering voices that say all is well.

Ephesians 4:15
The Christian obligation to speak the truth in love.

Doctrine and Covenants 121:41–44
Persuasion, long-suffering, gentleness, meekness, love, kindness, pure knowledge, Spirit-directed reproof, and an increase of love afterward.