

Mormon Oratory

An Introduction

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“And now, as the preaching of the word had a great tendency to lead the people to do that which was just—yea, it had had more powerful effect upon the minds of the people than the sword, or anything else, which had happened unto them—therefore Alma thought it was expedient that they should try the virtue of the word of God.” –Alma 31:5

Mormons do not generally think of themselves as orators. By and large Latter-day Saints consider themselves to be regular folks, while orators are great statesmen and public figures like Abraham Lincoln, Winston Churchill, or Martin Luther King, Jr. Oratory connotes a certain level of high-toned rhetoric that may even feel fundamentally foreign to LDS sensibilities. Political rhetoric, after all, is tainted with bombast and deceit. Mormons do, however, consider themselves to be speakers. We give “talks,” but we don’t declaim; we may teach, but we don’t harangue; we may proselyte, but we don’t propagandize.

But Mormons nevertheless participate in a long tradition of Christian oratory that can be said to begin with Jesus himself. Christ’s sermons and teachings have flooded the world with “the word,” the message of salvation, and that message about the Mediator is mediated through language, through discourse, through speaking and teaching, preaching and praying, blessing and confessing, chastising and consoling, and every act of Christian service that depends upon speech. Heavenly communion requires earthly communication.

Latter-day Saints, as those of so many other faiths, make the study of the spoken word a prominent part of their private and public devotion. We turn to written sermons for both doctrine and encouragement: the Sermon on the Mount, Peter’s Pentecostal sermon, Paul’s Mars Hill speech to the Athenians, and in the Book of Mormon the stirring speeches by King Benjamin, Abinadi,

Amulek, Samuel the Lamanite, Alma, or Christ addressing the ancient Americans. As Christians and as Mormons we preserve and prize the spoken word. We reread it and quote it and shape our thoughts into the framework of the spoken words of ancient and modern prophets. For Latter-day Saints, living within a theology that insists upon the reality of ongoing revelation, the written word in scripture becomes continuous with the spoken word heard from the mouths of contemporary prophets and local leaders who speak God's present will; patriarchs and priesthood holders who pronounce blessings; missionaries who preach and teachers who teach. In short, Mormons believe God continues speaking, presently and powerfully, and this conditions Latter-day Saints to attend to and to expect vital spiritual guidance through God's written and spoken word, past and present. Scripture is living for Mormons; the echoes of God's spoken word never diminish, but are only complemented and amplified through the vigorous voicing given them by believers in a hundred speaking contexts.

Oratory is not just a subject of study for Latter-day Saints; it is an ongoing practice. Ours is a lay church in which members of the congregation take turns at the pulpit preaching, and in the classroom teaching, and on the streets testifying. Public speaking has always been central to the Mormon faith. The proselyting that helped Joseph Smith's fledgling church emerge from the backdrop of nineteenth century America was accomplished through preaching, and the millions of adherents who have for nearly 200 years grounded their faith in the restored gospel of Jesus Christ have shared and shored up their faith through constant communication. Consider the fact that every week of the year some 20,000 sermons are given across the pulpits of Latter-day Saint wards and branches. To this can be added the speeches given at every fireside, funeral, or patriotic assembly in which Mormons regularly gather. For Latter-day Saints as for other faiths, it is not sufficient to

receive the word; it must be shared and celebrated in many different places to many different audiences through formal and informal speaking.

Most Mormon speaking goes unrecorded, but the official speeches of church leaders have been preserved and published from the beginning, and those sermons now constitute an impressive literary and oratorical heritage. I estimate that some 8000 sermons presented at the semiannual General Conferences of the church have been published and circulated, and dozens more are added to this twice a year. The *Journal of Discourses* fills a shelf with 26 volumes of collected sermons, some 1424 individual speeches in all, and these span but a few decades of Mormon history. General Conference addresses are now published in multiple media on an ongoing basis, accumulating a vast store of recorded public speaking. It is not just those speeches given at general conferences of the church that are published. A sizeable body of published speeches now exists from the various devotional addresses, forum speeches, and commencement speeches that have taken place at LDS institutions of higher learning, while other popular occasions for Mormon public speaking have in recent years also become a steady tributary in the swelling river of Latter-day Saint public address: Women's Conference, Especially For Youth, religious symposia, academic conferences, etc. Mormon speeches have also circulated widely over the broadcast media (radio, television, internet), in audiotape, videotape, and DVD versions, and fireside circuit speakers have published their talks in book form or marketed these extensively through LDS retailers on audiotape and CD.

Many Mormon speakers have received popular acclaim for their oratorical abilities (Sidney Rigdon, Brigham Young, Matthew Cowley, LeGrand Richards, Neal A. Maxwell, John Bytheway, Susan Easton Black, Chieko Okazaki, Sheri Dew, etc.), but surprisingly few have been given serious scholarly attention or rhetorical criticism. David Whittaker's bibliography counts only a score of

formal studies of some 15 Mormons—all of them general authorities, none of them women, most of them from the nineteenth century. There is more that remains undone than done in analyzing Mormon oratory.

As a starting place for understanding the range of Mormon speaking, we might consider some of the major categories by which experts in rhetoric and public speaking analyze communication and apply these within a Mormon context. Most of these, by the way, have had next to no serious attention yet given to them:

To whom do Mormons speak? with what purposes? in what settings and on what occasions? What is characteristic of Mormon speaking as children, as adolescents, as adults, as teachers, as leaders?

What determines the formality of Mormon speaking? Is Mormon speaking prepared or spontaneous, pre-written or extemporaneous?

How do Mormons develop their speaking ability?

What are measures of the success of Mormon speaking?

What cultural habits have developed that now typify Mormon public address, and are these continuous across the many places and time periods in which Mormons have lived and spoken?

What standard patterns can be found in Mormon speaking? what lines of reasoning, what kinds of authority are appealed to? Are there typical patterns of arrangement within Mormon sermons?

How do Mormons establish their authority when speaking?

How do Mormons appeal to emotion within their speaking? What use is there of humor, of

personal anecdotes, of emotionally bearing witness of belief? How does this relate to the message and purpose of their speaking?

What stylistic traits are sought for, avoided, or imitated within Mormon speaking?

What methods are used for delivery in Mormon speaking? How do Latter-day Saints use inflection, pitch, gestures, visual objects, and media as part of their speaking? How do they make use of sound amplification? How do they accommodate the broadcasting of speeches, the translation of speeches?

When are speeches recorded? transcribed? distributed? read in written form? How do speeches incorporate material from other speeches, or how do speakers draw from scripture, from history, from contemporary culture to make their points?

What does Mormon speaking actually do? What effects does it have? How does this square with the intentions of speakers and leaders?

Let's take just the first of this series of questions to see how it plays out: To whom do Mormons speak? On the most general level Mormon speaking can be divided between communication oriented toward those outside the faith (proselyting) and toward those inside the faith (sermons to the converted). A third vital audience is God as He is spoken to through prayer. Of course one could further divide the Mormon audience into the various settings in which speaking is employed very differently: the General Conference setting, speaking from the podium of a Mormon chapel, speaking in a classroom setting, communication within private interviews between leaders and members or between parents and children, speaking that takes place in home and visiting teaching settings, etc. Much could be studied about how Mormon speaking changes when these

different audiences or settings are anticipated, especially when one adds the complicating factor of audience size, mixed audiences (old/young, male/female, member/non-member, active/less-active member, Americans/non-Americans, etc.), intimate speaking settings vs. mass audience settings, and of course the way that media, either by its presence or absence, affects a speaker's understanding of his/her audience and the way he/she shapes, times, arranges, and presents his/her speech. The question of audience very quickly moves to the question of setting, and the places and occasions for Mormon speaking each have their own dynamic. Ultimately, studying Mormon speaking requires the sensitivity of an anthropologist in addition to the skills of a linguist, literary critic, or rhetorician. It sometimes requires the historian's knowledge of places in the past or the sociologist's understanding of the cultural configurations that conditioned Mormon speaking in places as diverse as ancient America, 19th century New York, 20th century western American, or the 21st century international settings for LDS speaking.

Obviously there are a variety of fruitful possibilities for investigating Mormon speaking, beginning with an understanding of the various people, places, and events involved with LDS public address. My students and I have put together a proposed table of contents for a possible anthology of Mormon speaking. Its categories are a beginning for understanding the great variety of audiences and occasions for Mormon speaking that have not yet been academically studied (see separate document).

Mormon oratory is complementary with Mormon literature and history. Obviously as speeches are recorded, printed, distributed, and read they become literary objects with their own dynamics—new audiences, applied to new uses, and overall helping to contribute to a body of writing that makes possible analysis and interpretation unavailable when a speech is never written. These

recorded speeches, like the thousands of poems, stories, plays, and novels penned by Mormons, contribute to a cultural record through which we can come to understand the values and character of the LDS people throughout their varied history. Of course some speeches become canonized as scripture, whether anciently (Book of Mormon speeches), currently (General Conference addresses published officially as God's word through modern day prophets), or privately (patriarchal blessings). Those who compose their speeches in written form also develop a personal literature, a record not just of their speaking but of their thinking processes and their personality. ■