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2006-12-08

A Seal of Living Reality: The Role of Personal Expression in Latter-day Saint Discourse

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"A SEAL OF LIVING REALITY": THE ROLE OF PERSONAL

EXPRESSION IN LATTER-DAY SAINT DISCOURSE

by

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A thesis submitted to the faculty of

Brigham Young University

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

Department of English

Brigham Young University

December 2006

BRIGHAM YOUNG UNIVERSITY

GRADUATE COMMITTEE APPROVAL

of a thesis submitted by

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This thesis has been read by each member of the following graduate committee and by majority vote has been found to be satisfactory.

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ABSTRACT

"A SEAL OF LIVING REALITY": THE ROLE OF PERSONAL

EXPRESSION IN LATTER-DAY SAINT DISCOURSE

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A personal mode of discourse is central to Latter-day Saint culture. This mode is both pervasive throughout the culture and significant within it. Two specific genres— the personal experience narrative and the personal testimony—illustrate the importance of this discourse mode in LDS culture. Understanding the LDS personal mode of discourse is essential to properly understanding Mormonism.

The personal orientation in LDS discourse mirrors a tendency towards personal expression which has become common throughout Western culture. This tendency has important roots in the Protestant religious movement. In particular, Puritanism represents a significant point of origin for American personal expression. Such

expression has been further encouraged by the democratic climate of America and has become an important part of American religious discourse.

However, LDS personal discourse cannot be explained by merely reducing the Latter-day Saint tradition to outside influences. Latter-day Saints, while deriving influence from many points, have fashioned a tradition of using personal expression in their religious discourse which deserves independent consideration.

Within Latter-day Saint culture, the LDS tradition of personal discourse has special significance because it draws upon a host of doctrinal and cultural associations that are religiously significant to Latter-day Saints. LDS doctrines about the necessity of personal revelation and the importance of pragmatic action legitimate a religious focus on personal experience. Likewise, cultural encouragements towards personal religious involvement and spiritual expression foster a culture of personal expression. Because of these philosophies and commitments, LDS audiences respond powerfully to personal discourse.

A personal style of discourse is important in mediating authority in the LDS religion. Personal expression is a means through which official LDS doctrine is conveyed. This mode of expression also allows individual Latter-day Saints to locate their identities within the structure of the LDS religion. Culturally-encouraged genres of personal expression allow LDS speakers to enact their religious beliefs. These genres reinforce fundamental LDS doctrines and serve an acculturating function in LDS culture. They teach Latter-day Saints how to experience, interpret, and speak about the world in ways consistent with the Latter-day Saint community's doctrines and commitments.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Chapter 1: Introduction

For the past 176 years, members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day

Saints have regularly convened in the Church's General Conference. At the most recent

conference, in September/October 2006, Church leaders preached thirty-eight sermons.

Although varied in their substance and style, these sermons have great collective

significance in LDS culture. To the faithful, they are 'living scripture,' a current

expression of God's voice which is even more important than conventional scripture.

Endowed with such meaning, these speeches function as powerful rhetoric in the LDS

community. 'Conference talks,' as they are commonly called, represent the zenith of

contemporary LDS oratory. Each address, as it is delivered, is potentially heard by

millions. Within weeks, printed copies are disseminated to Church members throughout

the world. Once distributed, these addresses receive semi-canonical treatment, serving

as encouraged reading and as church-approved instruction material. In their collective

importance, they vividly illustrate the important place of speaking within Latter-day

Saint religious culture.

Yet by themselves, these influential sermons do not fully express the cultural

energy of LDS religious oratory or the general vigor of Latter-day Saint religious

discourse. The semiannual general conferences stand out against a backdrop of regular

worship services, where each week churchgoing Latter-day Saints listen to several

sermons and attend several more classroom lessons. This diet of regular religious

discourse is supplemented by similar sermons and lessons heard at numerous other

events ranging through all degrees of size and formality. Nearly every Latter-day Saint

religious gathering revolves primarily around the spoken word. David Knowlton has described the use of words as the most significant of LDS worship rituals: "For Mormons…speech *becomes* the meeting" (22). And indeed, while there are other significant aspects of LDS worship, Latter-day Saints do dedicate most of their time in any religious meeting to the spoken word.

This emphasis on religious speaking is not new. The very first LDS worship service for which there exist recorded proceedings occurred on June 9, 1830. In the words of Joseph Smith, it included "much exhortation and instruction" (qtd. in Hartley 20). With this pattern established, Latter-day Saints devoted "the major part of each public meeting" held in Kirtland, Missouri, and then Nauvoo to religious oratory (20-21). Likewise, during the later decades of the nineteenth century after the LDS Church had moved its headquarters to Utah, Church leaders still "regarded preaching…as one of their most effective means for influencing the attitudes and actions of the saints" (Jarvis 199-200). Clearly, a regular reception of religious speech represents an important, if not particularly unique, feature of the LDS religious tradition.

However, even the regularity with which Latter-day Saints listen to sermons and lessons does not fully explain the substantial role which religious speaking may play in their lives. Typical Latter-day Saints do not merely listen to religious speech; they also actively participate in its creation. In the LDS Church, the vast majority of sermons are preached not by full-time church leaders, but by rank-and-file members. This characteristic is often seen as one of the strongest identifying features of contemporary LDS worship. For example, in her study "Verbal Performance in Mormon Worship

Services," Carolyn Gilkey writes, "Mormon worship services are strikingly different from other Christian groups in that there is no professional clergy and hence no preaching by a single leader. Rather, all Church members can be called upon to offer the invocation and benediction and the sermons or talks" (8). Likewise, all members can be called upon to teach Church lessons and participate in religious discussions. Indeed, at all types and sizes of religious gatherings—ranging from the highly formal to the quite casual—Latter-day Saints of all ages are personally involved in speaking as a regular part of their religious lives.

The popular level of involvement in speaking by the general LDS Church membership has given individual religious expression a special sort of significance in LDS culture. Latter-day Saint children often begin speaking publicly in religious settings before they begin attending school. Gilkey indicates that LDS children master the basic conventions of public prayer and testimony by age eight or nine. They then "continue throughout their lives to perfect their performances" (iv). For both children and adults, learning to speak publicly in religious settings and to appreciate the value of religious discourse is an important part of LDS religious acculturation.

Importantly, this popular participation in religious speaking involves the membership of the LDS Church in the production of a style of discourse that is distinctly personal. This personal orientation may seem paradoxical since Latter-day Saints in many ways downplay individualism. Yet even in their most formal religious meetings, LDS speakers routinely refer to personal insights and experiences—at times even deeply

personal ones. This custom is central to LDS discourse and can provide important

insights into the LDS culture, worldview, and religion.

Since speaking is so significant throughout Latter-day Saint culture, discourse

modes—indeed even those which appear superficial at first—can actually provide some

of the deepest insights into the LDS worldview. This is the position taken by folklorist

William Wilson. Wilson feels, for example, that Latter-day Saints' ubiquitous use of

narratives has mistakenly been "largely ignored by interpreters of the Mormon

experience" ("Folklore" 180). This may be partly because, to an acculturated Latter-day

Saint, telling religious stories seems natural, even automatic. It may also be that the

practice seems too common, even too simple, to be taken seriously. However, in reality,

Wilson believes, narratives can "bring us about as close as we are likely to get to

Mormon hearts and minds and to an understanding…of what it really means to be

Mormon" ("Folklore" 180). Both in this case and in more general application, a study of

LDS discourse can yield important insights into Latter-day Saint culture.

In recent decades, much scholarship has been devoted to exploring the nature of

LDS culture and tracing the degree to which Latter-day Saint traditions have diverged

from and converged with those of general Christianity. Shortly after the LDS Church

was established, its members began to gather to central locations and to separate

themselves from the general American populace. This isolation allowed Latter-day

Saints to develop a self-contained culture which religious historians and sociologists

have treated as both a "new religious tradition" (Shipps) and a distinct ethnic identity

(O'Dea). Because of its unique features, the LDS identity has been a topic of much scholarly interest.

Yet, despite the cultural significance of LDS religious speaking, Latter-day Saint discourse has received comparatively little in-depth scholarly attention. Some of this may be because preaching is common in Christianity. Historians describing the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints have primarily focused on theological and organizational aspects of the Church which make it unique; they have not given much attention to LDS discourse. In 1997, Elmer Jay Richardson noted the scholarly inclination to focus on organizational features of the LDS Church and provided an assessment: "If a more comprehensive picture of the movement is to emerge, the beliefs, attitudes and practices of individual members must be studied….How typical Mormons view their world is still largely uncharted waters" (145, 151). Richardson, although writing from a perspective outside the LDS Church, was discerning in his perception of traditions within LDS culture which have an influence largely unrecognized even by Church members.

In any culture, such traditions are not always easily identified or studied, particularly because they are often woven into the most basic assumptions and practices of a culture. However, for this exact reason, their consideration can be particularly valuable. The importance of religious discourse within Latter-day Saint culture should not be dismissed simply because of its general prominence among other religious groups. Often, the contextualized application of a general rhetorical practice may provide unique insight into the concerns important to a specific group. Indeed, a study

of LDS discourse does yield insights into Latter-day Saint culture beyond those which can be gained by studying the LDS Church's theological claims or organizational features alone.

In particular, understanding the personal nature of Latter-day Saint discourse is essential to a complete comprehension of LDS religious culture. In the LDS worldview, personal experience has an especially high value. Latter-day Saints treat personal experience as having central religious significance. Elmer Jay Richardson has described this preference:

> If one were to ask the typical Mormon why he believes in God and why he accepts Joseph Smith as a prophet, his response probably would not include a sophisticated argument for the existence of God, nor would he marshal evidence of Smith's prophetic abilities. Instead, he likely would simply state that personal revelation has made known to him the truth of these two propositions. (152)

Here, Richardson implies that for Latter-day Saints, such reference to personal revelatory experience trumps other means of religious persuasion.

This epistemological stance has had important rhetorical consequences. Within LDS culture, verbal enunciations of personal experience are treated with spiritual reverence. Thus, a personal mode of discourse has important power for those who speak within the LDS Church. Personal expression is not merely common in Latter-day Saint society; it is culturally vital.

Throughout history, the personal voice has been recurrently used to give persuasive force to LDS discourse. This mode of speaking is not always immediately

obvious in records from the Church's earliest days, from which there exist only a small number of direct transcriptions of speeches. Since early Latter-day Saints nearly always spoke extemporaneously, their speeches were not usually transferred to written forms unless someone in an audience considered an address to be sufficiently noteworthy. When records do exist, the details of personally-oriented accounts did not always survive the transcription and publication process, even in sermons that clearly contained direct personal reference.

For example, the minutes of an 1834 Church conference in Ohio summarize a portion of an address by Church founder Joseph Smith: "The President then gave a relation of obtaining and translating the Book of Mormon, the revelation of the Priesthood of Aaron, the organization of the Church in 1830, the revelation of the High Priesthood, and the gift of the Holy Ghost poured out upon the Church" (qtd. in Burton 53). Here, although the details are unspecific, portions of Joseph Smith's address clearly would have involved personal reference.

Such early records of personal reference are common enough to verify that a personal mode of speaking was indeed important in the LDS Church's early oratory. Other, more complete records of Joseph Smith's speaking, such as the King Follett discourse, demonstrate that his speaking style was highly personal (Larson). This characteristic was also true of his religious writing. In fact, as will be discussed in Chapter 2, his canonized First Vision account serves as an important prototype for the entire LDS personal discourse mode.

Over time, records of entire LDS sermons were more frequently published and the personal orientation in LDS religious speaking becomes easier to trace—particularly in well-documented formal settings. Some general Church leaders have been particularly prolific users of certain genres of personal expression. Among the Church's nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century leaders, George A. Smith, George Q. Cannon, and Heber J. Grant were especially fond of relating accounts from their personal experience (see e.g., Jarvis 344-345, 517-519). In more recent times, Thomas S. Monson, Gene R. Cook, and Paul H. Dunn have been especially known for telling personal stories.

As time has passed, the style of personal expression used by Latter-day Saints in formal settings has changed somewhat. General Conference addresses from the late nineteenth century manifest very heavy reliance on the personal affirmation of ideas but relatively infrequent use of personal stories. Today, in contrast, General Conference addresses are generally pre-written, and while the pronoun "I" is not used as liberally as it once was, fully-developed personal experience narratives are much more common. In any case, while the exact style of personal discourse may have changed over time, the mode itself has not.

Indeed, nearly every churchgoing Latter-day Saint will immediately recognize personally-oriented speech as a common feature of LDS culture. Still, it might be surprising to realize how very prevalent this mode of discourse is in even the most formal LDS religious settings. For example, in the Church's most recent General Conference in September/October 2006, a number of speakers developed significant

personal experience narratives as part of their talks: Elder David A. Bednar opened his

address by describing lessons he had learned from his interaction with less-active

Church members; Bishop Richard A. Edgley centered his sermon on two personal

experiences that illustrated the principle of honesty; Elder Joseph B. Wirthlin began an

address on the hope provided by Christ's atonement by recounting tender personal

relationships with his father, mother, sister, and wife; Elaine S. Dalton opened and

closed her talk on personal purity by referring to teaching experiences with a son;

President Thomas S. Monson interspersed his address in the priesthood session with

multiple examples of edifying deeds personally accomplished as he carried out religious

duties ("Trust"). These examples are representative rather than exhaustive; overall,

recent General Conference speakers have more often than not referred to personal

experience at some point during their addresses.

As is shown by such tabulations, Latter-day Saints are clearly comfortable with

rhetorical self-reference, even in their most official religious settings. However, such

personally-oriented speech is perhaps even more common in the less formal local

meetings of the LDS Church. In his 1979 study, Roots of Modern Mormonism,

anthropologist Mark Leone referred to the commonality of LDS references to personal

experience. Decades later, Latter-day Saints would still recognize Leone's description of

the frequency of personal reference in an adult Sunday School class:

> Regardless of the topic…participants attempt to relate some aspect of their life to
>
> the idea behind the lesson. Whether it is meekness, the nature of the millennium,
>
> or the role of authority in the church, individuals tell how they used the idea to

solve specific problems. The discussion is completely personalized and autobiographical….This parade of personal opinions goes on virtually unchecked. (189-190)

In this description, Leone is not describing formal oratory. Rather, he is describing a setting where religious instruction is conveyed through discussion rather than sermon. His example illustrates how the LDS reliance on personal expression permeates local discussions, connecting them to the enunciations of central authorities.

Indeed, a personal mode of speaking and writing pervades the entire Latter-day Saint culture. In classroom settings, teachers and students often ground discussion in personal experience. In testimony meetings—a monthly occurrence in every LDS congregation—individual Church members stand before their local congregations and share statements of personal conviction and accounts of personal experience. In interviews and during counseling, ecclesiastical leaders speak to people about their personal religious standing and share motivating examples from their own experiences. In monthly visits, home and visiting teachers call on Church members in their homes and discuss the personal application of gospel principles.

In every setting, Latter-day Saints feel free to share accounts of personal experience. Likewise, in any setting, if the mood is right, Latter-day Saints may bear personal 'testimony' to the gospel. These two kinds of personal speech—the personal experience narrative and the personal testimony—manifest the breadth and depth of Latter-day Saint personal discourse. These genres are both pervasive throughout LDS culture and enormously consequential within it.

Personal experience narratives represent one of the most prevalent of all types of expression in LDS culture. This genre is used regularly in both oral and written Latter-day Saint expression. It is rather uncommon to hear an LDS church talk without a personal story and even more rare to experience a classroom lesson without hearing an account of a participant's personal experience. Of course, not every instance of personally-inflected speech carries religious significance in LDS culture. LDS speakers may tell a personal story simply because it is important to them and they feed a need for personal expression. Others may speak of themselves from a desire to gain recognition, to defend their actions, or simply to pass time. Personal experience narratives are common in many cultures, so Latter-day Saint uses of the genre do not always have special religious import. Still, very often, LDS speakers carefully select personal experiences from their lives to relate in religious settings because they feel that they have spiritual significance. The LDS culture of personal expression promotes an atmosphere where personal experience narratives always have the potential to be understood as religiously significant, whether or not a particular narrative is treated that way in any specific context.

In contrast, the personal testimony genre is nearly always perceived by LDS audiences to be religiously significant. This genre, in which speakers use the first-person voice as they affirm their own conviction regarding the legitimacy of the doctrines and organization of the LDS Church, is a part of nearly every Latter-day Saint sermon and lesson. Such testimonies can also stand alone. In fact, LDS congregations designate one worship service each month as a 'testimony meeting'—an occasion where all members

of the congregation can stand and speak about their personal religious beliefs and experiences. In both practice and instruction, testimonies are granted a privileged status by the LDS community. Except in cases where they feel that a speaker is being duplicitous about belief or has a mistaken understanding of doctrine, LDS audiences will accept personal testimonies as important religious expressions.

Significantly, the Latter-day Saint use of a personal mode of speaking has not been limited to occasions where LDS speakers address fellow-members of their Church. From the LDS Church's very beginnings, missionary preaching has been an important part of Latter-day Saint discourse. In her groundbreaking dissertation, "The Role of Preaching in the Early Latter Day Saint Church, 1830-1846," Barbara Higdon stresses the important role which missionary preaching played in establishing and sustaining the early LDS Church. She notes that three-quarters of the Church's revelations received between 1829 and 1831 refer to preaching (20). While some might hesitate to match Higdon's bold assertion that "the vigorous promulgation of the gospel through press and pulpit" was the "one feature that produced a church capable of survival," she has certainly established the importance of preaching within early Latter-day Saint culture (10). Higdon's point is supported by Davis Bitton, who in his study of nineteenth-century LDS sermons, referred to the church growth which was effected through preaching, concluding that "early Mormon preachers seem to have enjoyed a remarkable degree of success" (9).

Such missionary work continues to be an important feature of the LDS religion. At any given time, tens of thousands of Latter-day Saints are involved in full-time

missionary service which requires them to speak daily about the Church and its doctrines. This missionary program both brings new members into Church fellowship and also strengthens the religious identity of existing Latter-day Saints by training them to be more proficient religious speakers.

Throughout Church history, personal expression has been an important feature of LDS missionary speaking. In fact, in the early days of the Church, reference to personal experience may have been more common in proselyting than in preaching to the converted. During the 1830's, most Church members were not familiar with Joseph Smith's First Vision narrative which is so commonly used as the introductory point in today's missionary work (Allen 5). However, all of the Church's first missionaries were themselves recent converts. Their personal stories about the joy of finding the message of a gospel truth restored to earth resonated powerfully with people searching for religious guidance.

Higdon explains that missionaries who described how they themselves "had questioned their previous beliefs" and "who incorporated in their sermons their doubts and the answers they had found in Mormonism" connected powerfully with members of the audience who felt religiously discontent (ii). Likewise, listeners who wanted to ascertain the value of this new religion appreciated speakers who "simply related the impact that the new beliefs had had in their lives" (179). As ministers, these missionaries were relatively untrained, but their ability to personally connect with their listeners resulted in impressive conversion rates.

Today, LDS missionaries continue by and large to have little formal training as speakers. While usually not recent convents, most members of the missionary corps are relatively uneducated young men and women barely out of their teens. These missionaries are instructed, however, to use a mode of discourse in which they, as participants in the LDS religion, have had ample informal training. Their instruction is to learn the gospel, have spiritual experience, and then bear personal testimony of it. The Church's 2002 missionary training manual, <u>Preach My Gospel</u>, instructs,

> Bear testimony often to seal the truth of the principles of doctrine you are teaching….You may also share a brief experience about how you gained this knowledge….Bear testimony several times in each lesson, not just at the end….Bear testimony that the principle you are going to teach will bless the investigator's lives if they will follow it. Talk about how living a principle has blessed your life. (199)

The goal is for missionaries to acquire personal religious experience which they can speak from as they encourage investigators to have religious experiences for themselves. In this manner, LDS missionary preaching continues the general LDS pattern of speaking personally to convey religious belief.

In important ways, the missionary use of this personal discourse mode has had a winnowing effect. Those who accept the message of LDS missionaries will necessarily be those who are willing to recognize the authority of personal religious experience. Converting to the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints implies a willingness to accept the epistemology and rhetoric of personal experience.

Of course, the use of personal expression is not unique to Latter-day Saint culture. This style of discourse is common throughout Western society. As will be discussed in Chapter 2, outside influences have played an important role in shaping the LDS tradition of personal expression. However, this tradition has become independent. A number of characteristics which Latter-day Saints prize as important identifying features of their religion have had an influence on the ways in which LDS audiences respond to personal expression. In particular, this form of expression resonates with certain aspects of LDS theology. The relationship between LDS theology and personal expression is the focus of Chapter 3.

Because personal expression is connected to significant components of the LDS identity, its use by Latter-day Saints is essential to properly understanding Mormonism. This is because, as is discussed in Chapter 4, the LDS approach to personal expression teaches a particular way of looking at the world and one's experiential place within it. The LDS personal discourse mode allows Latter-day Saints to personally identify themselves with the LDS Church. It also allows LDS authorities to speak in a way that links them to the general membership of the Church and identifies them as fit representatives of the divine. As Chapter 5 explains, the recurrent use of a personal mode of speaking acculturates Latter-day Saints, teaching them to identify with the LDS worldview in a deeply personal manner.

This important function of LDS personal expression deserves appropriate attention in the scholarship regarding the Latter-day Saint Church and culture. The LDS reliance on personal expression has not gone entirely unnoticed. In particular, Mark

Leone has recognized the personal nature of LDS speaking. This quality is likewise noted in the work of Carolyn Gilkey, Barbara Higdon, and David Knowlton. However, too often, scholars both within and without the Latter-day Saint Church have overlooked the importance which a personal discourse mode holds in the LDS worldview—focusing on institutional developments while taking for granted the significance of epistemological and rhetorical traditions. Many scholars have not fully understood the nuances of LDS personal expression, resulting in characterizations that are oversimplified or at times even offensive to Church members.

A fuller understanding of the personal mode of LDS discourse will not only amend such oversights, but can also contribute valuable insight into larger questions regarding the meaning of LDS worship practices, the derivation of LDS ideas, and the nature of the LDS identity. Indeed, this fundamental LDS tradition provides an interesting case study in how discursive modes can function as powerful rhetoric within any culture.

Chapter 2: American and Protestant Contexts for LDS Personal Discourse

For today's Latter-day Saint, the foremost example of an LDS personal experience account is Joseph Smith's 1838 narrative of his First Vision experience in which he describes seeing God the Father and Jesus Christ and being told by them that none of the churches upon the earth had divine authorization. This account, which is published in the Church's <u>Pearl of Great Price</u>, holds a special place within LDS culture. Since the 1840's it has been used as a missionary tool (Allen 38), and for years it has been one of the first distinctly LDS teachings to which potential converts are introduced. Its presentation to existing members is likewise ubiquitous: James B. Allen writes, "The nature and importance of the vision is the subject of frequent sermons by church members in all meetings and by General Authorities…in semi-annual conferences" (29). Because it has been canonized as latter-day scripture, it carries the weight of undisputable religious authority. Indeed, this account has, as Allen notes, "achieved a position of unique importance in the traditions and official doctrines of the Mormon Church" (29). It is recognized as the foundation story of Mormonism and understood by Latter-day Saints to represent an unparalleled occurrence in human experience.

Because of its central position in LDS theology, the historical validity of this account has been a point of debate for over a century and a half. Believers have affirmed its truth while critics have explained its fabrication. Lost in much of this debate has been attention to how the account both conforms to and varies from the established religious discursive traditions of its time. Clearly, Joseph Smith's account claimed personal

religious experience of unparalleled magnitude. Nevertheless, in its form, the account

conformed closely with literary patterns already present in the surrounding culture.

In its structure, Joseph Smith's First Vision account represents a typical

conversion narrative. Such narratives, which were very popular in early nineteenth-

century religious literature, followed a predictable sequence: they related stories of

individual progress from emotional crisis to assurance about one's personal spiritual

state (Watkins 9, 37). Often, these accounts began by chronicling experiences from early

youth and involved formative experiences with sacred text (53, 57-58). Many writers

described encounters with fierce temptations before they achieved a sense of God's

favor (42). Many others described intermediate episodes of falling away followed by

repentance (Lambert 91).

Considering just one account, Jonathan Edward's Personal Narrative—perhaps

the most famous spiritual autobiography in American literature—provides clear

demonstration of how closely Joseph Smith's narrative corresponds with the established

genre. In his account, Edwards tells of how he would "retire" to "secret places of my

own in the woods" to seek religious experience (211). He had "many uneasy thoughts

about the state of [his] soul" and eventually "was brought to…apply…to

seek…salvation" (212).

Edwards' first experience with "anything of that sort of inward, sweet delight in

God and divine things" came as a result of reading the New Testament, specifically 1

Timothy 1:17. He recounts the experience thus:

As I read the words, there came into my soul, and was as it were diffused

throughout, a sense of the glory of the Divine Being; a new sense, quite different

from anything I ever experienced before. Never any words of Scripture seemed

to me as these words did….I kept saying, and as it were singing over these

words of Scripture to myself; and went to prayer, to pray to God that I might

enjoy him; and prayed in a manner quite different from what I was used to do

(213).

Certainly these words, penned in the mid-1700's, are not much different from those

which Joseph Smith wrote in 1838: "Never did any passage of scripture come with more

power to the heart of man that this did at this time to mine. It seemed to enter with great

force into every feeling of my heart. I reflected on it again and again….I at length came

to the determination to 'ask of God'" (JS-H 1:12-13).

As Edwards continues his narrative, he tells his father about the experience (213-

214), suffers from being "greatly diverted…with some temporal concerns" (216), and has

an encounter with God's glory as, in the woods, he takes a "walk for divine

contemplation and prayer" (218)—all experiences which have echoes in Joseph Smith's

account. While Jonathan Edwards' account is longer and more rhapsodic than Joseph

Smith's, they have noticeable similarities in both content and form. Even the language is

strikingly similar at times. Joseph Smith may or may not have been familiar with

Edward's account, but his own account clearly has significant correspondence with it.

Such correspondence suggests an important question concerning the origins of

LDS discursive modes. It raises the issue of whether Latter-day Saint conventions of

personal expression are merely undifferentiated continuations of previously established

traditions. At first, when considering similarities of the type evident between Jonathan

Edward's narrative and Joseph Smith's, it may certainly seem so. However, responsible

scholarship should recognize that the discourse modes of a group almost always involve

multiple influences as well as an important element of continuing creativity. In the case

of the LDS tradition of personal expression, certain cultural attitudes cannot be

explained by merely reducing the LDS tradition to any of its constituent influences.

Actually, Latter-day Saints, while deriving influence from many points, have fashioned

a tradition of using personal expression in their religious discourse which deserves

independent consideration.

Of course, in their utilization of personal discourse, Latter-day Saints are not

unique. The first Latter-day Saints shared a number of attributes with many others in the

culture which surrounded them. An emphasis on personal expression was increasing

prevalent throughout nineteenth-century Western expression and particularly common

in America. Scholars have often emphasized the broad-based nature of this trend in

order to highlight general patterns. Such generalization underlies Harold Bloom's

treatment of the LDS religion in his 1992 book The American Religion: The Emergence of

a Post-Christian Nation. In this work, Bloom argues that a reliance on personal direction

is the fundamental feature of American religion. He considers Mormonism as one

especially representative case, suggesting that the LDS religion actually represents the

fruition of religious impulses shared by both the general American public and many

specific American thinkers. In fact, Bloom renders Ralph Waldo Emerson and Joseph

Smith as the dual prophets of a modern American Gnosticism.

In his argument, Bloom is clearly aiming for generalization. Certainly, such

simplification has its use; however, it is necessarily reductive when considering the

particularities of individual movements. Bloom's interpretation of LDS values is

noticeably one-dimensional. As John Charles Duffy notes in his critique of the work,

Bloom's analysis of Mormonism overlooks some of its core customs (248). Bloom's

weakness is that he treats any reference to personal experience as an undifferentiated

case in the expression of a definable national character. Such sweeping statements

cannot fully illuminate the complexity of the LDS position. In reality, no single influence

can fully explain the development of the LDS tradition of personal discourse.

Yet, while generalization cannot fully explain the origin of LDS traditions, the

general development of Western cultural and intellectual history is still informative

when considering the LDS tradition of personal expression. For instance, the most

sweeping literary and artistic force at the turn of the nineteenth century was

Romanticism, a movement which stressed individual freedom and personal validation

and which idealized the experiences of common people. The movement promoted an

increased level of personally-oriented literature. Romantic writers created new genres

such as the personal essay and the travelogue. These genres functioned "to join the

personal and political, the social and the domestic" ("The Romantics" 4). Such types of

expression unquestionably had a degree of influence on LDS culture.

Another nineteenth-century movement that encouraged a personal discourse style was Transcendentalism. This American philosophy was created by New England intellectuals who held that "human beings find truth within themselves" and that "orthodox Christianity interfered with the personal relationship between an individual and God" ("Transcendentalism" 371). This movement shared important elements with Latter-day Saint ideas. Many a student of American literature has noted, for example, the similarities between LDS doctrines about the need for a gospel restoration and Ralph Waldo Emerson's lament, given in his notorious address at Harvard's Divinity School, that "men have come to speak of…revelation as somewhat long ago given and done" (485). In similar sympathy with LDS themes was Emerson's privileging of spiritual evidence. Emerson said, "The definition of *spiritual* should be, *that which is its own evidence*" ("Experience" 527). He taught that spiritual revelation could only be experienced personally and that "A man should learn to detect and watch that gleam of light which flashes across his mind from within" ("Self-Reliance" 492). These ideas correspond closely to LDS views about the primacy of spiritual experience and the interior location of religious revelation.

Significantly, these commonalities between Transcendentalism and Mormonism had important grounding in the development of American democracy. In early nineteenth-century America, new democratic ideals were still reverberating through every aspect of American society. Just a year after the founding of the LDS Church, the Frenchman Alexis de Tocqueville toured the United States. He later published his observations in Democracy in America, a historical classic that scholars still appreciate

for its insight and "clairvoyance" (Kaplan ix). In the introduction to his work,

Tocqueville wrote that "the general equality…among the [American] people" had a

"prodigious influence…on the whole course of society" (3). Tocqueville believed that

this influence had "created in [American] minds many feelings and opinions which were

unknown in the old aristocratic societies of Europe" (291).

According to Tocqueville, at the core of the new American philosophy was the

fact that "in most of the operations of the mind each American [appealed] only to the

individual effort of his own understanding" (295). The combination of democratic

practices, a lack of strong governmental constraints, and the lingering Common Sense

philosophies of the Enlightenment joined to encourage nineteenth-century Americans to

value individual epistemological authentication. Early Latter-day Saints were part of

this culture, and as has been shown by Steven Harper, they placed heavy stock in

personal experiential verification.

Latter-day Saints were not alone in extending this reliance on personal

verification to religious experience. Nathan Hatch, in his acclaimed book <u>The

Democratization of American Christianity</u>, has described how American political

independence resulted in a profound religious upheaval which relocated the authority

of American Christianity. He convincingly argues that the placement of American

churches within a democratic structure created a religious "marketplace" where

theologians vied for public acceptance (162). Hatch explains that suddenly prospective

churchgoers faced the necessity of choosing between competing religious options. They

responded by seeking denominations that could speak most convincingly to their

individual perceptions of reality and their personal desires for spirituality. In the process, they fashioned an epistemology in which "all rested their claims to authority on the validity of lay proclamations" (134).

Socially, Hatch asserts, the effects of this religious 'democratization' were tremendous. Without the institutional control provided by government support, churches found themselves limited in their quest to promote orthodox behavior. Religious leaders faced the risk of losing their congregations if they could not elicit their congregants' approval (55). Moreover, the traditional monopoly of America's founding churches was reduced by the tremendous physical expansion of the country. As America's population burgeoned and pressed westward during the early decades of the nineteenth century, established churches along the East Coast catered to a narrowing portion of the population.

These new circumstances resulted, Hatch argues, in a sea change in American Christian oratory. Rural and backwoods communities became the province of itinerant preachers who approached religion from the mindset of recruiters. As these circuit riders sought to reach the American public, they "refashioned the sermon as a popular medium," creating a type of "colloquial sermon" that "employed daring storytelling, no-holds-barred appeals, overt humor, strident attack, graphic application, and intimate personal experience" (57).

Hatch's description of this general change in sermon style is supported by the work of others. David Reynolds in his article "From Doctrine to Narrative: The Rise of Pulpit Storytelling in America" outlines an early nineteenth-century modification in

sermon structure that broke with "the conventional Ramist scheme of text, exposition, and proof" (481). In its place, Reynolds says, there arose a narrative form which was employed by "preachers who preferred personal appeal and practical example to theological exposition" (485).

Such sermonic novelties, Reynolds notes, did not meet universal favor. They were disparaged by many conservatives, and were never adopted by certain groups. Even among more liberal ministers, the transformation in sermon style was gradual rather than instantaneous. Still, "by 1826, Timothy Flint could generalize that on the American frontier 'a revolution' had 'taken place in the tastes of the people, in respect to the requisites of public eloquence'" (qtd. in 487). Eventually, the effects of these changes crept into even the great Eastern pulpits, where such renowned preachers as Charles Grandison Finney and Lyman Beecher adopted milder versions of the frontier's "relaxed narrative style" (488).

In many ways, the discourse of early Mormonism fits comfortably into Hatch's storyline. The LDS Church originated in the backcountry and its membership moved west as the country did. As others have recognized, LDS preachers were "for the most part…untrained and inexperienced," and they produced sermons that, while not deliberately crass, were often unsophisticated and roughhewn (Bitton 7). Considering these parallels to the general American experience, it may seem sufficient to portray any personal orientation in early LDS sermons as simply a reflection of the style of the time. Certainly, it would seem quite natural for LDS converts to bring with them the discursive genres and attitudes of the surrounding culture.

However, the general contours of American culture alone cannot fully explain the development of LDS traditions. There is no doubt, of course, that LDS traditions were impacted by American democratization. In many ways, it was this movement that allowed the LDS Church to exist at all. Still, when considered alone, the democratic impulses of Jacksonian American are not enough to explain the formation and development of the Latter-day Saint tradition of personal expression.

For one thing, LDS ideas about democracy were not as egalitarian as might be assumed. Marvin S. Hill has argued, in an article entitled "Counter-revolution: The Mormon Reaction to the Coming of American Democracy," that nineteenth-century Latter-day Saints actually had a "negative reaction to the democratizing influences in the nation" (29). In support of his position, Hill quotes Joseph Smith's 1838 statement that "he believed in aristarchy, government by the best people" (qtd. in 24) and John Taylor's 1861 declaration, "I do not believe that the voice of the people is the voice of God" (qtd. in 31).

Whether such attitudes, expressed here by leaders of the Church, were shared by the general body of early Latter-day Saints is debatable. However, it is certain that during the first decades of their history, Latter-day Saints seemed to have very little value for the individualism that Tocqueville found to be so closely related to democracy (395). Early Latter-day Saints evinced a strong sense of community and even tried several abortive attempts at communalism. In arguing that Latter-day Saints acted in resistance to democratic chaos, Hill points to this strong group impulse. Certainly, however it might be interpreted, the LDS value for communal organization separated

the Latter-day Saint movement from other movements in the surrounding culture in important ways.

For example, Romanticism, in privileging individuality, rebelled against convention and strained against external authority, even the authority of God. Nineteenth-century Latter-day Saints, with their adoption of a highly organized ecclesiastical system, would have found little exemplary, for instance, in the Romantic Byronic hero. Thus, LDS culture, while sharing certain features with Romanticism, cannot be explained by the general movement alone. In many ways, Latter-day Saints acted independently of the Romantic movement.

Likewise, Transcendentalism differed from Mormonism in important ways. Transcendentalists also emphasized individual independence and resisted social organization. Emerson, for example, strove to think independently of societal influences, saying, "Society everywhere is in conspiracy against the manhood of every one of its members" ("Self-Reliance" 494). He resisted conventional moral strictures, writing that "Good and bad are but names readily transferable to that or this; the only right is what is after my constitution, the only wrong what is against it" ("Self-Reliance" 494). Early Latter-day Saints would not have accepted the radical individuality of such statements. Because of such differences, neither Emerson nor other Transcendentalist thinkers should really be considered as more than analogs to the early Latter-day Saints. [1]

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[1] In his article "'A Religion by Revelation': Emerson as Radical Restorationist," John Charles Duffy has convincingly shown that Joseph Smith and Ralph Waldo Emerson responded to their common historical circumstances in relatively parallel ways. However, while they may have been similar in their approaches, Duffy shows that these approaches were not derivative of, or even influenced by each other.

In reality then, one cannot consider the meaning of personal expression within certain literary traditions and then assume that its motivations in these traditions can also explain the use of personal discourse in early LDS culture. It is not safe to suppose that when early Latter-day Saints used a personal mode of speaking, it meant the same thing for them that it did for Wordsworth and Coleridge or for Emerson and Thoreau. Of course, typical nineteenth-century Latter-day Saints did not have much meaningful interaction with such literary luminaries anyway. It seems more reasonable to assume a greater degree of influence on LDS expression stemming from popular religious culture.

Yet, even here, there are important reasons to consider the Latter-day Saint movement independently. While the personally-oriented religious speech of the American frontier was an important influence in the lives of many LDS converts, the general democratization of Christianity described by Nathan Hatch does not fully illuminate the specific motivations of the LDS tradition of personal expression. Of course, Hatch's work is not focused specifically on LDS speaking anyway. Instead, he is interested in tracing the rise and development of a major shift within American Christianity. Hatch uses early Mormonism as just one representative example of his larger thesis concerning a popular "revolt against Calvinism" (153). Thus, when Hatch describes the early LDS use of a "vernacular style" of preaching, he uses it simply as a representative case of a larger societal movement which privileged lay proclamations.

In its broad outlines, Hatch's analysis is quite convincing. However, it falters at times when he applies the overall argument to individual traditions. Specifically, his interpretation of the LDS movement sometimes misrepresents its position. By using

Mormonism as a representative example of a larger shift, Hatch portrays it as a

movement of "profound social protest" (116). He asserts that early Latter-day Saints

made the "unmistakable claim that common people have the right to shape their own

faith, and to take charge of their own religious destiny" (121). In this light, he depicts

Church founder Joseph Smith as a populist champion who rejected the conventions of

orthodoxy and distrusted the guide of reason (120). This portrayal is convenient in

placing early Mormonism within a larger evangelical movement that turned the search

of salvation inward in defiance of institutional antecedents (114). However, at times, the

portrayal seems to stretch reality to fit the argument.

In reality, the adoption of a vernacular preaching style by early Latter-day Saints

did not mean that they considered themselves part of a larger evangelical movement. In

fact, a number of historians have argued that while the LDS Church emerged against the

backdrop of evangelicalism, it was decidedly non-evangelical. In his 1980 article,

"Evangelical America and Early Mormonism," Gordon Wood explained that the LDS

Church "defied…both the orthodox culture and the evangelical counter-culture" (379).

Apparently, the broader evangelical movement influenced LDS customs at least as much

by being a force to react against as by being a model.

One point of differentiation between the early Latter-day Saints and the general

evangelical movement can be seen in speaking styles. Like the early Latter-day Saints,

evangelicals did emphasize the need for a personal conversion experience; however,

they also promoted a level of emotionalism and self-direction that early Latter-day

Saints found uncomfortable. Stephen C. Harper, in his 2000 article "Infallible Proofs,

Both Human and Divine: The Persuasiveness of Mormonism for Early Converts,"

demonstrates that a large percentage of early Latter-day Saints were actually attracted to

the LDS Church because of its perceived rationalism.

To a certain extent, Hatch does recognize this and while locating Mormonism's

origins within the tumult of revivalism, he treats it in his general argument as a religion

with a "passion for new order" (65). However, he does not extend this nuanced

approach to his consideration of LDS oratory; instead, he treats Latter-day Saint sermons

rather by default as reflections of the tendencies of the day.

Other scholars have improved this treatment somewhat. Speaking specifically of

sermon styles, Barbara Higdon points out that Latter-day Saints were atypical of upstart

Christian denominations because they "minimized the emotional elements of their

material" (196). Likewise, David Reynolds qualifies his examination of nineteenth-

century sermon evolution by noting, "Mormonism [does] not fit comfortably into the

doctrine-to-narrative pattern and, indeed, resist[s] holistic comparisons of any sort"

(492). In fact, Reynolds appears to assert that early Latter-day Saint speakers used

scriptural exegesis exclusively—an idea that collapses before the evidence of Higdon

and Bitton. Reynolds' mistake derives from his attempt to consider LDS sermons solely

in relation to a larger tradition. In this attempt, Reynolds, like Hatch, misses specific

nuance. In both cases, the generalizations are not so much wrong, as incomplete.

To his credit, Hatch does recognize that his attempt to generalize about

American Christianity could result in missing such nuance, saying, "In addressing

themes common to this era, I risk slighting the particularities of individual religious

traditions" (12). The limitation of such broad analysis is that it does little to explain how multiple, self-consciously distinct movements could arise out of the same milieu. Hatch speaks of authority being given to ministers who "best resonated with the interests of the common people" (134). However, the 'common people' cannot just be treated as a collective mass who all responded to the same appeals. During the early nineteenth century, the Mormon, Methodist, Baptist, Shaker, and Millerite movements, along with many others, all developed side-by-side. Explanation is needed for how these groups understood themselves as distinct and for why people were individually attracted to various traditions.

Some progress toward this explanation can be made by recognizing the common heritage shared by these disparate groups. Nearly all nineteenth-century movements within American Christianity shared common religious antecedents. In many ways, their common ancestry can account for a good deal of the similarities found among the movements. In fact, considering this commonality, the differences between movements may actually be more telling than their similarities. In any case, a good deal of insight into LDS discourse modes can be gained by identifying the attitudes and practices which came to early Latter-day Saints as part of their common cultural heritage.

For centuries, the evidence of personal experience had been granted religious importance. Christianity has a long history of attention to individual experience. Saint Augustine established the foundations for the "modern form" of expressing personal religious experience with his autobiographical Confessions (Mandelker 16). However, Protestantism especially gave license to these impulses. Martin Luther began the

Protestant Reformation with his assertion that "The pope is not judge of matters pertaining to God's word and faith….The Christian man must examine and judge for himself" (qtd. in White 39). This pronouncement unleashed powerful centrifugal forces. As reformers across Europe worked out its implications, they shook the foundations of institutional religion.

One of the many manifestations of Protestantism's personal focus was the development of established literary genres for describing personal religious experience. Many of the genres which eventually proved meaningful within the Latter-day Saint tradition were connected to Puritanism, an intense reform movement which sprang up in England during the sixteenth century. Puritanism, which represented one of the more radical offshoots of Protestantism, originated as a dissident movement emphasizing the primacy of individual experience and the importance of local authority. In his book The Puritan Experience, Owen Watkins explains:

> The Puritan intellectuals who formed their spiritual brotherhood were at once more sensitive to the Reformation ideals and more eloquent in giving expression to them than most of their contemporaries were. One they emphasized most forcefully was that individual men and women could achieve a personal relationship with God, and that this relationship could permeate all daily life. (15)

Because of these ideas, "Puritan pastors…laboured incessantly…to help people of all ages and conditions…work out the application of the gospel to every part of their lives" (Watkins 2).

This focus was seen to a certain extent in Puritan oratory, particularly in the final, or 'Application,' section of sermons. However, it was especially evident in the development of a number of personally-oriented religious literary genres, such as confessional diaries, written conversion narratives, and spiritual autobiographies (Watkins 30). For several hundred years, these personal religious forms constituted the most popular sort of reading in both England and America (Caldwell 2). Once developed, these genres proved to have a life of their own. They eventually outlived the institutional aspects of Puritanism. Centuries after their development, they were inherited by countless spiritually-earnest individuals, including many Latter-day Saints.

Originally, these religious genres grew out of the Puritan concern with personal salvation. The Puritans' Calvinist theology taught them that each individual was predestined to either salvation or damnation. This doctrine naturally encouraged introspection. Individual Puritans, with an interest in whether they were among the elect, were told that "the clue to their eternal destination lay in the further recesses of their hearts" (Shea 88). In response, they anxiously turned inward, eager to ascertain their state.

In principle, Calvinists believed that certainty about an individual's spiritual state was unattainable; however, they also believed God to be orderly and hoped that by sufficient study they might be able to "discover the pattern by which God drew elected persons close to him" (White 53). This aspect of theology became a specialty of Puritan intellectuals. Over time, English theologians developed a complex description of the 'conversion' process, breaking it "into a succession of recognizable stages" (Morgan 68).

These efforts culminated in the work of William Perkins, who described a detailed ten-

stage progression which twentieth-century scholars have termed the Puritan

"morphology of conversion" (66).

Such an emphasis on chronology had important literary ramifications. Narrative,

because of its sequential form, was accepted as the most suitable way to adequately

examine religious experience (Watkins 239). Even a relatively liberal English Puritan like

John Bunyan embraced the blueprint of conversion. In his autobiography, <u>Grace</u>

<u>Abounding</u>, Bunyan clearly traces his progression through the stages of conversion. In a

similar manner, countless diarists and autobiographers fretting over the state of their

souls subjected their experiences to close examination, hoping to find desired patterns in

their lives. In time, the analysis and expression of personal experience became such an

important part of Puritan custom that handbooks showing "how to relate…inner

experience to some ascertainable outer experience" proliferated, with "almost every

Puritan preacher of note" creating one (Watkins 10-11).

In these personal literary genres, the Puritans left an important inheritance to

subsequent generations. While institutional Puritanism disappeared, the Puritan literary

genres persisted, although often in modified forms. Religiously devout individuals

continued to make use of the conventions of Puritan spiritual autobiography, even

though they no longer employed this genre to judge the probability of election. The

literary conventions of Puritanism also disseminated into the larger culture, where they

evolved into secular versions of personal expression. According to Emory Elliott, New

England Puritanism is a "pervasive presence in American literature and culture,"

containing "the seeds of political and social ideals, structures of thought and language, and literary themes which inspired both the content and forms" of later styles (Introduction xii-xiii). This assessment is echoed by Sacvan Bercovitch who points to Puritanism as an important precursor to American Transcendentalism and Romanticism, a precursor which these movements both drew upon and reacted against. Thus, even when Puritanism faded as a distinct religious movement, its literary influence persisted.

By the time the LDS Church was founded, spiritual autobiographies, religiously-oriented diaries, and other literary genres for conveying personal experience were commonplace throughout American culture. Many early Latter-day Saints kept accounts that took part in these traditions. Two especially well-known examples are Parley P. Pratt's autobiography and Wilford Woodruff's journal. However, despite their unusual acclaim, these examples are not unique. Hundreds of such early LDS accounts can be found in the BYU library, the LDS Church Archives, and in the possession of private individuals. Significantly, these accounts are most prevalent in connection with events—such as missions—which their LDS writers perceived to be religiously meaningful.

In their inheritance of these originally Puritan forms of expression, early Latter-day Saints were not unique. These genres were not recognizable as the signature of any particular religious group. The salient cultural question regarding personal religious expression in nineteenth-century America was not so much whether it was used as how it was approached and understood.

In many cases, the way in which a religious group handled personal expression reflected deeper philosophies and commitments. At the time that the LDS Church was established, various American sects were engaged in a sometimes volatile struggle over the true meaning of Christianity. For many earnest individuals, one's own affiliation within this religious battleground represented one of the most important aspects of personal identity. Naturally enough, such affiliations were continually communicated through everything from clothing styles to recreational activities. And not surprisingly, one of the most important ways to differentiate various groups was through their approach to religious discourse.

One of the most common weapons in the religious battles of the nineteenth century was the religiously-inflected personal mode of expression which seventeenth-century Puritans had unleashed. The use of this mode in religious struggle was not new. Even in its original manifestations, Puritanism had never been a monolithic institution; it emerged from struggle and was constantly torn with tensions. These tensions proved to be long-lived, simmering in American society for hundreds of years. Thus, later generations of Americans inherited not only Puritan literary genres, but also the struggles which were connected to these genres.

One of the main controversies within the original Puritan movement concerned the location of religious authority. One group of Puritans known as Separatists felt that since the Anglican Church was corrupt, it was no real church. They split with it and formed separate 'gathered churches' that functioned on the principle of "voluntary association" (Morgan 25). Within these churches, an elevated emphasis was given to

personal authority. In their practices, Separatists carried out the implications of their beliefs about the primacy of personal authority. They encouraged lay involvement in religion, they "stressed spontaneity," and in their meetings, they "set aside time for…extempore sermons or speeches by members of the congregation," a practice they called "prophecying" (27).

Such concrete enactment of doctrinal philosophy was not unusual. In fact, various factions of Puritanism often employed the same discursive genres to portray very different ideas. For example, both mainstream Puritans and the more radical Quakers used autobiographical literary forms to relate their conversion experiences. To an undiscriminating modern reader, such accounts would seem quite similar. However, Puritans and Quakers had very different ideas about the importance of scripture, the timeframe of conversion, and the extent of individual authority. These differences were reflected in their narratives. For example, Puritans believed the truly elect were never certain of their salvation; accordingly, their narratives record inward struggles after the experience of saving grace. Quakers, on the other hand, emphasized the perfection of a life guided by the 'inner light.' Thus, their accounts do not record any spiritual progress subsequent to conversion (Watkins 184-186).

These examples demonstrate that, for Puritans in the seventeenth century, the handling of personal discourse modes was symbolic of deeper allegiances. Owen Watkins explains:

> Any individual seeking to articulate and unify his experience was…involved in a number of choices, or (since these might not all be consciously made) in a

> number of possible relationships to the theological and social framework of his
>
> environment….Writers with different loyalties shaped their experience, found
>
> their identity in relation to the commitments they had, and used their findings as
>
> evidence for the truth of their position. (82)

In this manner, as writers and speakers articulated their faith by relating accounts of

personal religious experience, they also, in a highly nuanced manner, affirmed their

commitments.

An extended example of the philosophical tensions surrounding personal

experience accounts can be seen in the history of the non-Separating Puritans who

established a theocratic society at New England's Massachusetts Bay. Here the Pilgrims

initiated American religion's concern with personal discourse modes. In the New World,

where they were free to organize themselves in any way they chose, these colonists

faced practical questions about religious polity that they had not fully considered while

still in England (Morgan 82). One of the most significant centered on the matter of

church membership. Indiscriminate membership and loose discipline had been faults for

which the Puritans had severely criticized the Church of England. In their new society,

they felt a responsibility to strive for ecclesiastical purity.

In his classic history, <u>Visible Saints: The History of a Puritan Idea</u>, Edmund S.

Morgan tells the story of what resulted. Within ten years, "New Englanders had evolved

practices" designed to preserve church sanctity. Their church membership admittance

system, known as the 'New England Way,' was succinctly described by John Cotton in

1669: "The practice was for men orally to make confession of faith *and a declaration of*

their experiences of a worke of grace in the presence of the whole congregation, having bin

examined and heard before the elders in private and then stood propounded in publick

for 2 or 3 weeks ordinarily" (qtd. in Morgan 61-62). In other words, prospective church

members were required to present "a testimony of personal religious experience that

had to be spoken or read…as evidence of the applicant's visible sainthood" (Caldwell 1).

The testimony was then scrutinized for doctrinal legitimacy and personal sincerity. If it

was deemed acceptable to the church, its speaker entered into communion.

Clearly, this procedure represented a new approach to examining personal

experience. While before such 'testimonies' had functioned as mechanisms of self-

analysis and instruments of edification, they were now conscripted as measures of merit

and bound to an institutional system of standards. This new practice soon met with

controversy back in England where moderates charged that oral examinations made

church membership a function of verbal aptitude. John Cotton responded by

emphasizing the need for ecclesiastical sanctity (Caldwell 102).

The New England Way represented a new development in the ongoing tension

within Puritanism between individual spiritual impulses and communal needs for

order. In extrapolation, the Puritan emphasis on personal religious experience held the

seeds of radical social policy. If each individual was a judge of truth, then what need

was there for external authorities? And, if individual experience was the supreme

authority, how could a society regulate individuals who improperly claimed divine

inspiration? When carried to extremes, the principles at the core of Puritanism seemed to

threaten the disintegration of society (Elliott, <u>Power</u> 40).

Mainstream Puritans, of course, did not emphasize the radical implications of

these ideas. For them, personal testimonies functioned as spiritual evidence but not as

sources of doctrine. However, not everyone in the broader Puritan movement

recognized the restraining force of recognized doctrine. Perhaps New Englanders were

especially conscious of such potentialities because of their history. Almost immediately

upon their arrival in the New World, Puritan leaders faced the insurrection of a

movement which they labeled 'antinomian.' The followers of Anne Hutchinson took the

implications of Puritan ideas and extended them to their limits, claiming that because

they were "in direct communication with the Almighty," they could "tell with absolute

certainty whether a man had saving grace or not" (Morgan 109). This assertion of

individual powers of spiritual verification went too far for Massachusetts' leaders, who

after months of debate, expelled Hutchinson and her followers.

Yet, despite their best efforts at control, Puritan authorities could not contain the

centrifugal implications of their commitment to personal experience. Radicals cast out

from Massachusetts simply moved along the coastline, establishing their own colonies in

Rhode Island and Connecticut. In Massachusetts itself, people discontent with the

admission requirements of established churches responded by forming their own

congregations (Watkins 53-54, 148). Even in England, by mid-century "many of the

worst fears of the moderates were coming true":

> Ranters, Antinomians, Quakers and sectaries of all sorts seemed to be putting
>
> man in the room of God and doing so by appealing to dreams, visions, voices,
>
> and personal revelations. 'Extraordinary' experience began to be seen as an

insidious means to uphold the authority of self over both civil and ecclesiastical

restraints, and even over the objective revelation of the Bible. (Caldwell 16-17)

Slowly but relentlessly, the Puritans' theocracy was undercut by the movement's own

impulses which privileged the importance of personal spiritual guidance. Over time, the

movement in America became completely fractured. As religious options multiplied and

institutional unity waned, the ecclesiastical structure of the Puritan establishment

disappeared. Eventually, Americans began to think of Puritanism as a movement of the

past.

However, the rise and fall of institutional Puritanism does not adequately

represent the deeper advance of Puritan ideas. What survived of Puritanism—its focus

on personally experiencing salvation, its faith that the events of daily life contained

religious significance, and its urge to edify others through the expression of religious

experience—were all at the heart of the original movement. Indeed, the conflicts that

had arisen within Puritanism—between the desires for internal assurance and external

validation; between the forces of individuality and conformity; between the doctrine of

grace and the exercise of agency—all reflected the movement's uncompromising

adherence to the benchmark of personal experience.

In the decades following the disintegration of institutional Puritanism, these

competing ideas relocated in other religious movements, becoming cloaked with new

names but not disappearing. The evangelicals of the nineteenth-century inherited Anne

Hutchinson's "slant towards individualism" and emphasis on extraordinary experience

(Richardson 51). Meanwhile, the primitive gospel movements preserved John Cotton's

emphasis on purity. Presbyterians retained an emphasis on institutional authority while Unitarians emphasized individual agency. Puritan struggles resurfaced with particular force during the First Great Awakening of the 1730s and 1740s and the Second Great Awakening of the 1820s and 1830s. During these periods, many Americans engaged anew in the old Puritan battles, affirming their commitments to particular elements of the common tradition as they positioned themselves within the religious spectrum.

The evolving influence of various aspects of the Puritan legacy is well demonstrated by the case of Jonathan Edwards. Preaching over a half-century after John Cotton, Edwards called for a return to the old Puritan ideal of ecclesiastical purity and again linked this ideal to experiential religion. He resurrected the practice of using tests of experience for church admission, updated it for the eighteenth-century, and thereby "launched a new cycle" of emphasis on visible sainthood (Morgan 152).

However, because Edwards adapted the ideas of earlier Puritanism to his own age by including, among other things, contemporary "insights…from Locke and Newton," there are noticeable differences between his Puritanism and that of his predecessors (White 73). Edwards rejected the traditional morphology of conversion, advising that its insistence on "a certain order" was not a justifiable determinant of valid religious experience (qtd. in Caldwell 163). His movement also lacked the sense of congregational unity so important to early Puritans. Daniel Shea has described how "the communal sense of earlier autobiographies" was missing from the "apparent solitariness" of Edward's own writings (182). Thus, while Edwards inherited the literary genres of early Puritanism, he ignored an important aspect of their original meaning.

Jonathan Edwards is a good example of how many eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Americans inherited strands of Puritanism's personalism and fashioned them into new movements that neither fully captured nor fully separated from these movements' origins. Often, when viewed from afar, these strands may appear quite similar. However, it is always risky to study how people act in one movement and assume that the same behavior in a different group can be explained by the same motivations. This danger has been acknowledged in some existing scholarship on nineteenth-century sermon changes. David Reynolds shows that both doctrinally-conservative evangelicals and doctrinally-liberal Unitarians moved towards narrative sermon styles, but for very different reasons (491).

Thus, while there may well be shared impetus for the practices of various religious groups, the very fact that these groups view themselves as distinct suggests that they have differences that are important, if only in the perception of the groups themselves. This recognition should be important in interpreting the LDS tradition of personal expression.

The Latter-day Saint movement accepted particular strands of a common religious heritage while discarding others. Clearly, Latter-day Saints did not inherit the Calvinism of early Puritans. The LDS approach to personal religious experience involves a much greater degree of concern with the necessity of 'working out' one's own salvation. This position is reflected in LDS discourse. When relating individual stories, Latter-day Saints provide models rather than self-justification. More often than scrutinizing their lives to see if they conform to a pattern, Latter-day Saints examine

their experiences to see what patterns they hold. Their impetus for discourse stems less often from a desire to determine their own status than from a wish to 'provide a good example' for how others might live.

On the other hand, many Puritan practices have been incorporated into the LDS tradition. In the form of testimony meetings, Latter-day Saints have inherited the Separatist practice of 'prophesying' by members of the congregation. In LDS culture, personal testimonies are seen as important measures of personal religious standing. Also, during the nineteenth century, the Latter-day Saint tradition was particularly emphatic on the superior value of extemporaneous speaking. However, while all LDS Church members are instructed to develop a testimony and encouraged to share it, they are almost never *required* to produce a public relation of it.

In short then, LDS personal discourse represents a nuanced response to tensions present within an existing religious culture. Certainly, early Latter-day Saints derived many of their personally-oriented discourse conventions from existing traditions. However, they handled these conventions in ways that affirmed their own beliefs and commitments. In this nuanced approach to personal discourse, Latter-day Saints were of course not unique. Still, rather than being considered merely as a manifestation of a larger American trend, the LDS tradition deserves its own consideration.

Such independent consideration is certainly justified by LDS history. In numerous ways, early Latter-day Saints acquired a set of influences independent from other religious movements in the surrounding American culture. They rapidly developed their own practices (e.g., gathering to a central location and the law of

consecration) and began to face their own challenges (e.g., persecution in Missouri and migration to the Great Basin). Moreover, the LDS Church, within its first few decades of existence, drew tens of thousands of converts from Great Britain and Scandinavia. Three-quarters of the British converts came from towns with populations of over 10,000 people (Taylor qtd. in Hill "Rise" 418). Certainly, LDS discourse should not be assumed to be derivative solely of general American frontier oratory. While this frontier oratory did influence many early Latter-day Saints, LDS culture was also characterized by a number of distinct features which shaped its discourse in independent ways.

In part because of these influences, the Latter-day Saint people did develop an independent discursive tradition. Certainly, this independent tradition shared many features with other traditions. However, Latter-day Saints themselves clearly believed that they were involved in a movement that was new, grand and unique. In the early years of the Church, writers such as Wilford Woodruff or Parley P. Pratt were no doubt aware of their literary progenitors in other traditions. They certainly understood that they were using literary forms which they had learned outside of the Church. However, they also understood themselves as being involved in something new and unparalleled: the Restoration of the Gospel. In their eyes, their writings had special significance because of their involvement within the LDS context. Over time, these writings, now incorporated into a new LDS tradition, have become dissociated from their origins. For readers today, these writings are most commonly considered as important foundation documents within an independent LDS tradition.

In the same manner, entire genres have come to be identified with LDS connections rather than with other antecedents. For example, today when Latter-day Saints speak about 'writing in our journals,' they think of the practice as a specifically LDS, rather than a general Protestant endeavor. Such identification has been fostered by the ongoing LDS encouragement of the use of this personal genre. For instance, many Latter-day Saints will recall the counsel of Church President Spencer W. Kimball who vigorously promoted the keeping of personal journals and gave the practice an aspect of religious importance, saying "Maybe the angels may quote from [your journal] for eternity" ("Angels" 5). Because President Kimball was the Church's prophetic leader, his promotion of journaling framed the practice as an LDS religious duty.

The same process of transformation manifested by this literary genre can also be seen in the history of the LDS adoption of oral genres. The most significant genre in LDS oratory is the personal testimony. This genre of course has roots in earlier forms. Barbara Higdon explains that Mormon speakers "adopted" the practice of "presenting a personal testimony as part of the sermon…a few months after the organization of the Church." However, they "had not invented" it (Higdon 175). In the immediately surrounding culture, there were parallels in both Methodism and Presbyterianism.

However, in Latter-day Saint hands, this custom gained new significance: the Saints "took the testimony and adapted it for their own use, making it a distinctive and effective part of their services" (Higdon 175). Over time, this custom has become a signature practice of LDS culture. Today, by institutional mandate, every congregation devotes an entire worship service to it once every month. This practice is for all intents

and purposes, an LDS practice. Aside from its mere existence, the genre has little

correspondence to its antecedent used by John Cotton's congregation. It has been

completely reconfigured with meanings useful and acceptable to the LDS community.

In a similar manner, Joseph Smith's First Vision account cannot be interpreted

just as a derivative expression of the traditional conversion narrative genre. Rather, this

account demonstrates how personal discourse can both draw upon current cultural

conventions and at the same time also communicate information that transforms these

conventions.

Certainly, Joseph Smith's 1838 First Vision account did have correspondence

with an established narrative genre. Considering the cultural background of Joseph

Smith, this correspondence should not be surprising. Such familiar patterns have

powerful influence. They affect not only the way people talk about experiences, but even

the ways experiences themselves transpire. By his own admission, Joseph Smith had

sought out an experience similar to those he heard about; he "wanted to get Religion too

[and] wanted to feel and shout like the Rest" (qtd. in Allen 8). A boy familiar with stories

in which people retire to secluded spots when they seek spiritual enlightenment will

likely find it most natural to pray in seclusion himself. Later, when he tells his own

story, it will reinforce a pattern already so well-established.

Moreover, as he tells his story, his natural impulse will be to relate it in a manner

closely corresponding to familiar patterns. In their article "Literary Form and Historical

Understanding: Joseph Smith's First Vision," Neal Lambert and Richard Cracroft

explain: "When Joseph Smith, Jr., began to shape his recollections of his momentous

vision into a narrative…it is natural that he would turn to a traditional form of spiritual autobiography familiar to those around him" (91). In fact, they demonstrate that Joseph Smith's earliest attempts to relate this experience were among his most conventional.

The First Vision experience was recounted by Joseph Smith on multiple occasions, and historians have well-documented the differences between various recorded versions of the First Vision story (Jessee, Allen). Lambert and Cracroft describe how in Joseph Smith's first attempt at recording the experience, he "attempted to couch his exalted experience in exalted prose, as his contemporaries were fond of doing" (94). The account, filled with stock phrases such as "The Lord heard my cry in the wilderness" and "I looked upon the sun the glorious luminary of the earth" (qtd. in Jessee 279-280), sounds linguistically quite comparable to other narratives of the time (Lambert 92-95). However, such linguistic mimicry does not necessarily invalidate the expressive genuineness of the account. Formulaic phrases can help make a transcendent experience communicable by giving it form. A sentence such as "They did not [adorn] their profession by a holy walk and Godly conversation agreeable to what I found contained in that sacred depository" may seem rather stilted to modern ears, but it likely reflects Joseph Smith's mental processes quite accurately—because of, rather than despite, its conventionality (qtd. in Jessee 279).

In any case, this early conventionality is less important in understanding Latter-day Saint culture than the ways in which, over time, Joseph Smith's account has developed. While the First Vision narrative may originally have drawn on earlier traditions, it has now become established as a paradigmatic model which "transcends

the particular experience of any one person" (Lambert 100). Today, speakers all over the world draw upon its forms as a pattern for recounting their own experiences in inquiring after truth.

Lambert and Cracroft assert that, even for Joseph Smith himself, the First Vision story underwent this sort of transformation. As evidence, they compare the differences in various versions of the First Vision account. One significant change which the story experienced between retellings was a subtle shift in genre which reflected a change in focus. Lambert and Cracroft explain,

> A close examination of these accounts reveals that…[Joseph Smith] moved from writing of his transcendent experience as a young man influenced by the Protestant tradition of spiritual autobiography to writing profoundly of the event as the leader, restorer and prophet of a unique religious movement destined for growth and greatness. (91)

They trace how between 1832 and 1838, Joseph Smith moved from writing an account which centered on a "concern for personal sin and expiation" to writing an account focused on where "all must turn in order to find salvation" (98-99). The implication here is that Joseph Smith became increasingly aware that the importance of his experience was not merely personal, but also communal and institutional (98).

This difference is important because it reflects the account's altered position within a new, independent Latter-day Saint tradition. Within this tradition, the First Vision account, because of its historical primacy, is frequently referenced and treated as paradigmatic; it has set a precedent for the LDS use of personal experience narratives.

Joseph Smith's story, along with many other stories told by early Latter-day Saints, has become a model in its own right.

One representative example of such modeling is found in Jeffrey R. Holland's 1999 address "Cast Not Away Therefore Your Confidence." Elder Holland declares in the very first lines of the speech,

> There is a lesson in the Prophet Joseph Smith's account of the First Vision that virtually everyone in this audience has had occasion to experience, or one day soon will. It is the plain and very sobering truth that before great moments, certainly before great spiritual moments, there can come adversity, opposition, and darkness.

By assuming that Joseph Smith's personal experience is a source of truth, Elder Holland teaches his audience how to interpret and deal with problems in their own lives. Such uses of the First Vision account to provide direction on how to interpret and respond to life's experiences is very commonplace today. For example, in the October 2003 General Conference, Elder Henry B. Eyring, Elder Boyd K. Packer, and Elder Robert D. Hales all referred to the First Vision story in a similar manner, saying, "The young Joseph Smith showed us how to pray" (Eyring, "Enduring" 90), "He did what every one of you can do" (Packer, "Candle" 25), and "Like Joseph, we must search the scriptures and pray" (Hales 29).

The existence of such an exemplary narrative has had experiential consequences for many individuals influenced by LDS religious discourse. In the words of David Knowlton, the First Vision account "teaches…how to 'do' testimony" (25). Without

question, such emulation is clearly sanctioned by LDS Church leaders. For example, in

an October 1999 General Conference address, President Thomas S. Monson of the

Church's First Presidency related an experience shared with him by letter. A young man

wrote of touring the Sacred Grove, kneeling in prayer, and receiving revelation that

Joseph Smith and Gordon B. Hinckley were true prophets, stating, "I had prayed before

about the same things, but never received such a powerful answer. There was no way

that I could deny that this Church is true or that President Hinckley is a prophet of God"

("Power" 50). Incidentally, even in this brief account, it is interesting to note the echoes

of Joseph Smith's words "I could not deny it, neither dared I do it" (JS-H 1:25).

President Monson gave his approbation to such imitation, first by relating it in

General Conference and then by reinforcing its repetition of the pattern set out in Joseph

Smith's account: "Like Joseph Smith, this young man had retired to a sacred grove and

prayed for answers to questions phrased by his inquiring mind. Once more a prayer was

answered and a confirmation of truth was gained" ("Power" 51). When treated in this

manner, Joseph Smith's First Vision account not only expresses a personal experience; it

is also supposed to be experienced personally. Latter-day Saints believe that individuals

can and should have personal experience with the account in order to validate it. Joseph

Smith's First Vision account is not only a foundational narrative; it is also an

epistemological and experiential model.

Through the revering and replication of this and other models, the LDS people

have developed their own independent tradition of personal expression. It does seem

clear that, originally, many LDS discursive customs were borrowed from other

traditions. However, this derivation does not mean that LDS discourse is solely derivative. Rather, the LDS discursive tradition should be understood as having evolved independently as members of the LDS Church facing specific circumstances drew on elements of their collective heritage and employed these elements in expressing their personal commitments.

Through the amalgamation of millions of such occurrences, the LDS people have developed a meaningful tradition of personal expression that signifies their own commitments and, as will be discussed in Chapter 3, even their most fundamental doctrines. Of course, this pattern of development is not particularly exceptional. Many religious groups have experienced the development of traditions through a similar pattern. However, it is clear that the LDS tradition of personal expression deserves consideration as an independent tradition.

Chapter 3: The LDS Personal Worldview

Just before noon on April 2, 2006, 95-year old Gordon B. Hinckley, the President

of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, stood before a congregation of some

23,000 people at the Church's Conference Center in Salt Lake City, Utah. The occasion

was the 176th annual General Conference of the Church. In addition to the thousands

assembled in the Conference Center, hundreds of thousands—likely millions—of

listeners throughout the world were tuned into the broadcast of his address. The vast

majority of these listeners regarded President Hinckley as a 'prophet, seer, and

revelator.' They were prepared to receive his words as the most significant religious

message in the world.

President Hinckley began by thanking his listeners for their prayers and support.

Then, almost immediately, he took up a personal theme, saying, "When a man reaches

my age, he pauses now and again to reflect on what has led him to his present status in

life" ("Seek" 81). For the next fifteen minutes, President Hinckley reflected on the events

of his life. He spoke of his 48 years of service as a General Authority of the Church. He

spoke of his 67 years of marriage. He spoke of his years of association with world and

Church leaders. He told of his experiences while visiting nations throughout the world.

As he spoke, President Hinckley referred to sources generally distinguished for

their private character: he read multiple entries from his personal journal; he quoted a

line from his personal patriarchal blessing. He spoke of personal relationships and

private reactions. As he concluded, President Hinckley acknowledged that such a

speech might seem to have somewhat of the character of an obituary and apologized for

speaking in such a "personal vein" (83). He then closed with 16 sentences of testimony

to the prophetic call of Joseph Smith, the truthfulness of the <u>Book of Mormon</u>, the

restoration of the priesthood, and the divinity of the LDS Church.

Such an address in a large religious setting is certainly not common. Even

President Hinckley acknowledged that it may have been somewhat "different from

any…previously heard in the general conferences of the Church" (81). However, Church

members did not receive it as startling. Despite President Hinckley's expressed concern

that it "might be regarded as…selfish," it was enthusiastically accepted and appreciated

(81). The religious significance of his experience was not questioned. The connection

between the incidents related and the testimony borne was recognized and remembered.

This reaction is not surprising when considered in light of the LDS tradition of

personally-oriented speech. In the twenty-eight other sermons given during the five

sessions of that same General Conference, twenty-three contained direct reference by the

speakers to specific experiences from their lives. Indeed, a number of these speakers

spoke of multiple experiences. And in each of the five remaining addresses, the speaker

referred to a 'personal witness' of various elements of the gospel.

Certainly, when considered statistically, personal expression appears to

constitute an important component of LDS religious discourse, if only because of its

prevalence. Still, the mere commonality of a discursive practice does not necessarily

indicate the presence of an institutional tradition. Nor does it automatically signal deep

cultural or religious significance. Rather, the cultural value of a custom comes from the

meanings, both conscious and reflexive, which speakers and audiences assign to it.

Yet even by this measure, personal expression does have great significance in LDS culture. Any possible scholarly oversight or popular unawareness of the custom does not mean that this mode of discourse has been institutionally disregarded. Rather, it has been specifically encouraged. On page 304 of the Church Handbook of Instructions, LDS ecclesiastical leaders are instructed to encourage Church members to "share insights, feelings, and experience" that will help them "see how gospel principles apply to daily life." Likewise, in Church-produced lessons manuals and gospel study guides, Latter-day Saints are encouraged to discuss personal experiences. (See for example, the Old Testament Gospel Doctrine Teacher's Manual, p. vi; Teachings of the Presidents of the Church: Wilford Woodruff, p. vi; and Teaching, No Greater Call: A Resource Guide for Gospel Teaching, pp. 23, 33, 37, 77, 99, 159, 180, 187, 212.) Even this small sampling of official encouragement suggests that, within LDS culture, the practice of speaking from personal experience does carry recognized significance.

This significance derives at least in part from a host of cultural and doctrinal associations that give personal expression particular religious significance for Latter-day Saints. When LDS audiences listen to personal religious expression, they respond within a specific tradition of group commitments and epistemologies that are deeply rooted in LDS history and theology. These ideas form a worldview which is fundamental to orthodox Mormonism. Thus, although personal expression can be highly individualistic, in LDS culture it is, in most religious uses, actually expressive of group commitments.

From the earliest days of the LDS movement, personal experience accounts have been foundational to the Latter-day Saint religion. Since even before the incorporation of

the Church, the movement's legitimacy has centered in certain personal experience narratives. Joseph Smith and many of his followers told stories of angelic visitations, healings, visions, and other supernatural events. These events were important in manifesting the restoration of Christ's gospel and identifying the LDS Church as the inheritor of primitive Christian authority. In the past and indeed still today, being a Latter-day Saint means that one accepts Joseph Smith's story of the events of the Restoration and believes him to be a prophet. Moreover, it is not only these events that are of religious import. The stories which recount them, the actual expressions of personal spiritual experience, have also become an important part of the LDS religion.

Such expressions are important because they authenticate the LDS claim of present divine involvement in the world. Such involvement is, for Latter-day Saints manifest through direct individual experience. Thus, the personal nature of Joseph Smith's account constitutes an important part of its religious significance. In an October 1964 General Conference address, Elder Marion G. Romney enunciated this idea: "What is new and distinctive…is the knowledge claimed by Joseph Smith for himself and for them for whom he spoke." Elder Romney quotes Joseph Smith's voice ("'We know,' said he, 'that there is a God in heaven,'") and then emphasizes that "in making this declaration the Prophet spoke from personal experience." Here Elder Romney stresses that it was important that Joseph Smith spoke personally. Joseph Smith's personal approach to religious subjects was important because it reflected personal experience with God's power in the contemporary world.

While Joseph Smith's story was central to the foundation of the church, its personal element was not unique. Rather, his story was bolstered by a network of supporting personal accounts. For example, when the Book of Mormon was published, it contained in its opening pages the 'testimonies' of 11 other men saying they had personally seen the plates from which it was translated. These legalistic witnesses are important in a tradition which emphasizes the Biblical idea that truth is verified "in the mouth of two or three witnesses" (see e.g., D&C 6:28). The personal experiences of these witnesses were not only expressed in print. Oliver Cowdery, when speaking in religious settings, routinely bore personal witness to the divine origin of the Book of Mormon, as did Hyrum and Samuel Smith (Higdon 176, 186; McLellin qtd. in Harper 109).

Other speakers also shared their own confirmatory experiences. Indeed, the early days of the Restoration were marked by such a flood of these stories that as Barbara Higdon describes in "The Role of Preaching in the Early Latter-day Saint Church, 1830-1846," "almost every" early Mormon speaker "professed to have participated in some unusual occurrences" (177). Early LDS speakers referred to these events to support their claims that God's authority had been restored to the earth. For example, a Brother Granger when speaking in a missionary role "gave a very interesting account of his life" which included details concerning "the administration of angels, who testified to the work of God in the world" and "a vision of the Book of Mormon, the means by which he was brought into the church" (Greene qtd. in Higdon 177). Likewise, one Samuel Hall related how God had provided for him evidence through the Holy Ghost and he "thus…became a living witness of Joseph's divine calling" (qtd. in Higdon 108).

Such stories functioned as powerful validation of LDS claims. William Kirby, a

one-time Latter-day Saint who later dissociated himself from the Church, described their

power: "It was common with [Latter-day Saints]…to state that they personally [knew]

by manifestations which God had given them, that this latter-day work was of God, and

that they knew Joseph Smith was a true prophet of God. Their testimonies, viewed from

a natural standpoint, were almost irresistible" (qtd. in Higdon 179). The validating

function of such personal accounts was incredibly important in creating a cohesive LDS

culture. In his recent article "Infallible Proofs, Both Human and Divine: The

Persuasiveness of Mormonism for Early Converts," Steven Harper has examined the

rationalizations given by early Latter-day Saints for their conversions and concluded

that "Mormonism owed its persuasive quality to [an] empirical and revelatory blend"

(112). By this, Harper means that early Latter-day Saints attributed their conversions to

having personal experience with spiritually confirming events.

Collectively, these experiences launched a tradition in which having personal

witness is the supreme method of religious justification. In her respected description of

Mormonism, Jan Shipps has explained how this tradition was initiated: "The experience

of the original group [became] profoundly important….Their acceptance itself [became]

in time, a part of the original set of restoration claims" (71). For today's Latter-day Saint,

the early Saints' "belief validates the claims [of the Restoration] and at the same time

becomes…an infinitely repeatable paradigmatic act" (71). By reading the recorded

personal accounts of early Church members, today's Latter-day Saints vicariously

experience their predecessors' testimonies. Since these contemporary Latter-day Saints

understand themselves as the inheritors of the Restoration, they believe that they too can know of religious truth for themselves.

As a natural expression of this principle, the phrase "I know through personal experience" is found in the transcripts of numerous discourses throughout the Church's early history and continues to be exceedingly common today.[2] This expression is important to Latter-day Saints because they feel that their ability to use it makes them unique. In an 1880 address given in the Salt Lake City Tabernacle, Apostle George Q. Cannon articulated this belief:

> Today, the existence of God may be said to be…known by personal experience, to comparatively few people. Thousands throughout Christendom think they know, because of their traditions, that God lives and that Jesus is the Son of God….They fancy they know and understand these things. But how many are there who can testify, by personal experience that they know that God lives?...In this respect the Latter-day Saints occupy, so far as I know a unique position. ("Discourse")

As is shown by Cannon's words, within LDS culture, central, validating religious significance is given to speech that manifestly draws upon personal experience because it demonstrates the reality of the Restoration.

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[2] See, for example, George Q. Cannon's April 1890 General Conference address, Charles W. Penrose's April 1913 General Conference address, Heber J. Grant's October 1921 Thursday morning General Conference address, Ezra Taft Benson's April 1977 General Conference address, M. Russell Ballard's October 1984 General Conference address, and Richard G. Scott's October 1994 General Conference address.

Because of this implication, the personal voice has the potential for special

rhetorical power among Latter-day Saints. This rhetorical power is not merely an

accidental product of historical circumstances; it is actually given central emphasis by

Latter-day Saint theology. Some of the LDS Church's most fundamental and most

unique doctrines regarding spiritual revelation and mortal experience have direct

bearing on the meanings which Latter-day Saints assign to personal expression. These

doctrines combine to give personal expression a special resonance within LDS culture.

First, the availability of a type of revelation which is both ongoing and personal

is a defining tenet of LDS theology. Latter-day Saints believe that direct communication

with heaven is available for both the Church as a whole and for individual church

members. While revelation is a common Christian principle, Latter-day Saints have a

unique conception of revelation. Elmer Jay Richardson explains that 'revelation' as a

term "is used differently" outside the LDS Church: "Most often the term is used to

designate the revelation of God through Jesus Christ and the Bible. While [Latter-day

Saints] recognize these revelations, for them revelation is a continuous process" (2).

In the early days of the LDS Church, its members were aware that their doctrine

set them apart since "no major Protestant denomination in early nineteenth century

America claimed a prophet or an open canon of revelation" (Higdon 168). According to

nineteenth-century apostle Orson Pratt, the LDS doctrine of revelation was "the one

essential point which chiefly distinguished [the Latter-day Saint] faith from that of all

other Christian denominations" (qtd. in Jarvis 354). Likewise, in 1874 Church President

John Taylor asserted, "The principle of present revelation…is the very foundation of our

religion." This sentiment was echoed in 1892 by Apostle Franklin D. Richards when he identified continuous revelation as "*the* one principle…upon which the very existence of the Church depended" (qtd. in Jarvis 201). Then again, in 1981, Apostle Howard W. Hunter expressed an awareness that the LDS "declaration to the world that we are guided by a living prophet of God—one who communicates with, is inspired by, and receives revelation from the Lord" represented a "claim [of] special unique knowledge" (13).

This unique doctrine had had important discursive consequences. It means that religious discoveries can occur at anytime. Consequently, the expression of revelation cannot be limited to an existing canon. Instead, Latter-day Saints believe, revelations will constantly demand new articulation within new circumstances. These revelations will be tied to specific events in temporal history. They will be relatable as experience. In particular, personal expression can serve as a means for highlighting the immediacy of this revelation.

In the eyes of early Latter-day Saints, one of the most important manifestations of the Restoration was the re-instatement of prophetic authority. They believed the heavens had been opened so that just as in the Bible, a prophet could serve as God's mouthpiece on the earth. In the person of Joseph Smith, these early Saints believed they could hear the voice of the Lord. In their eyes, Joseph Smith, because he spoke with God's authority, could personally stand independent of other external sources of authority.

Not surprisingly then, Joseph Smith's proclamations were exceedingly self-referential. He frequently supported his teachings by drawing upon his personal

experience. For example, in a Sunday meeting on March 10, 1844, the Prophet introduced a subject by saying, "I will bring some of the testimony from the scripture and give my own" (History 45). He then continued by relating a narrative of going into the woods to pray, being visited by an angel, and being personally ordained to the Aaronic Priesthood. His account of this supernatural encounter was given in a first-person voice and told in a straightforward, matter-of-fact manner.

This sermon was given near the end of Joseph Smith's life; however, he had related such accounts of his personal experience throughout his years as a religious leader. For example, while traveling with Sidney Rigdon on a mission, Joseph Smith would focus on speaking personally: "Rigdon explained the scriptures followed by Smith who testified to the truth of Rigdon's message by relating personal experiences" (Higdon 17, see also Pratt 298). In one such experience, when "challenged…to prove his doctrinal assertions," he "very simply told his story, recounting his talks with angels, describing the golden plates, and expressing his assurance in the truth of his message" (Higdon 176).

In such cases, Joseph Smith's personal illustrations related to his previous involvement in the events of the Restoration and the establishment of the Church. The Prophet also referred to his own experiences when presenting new information and ideas. For example, at an April 1843 meeting in the Nauvoo temple, Joseph Smith asked his audience, "Would you think it strange if I relate what I have seen in vision in relation to this interesting theme [of the resurrection]?" (qtd. in Burton 121). Clearly, such an

invocation of personal experience would, if accepted, carry with it indisputable religious authority.

In his sermons, the Prophet did not shy away from the question of his right to speak with such authority. For example, in a May 1844 sermon, he justified his teachings, saying, "When did I ever teach anything wrong from this stand? When was I ever confounded?...I never told you I was perfect; but there is no error in the revelations which I have taught" (qtd. in Burton 51). Likewise, in another sermon, given just days before his death, Joseph justified an idea by saying "I have it from God, and get over it if you can" (qtd. in Burton 28). Thus, even when he did not directly narrate accounts of his personal experiences with divinity, he spoke from the position of authority which these accounts gave him.

Joseph Smith's proclamation of his own authority is perhaps seen nowhere so well as in the King Follett discourse. This discourse, which stands as one of the most doctrinally innovative among LDS sermons and one of the most thoroughly documented examples of Joseph Smith's speaking, is framed by repeated assertions of personal authority. The Prophet first implicitly contrasts his knowledge with the deficient understanding of others, saying "There are but very few beings in the world who understand rightly the character of God" (qtd. in Larson 199). He directly asks his audience to judge of his personal capacity to speak authoritatively: "If I should be the man so fortunate as to comprehend God, and explain to your hearts *what kind of being God is*, so that the Spirit seals it, *then* let every man and woman henceforth…never say anything or lift his voice against the servants of God again. But if I fail to do it, I have no

right to revelation and inspiration" (200). In this declaration, Joseph Smith not only speaks of his personal authority; he also outlines a personally-based mode of epistemology that his followers can use. He teaches that they will know of his personal authority as they personally consult the evidence in their own hearts.

In the middle of the discourse, Joseph returns to the theme of his personal authority, saying, "I am learned, and know more than all the world put together—*the Holy Ghost does, anyhow.* If the Holy Ghost in me comprehends more than all the world, I will associate *myself* with it" (qtd. in Larson 203). Finally, Joseph Smith concludes the discourse with seventeen sentences asserting the integrity of his character and the benevolence of his intentions (208). He asserts that because of what he has experienced, he personally has an authoritative mandate to provide doctrinal knowledge to others.

A willingness to accept such personal claims by Joseph Smith was what identified a person as a Latter-day Saint. Of course, early LDS conversions often did not hinge on Joseph Smith's words alone; they could also be supported by individuals' acceptance of the Book of Mormon, their own experiences, and the experiences of others. However, once converted, Latter-day Saints shared a readiness to hear the voice of authority in such first-person pronouncements. Today, LDS Church members are still expected to acknowledge Joseph Smith's prophetic authority. They of course have not experienced the personal interaction with the Prophet that many early members had. However, they are still directed to have personal experience with his words—an experience that comes through studying his life and reading his writings.

Contemporary Latter-day Saints also are identified by their willingness to accept the personal prophetic authority of Joseph Smith's successors. Each of the subsequent Presidents of the Church, from Brigham Young to today's Gordon B. Hinckley, has been regarded by Latter-day Saints as a 'living prophet.' As was the case for Joseph Smith, their personal authority is considered sufficient to validate their declarations. Important examples of the personal nature of this authority can be seen in the LDS Church's issuance of two "Official Declarations." These declarations, which are included at the end of the Church's scriptural Doctrine and Covenants, made important changes in official Church practice. Issued in 1890 and 1978, these pronouncements were respectively ascribed to President Wilford Woodruff and President Spencer W. Kimball.

In each case, the personal experience of these leaders was cited as justification for change. Regarding the first of these declarations, which ended the Church's authorization of polygamy, President Woodruff explained, "The Lord showed me by vision and revelation exactly what would take place if we did not stop this practice….When the hour came that I was commanded…it was all clear to me. I went before the Lord, and I wrote what the Lord told me to write" (Doctrine and Covenants 293). The second declaration, which granted priesthood authority to all worthy males regardless of race, was likewise justified by reference to a personal experience had by the President of the Church. At the Church's 148th Semiannual General Conference, President N. Eldon Tanner of the Church's First Presidency explained that President Kimball had received a revelation "which came to him after extended meditation and prayer in the sacred rooms of the holy temple" (Doctrine and Covenants 293).

Such experiences are considered by Latter-day Saints to be intrinsic to the office of a prophet. As Richard Lloyd Anderson explained, "The essential job of a prophet is to testify personally." While personally expressed, these prophetic experiences are seen as institutional in their significance. Latter-day Saints believe these experiences represent the Lord's method for disseminating His instructions to His Church. Thus, when prophets speak from their personal experience, they are understood to speak of things that matter to everyone.

Whenever a prophet speaks with such authority, Latter-day Saints consider his words 'living scripture.' In a number of cases, the LDS Church has actually formalized this relationship by including new revelations within their scriptural canon. This notion of an open canon is, for Latter-day Saints, another important manifestation of the Restoration. From the inception of the LDS Church, one of its most obviously distinguishing features has been its acceptance of new scripture. In addition to the Old and New Testaments, the LDS canon also contains The Book of Mormon, The Doctrine and Covenants, and The Pearl of Great Price. Interestingly, these Latter-day Saint additions to the scriptural canon have a distinctly personal orientation.

Today, the most common encounter with Joseph Smith's voice comes through the "Joseph Smith—History" account which is published in the Pearl of Great Price. As scripture, "Joseph Smith—History" is more personally-oriented than anything in the traditional Judeo-Christian canon. In the Old Testament, the Psalms utilize a first-person voice, but they are largely acontextual. In contrast, the account in "Joseph Smith—History" is highly contextualized, containing specifically-named dates, locations, and

characters. In the <u>New Testament</u>, some of the apostolic epistles do contain specific

contextualization, but none of them contain the accessible personal intimacy of an

account that refers to specific inner conflicts, familial relations, and household chores.[3]

In part because of this account, the foundations of the LDS Church are linked to a

personal voice. Joseph Smith's first-person narration conveys to today's reader the idea

that personal involvement was an important component of the LDS religion from its

beginnings.

Like "Joseph Smith—History," much of LDS scripture possesses a personal

orientation. For example, the <u>Doctrine and Covenants</u> is interlaced with expressly

personal revelations. In response to individual requests for guidance came many of its

revelations on missionary service (see e.g., D&C sections 4, 11-12, and 14-15 given

respectively to Joseph Smith, Sr., Hyrum Smith, Joseph Knight, Sr., David Whitmer and

John Whitmer). On other occasions, individuals were called by name and told to be

more humble (Martin Harris in D&C 5), to pray vocally (Joseph Knight in D&C 23:6), to

compile "a selection of sacred hymns" (Emma Smith in D&C 25:11), to "assist…to do the

work of printing" (William Phelps in D&C 55:4), and to "set in order" their households

(Frederick G. Williams, Sidney Rigdon, and Newel K. Whitney in D&C 93).

One of the most intimate of such personal revelations occurs in section 6 when

the Lord speaks to Oliver Cowdery. The Lord tells Cowdery that He knows him

personally in a way that no one else can: "Thou mayest know that there is none else save

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[3] The religious significance of scriptural narrative structures represents a productive branch of study. See for example, Robert Walter Funk's *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative.* Sonoma, CA: Polebridge Press, 1988.

God that knowest the thoughts and the intents of thy heart" (v. 16). The Lord then

addresses Cowdery by name, saying, "Behold, thou art Oliver, and I have spoken unto

thee because of thy desires" (v. 20). He reminds Cowdery of a personal experience he

has had, saying, "Cast your mind upon the night that you cried unto me in your heart,

that you might know concerning the truth of these things" (v. 22). The Lord then

presents Cowdery's personal experience as the supreme witness of spiritual truth: "Did I

not speak peace to your mind concerning the matter? What greater witness can you have

than from God?" (v. 23). Through the Lord's voice in this account, personal experience is

explicitly validated as religiously significant. Moreover, the very inclusion of this

revelation and others like it within the scriptural canon implicitly suggests the personal

nature of religious experience.

When reading these sections in the <u>Doctrine and Covenants</u>, LDS Church

members recognize that they were originally contextualized within specific personal

circumstances. Yet they also understand their application as general. As much as

anything, they understand from these revelations that the Lord will concern Himself

with personal problems. They read that He did so for those whose answers are recorded

in scripture, and they believe He will do so again as new circumstances arise.

This theme of the Lord's involvement in personal lives is emphasized throughout

LDS scripture. Even in works understood to be more historically distant, the personal

effects of divine guidance are uniquely emphasized. This emphasis begins with the

utilization of the personal voice. Throughout the <u>Book of Mormon</u>, as well as in the <u>Pearl</u>

<u>of Great Price</u>'s Book of Abraham, there is a strong first-person authorial presence. "I" is

the very first word in the <u>Book of Mormon</u>, and the opening personal identifier "I, Nephi" is repeated 87 times within its first 55 chapters—to say nothing of the hundreds of additional times when Nephi refers to himself as merely "I" or "me." As the work progresses, subsequent writers also employ numerous self-references, the most notable being "I, Jacob," "I, Enos," "I, Mormon," and "I, Moroni."

These authorial and editorial characters play an important role in setting forth doctrine and in showing the significance of the histories they recount. For example, in Ether chapter 12, Moroni inserts significant doctrinal commentary into his historical account of the Jaredite civilization, saying, "Now, I, Moroni, would speak somewhat concerning these things" (Ether 12:6). With this introduction, Moroni begins a significant dissertation on faith and humility. Moroni's exposition is interspersed with narrative references that bring attention to his own character. He describes a personal dialogue with the Lord and tells of the comfort he feels upon hearing the Lord's assurance that his testimony would be accepted by the righteous. Later, he emotionally bids farewell to his audience, saying "we shall meet before the judgment-seat of Christ….Then shall ye know that I have seen Jesus" (Ether 12:39).

In a similar example, Nephi, in 1 Nephi 22, delivers a doctrinal exposition on the scattering and the gathering of the House of Israel and the final destruction of the wicked. This discourse is framed by reminders that it was originally delivered by the character Nephi in response to questions from his brothers. This literary structure lends particular pathos to the historical preview by implying that Nephi understands that his brothers' rebellious attitudes will eventually lead to the downfall of his people.

Thus, in addition to commenting on the histories they tell, these authorial characters also tell their own stories. In fact, many of the Book of Mormon's most powerful and popular chapters are structured as personal experience narratives. These narratives effectively vivify moral lessons, demonstrating for example, how to follow the Spirit (1 Nephi 3-4), the importance of prayer (Enos), the necessity of conversion (Alma 36), and the blessings of remaining righteous in a wicked environment (Mormon 1-6).

The character development which is accomplished through these stories adds power to the Book of Mormon's authorial voices and strengthens its characters' pronouncements. Thus, when Nephi bursts into psalmic rapture, praising God, bemoaning his weaknesses, praying for strength, and resolving to be strict in righteousness (2 Nephi 4), his message has special import because of readers' understanding of Nephi's character—an understanding which had been developed through reading his experiences in obtaining plates, finding food for his family, and building a boat. Likewise in Moroni 10, when Moroni exhorts readers to seek the truth about the message he delivers, his statement carries special poignancy because of its placement within a personal account of the hardship of being the lone survivor of a once-righteous people.

Such scriptural use of the personal voice is not merely of literary interest; this style has contributed to the development of a culture where listeners are practiced in evaluating personal experiences for religious meaning and where they often ascribe special authority to the personal voice. Because of their familiarity with such scripture, as well as their immersion within a tradition of speaking from personal experience, LDS

audiences respond to the personal voice with particular appreciation. This appreciation is enhanced, moreover, by their own experiences with generating personal religious expression.

The Latter-day Saint tradition of popular involvement in religious speaking encourages modeling of the personal voice used by Joseph Smith and other Church leaders. It also encourages a degree of introspection regarding one's own experience. Significantly, this sort of introspection is encouraged by another aspect of the LDS doctrine of revelation: in LDS theology, each individual can *personally* receive revelatory instruction. In his <u>History of the Church</u>, Joseph Smith wrote, "God hath not revealed anything to Joseph, but what He will make known unto the Twelve, and even the least Saint may know all things as fast as he is able to bear them" (qtd. in Richardson 103). This doctrine is important to Latter-day Saints. Brigham Young, for example, focused on "the importance of personal revelation" in his first public address given as the new leader of the Church following Joseph Smith's death (Richardson 117).

Such revelation, in the LDS understanding, comes to individuals through the 'witness of the Spirit.' Latter-day Saints believe that the Spirit of God is personally available to individuals in their daily life. They believe this Holy Spirit can speak to persons individually by means such as 'a still, small voice' or 'a burning in the bosom.' Latter-day Saints prize these spiritual experiences as a type of experience elevated above the common level. The Spirit, Latter-day Saints believe, is able to impress a mind with a type of conviction more powerful than the knowledge which comes through normal sensory experience. Thus, not all experience is equal; 'spiritual experience' is privileged.

The Spirit is the source of religious conversion, and naturally, the preferred medium for accessing heavenly wisdom.

For Latter-day Saints, such personal spiritual communication is not only an accepted source of religious authority; it is actually advocated as the *most* important type of religious experience. This belief is reflected in a comparison made by Elder Dallin H. Oaks during the April 2001 General Conference. Elder Oaks explained:

> Consider the comparative value today of the advice Brigham Young gave to an audience 140 years ago with what President Hinckley and other servants of the Lord are saying to each of us right now, in this conference. Or compare the value to each of us of some other facts or advice from the distant past with what our stake president said at our stake conference or what our bishop counseled us last Sunday. Overarching all of this is the importance of what the Spirit whispered to us last night or this morning about our own specific needs. ("Focus" 83)

As is reflected in this quote, Latter-day Saints epistemologically prize both the current and the personal. Of course, they do not rely for religious guidance on personal witness alone. Scriptural texts and ordained religious leaders are both important sources of authority. However, for a people who believe in the importance of individual revelatory confirmation, personal experiences provide irreplaceable validation of Church doctrine.

This theology encourages Latter-day Saints to search for revelatory opportunities among their everyday experiences. Faithful Latter-day Saints, believing Joseph Smith's declaration that "Salvation cannot come without revelation" (Teachings, p. 160) and Elder Bruce R. McConkie's teaching that "You do not get religion into your life until it

becomes a matter of personal experience" ("Revelation" 48), feel they should constantly seek for revelation. They are not just to read the scriptures and learn from spiritual authorities. They are to seek to experience revelations for themselves.

As they seek such spiritual revelation, individual Latter-day Saints begin by pondering the events of their personal lives. LDS doctrine encourages Latter-day Saints to assign special importance to the daily aspects of their experience. In LDS theology, mortal life is understood as the 'second estate' in an ongoing process of human progression. Progression is made possible through God's 'plan of salvation.' This plan, which involves all of existence, is designed to lead towards heaven. All people, not just a chosen group of individuals, are part of this plan, and within it, mortal life is an experience of paramount importance—the central piece of God's entire plan for each person. Thus, for Latter-day Saints, experience in the flesh has no substitute and is more important than any doctrinal principle in abstract. LDS apostle and theologian Bruce R. McConkie enunciated this idea when he wrote, "Unless…religion is a living thing that changes the lives of people in whose nostrils the breath of life is now inhaled, it has no saving power" ("Stories" 4). Accordingly, Latter-day Saints believe that their everyday experience is central to their salvation and exaltation and can be an important means of accessing personal revelation.

Believing that such spiritual meaning exists in the events of their individual lives, it is no wonder that Latter-day Saints often interpret their personal experiences as having religious significance. For them, recognizing the spiritual lessons of everyday experience is a constant duty, a duty continually encouraged by recurrent reminders to

seek out personal revelation. Since as a people they believe that revelatory inspiration can be continual, they feel that a single "conversion experience [is] not…sufficient." Instead, having personal religious experience is supposed to be "a lifetime pursuit" (Richardson 67-68). This pursuit is continually reinforced by the Church's encouragement of the personal expression of spiritual experience. Knowing that they may be called upon to express personal testimony, Latter-day Saints feel driven to acquire such testimony through having religious experiences of their own.

Quite obviously, the LDS view on the importance of having individual experience with the divine implies a markedly positive conception of human nature. Indeed, LDS doctrine provides such a glorious portrayal of the human condition that God himself is understood to be involved in the details of individual lives. Latter-day Saints believe that God's divine purpose and glory is "to bring forth the immortality and eternal life of man" (Moses 1:39). This 'eternal life' signifies more than living forever; it represents the eventual assumption of divine status. Joseph Smith first taught this doctrine of the human potential for divinity in the King Follett discourse, saying "God himself was once as we are now, and is an exalted man, and sits enthroned in yonder heavens….You have got to learn how to be Gods yourselves" (293). In more recent times, this doctrine was reaffirmed by Elder Ezra Taft Benson who in a 1976 address taught, "We are gods in embryo, and thus have an unlimited potential for progress and attainment" (Teachings 21).

Such a dramatically positive assessment of human worth certainly sets Latter-day Saints apart from mainstream Christianity. Particularly in the mid-nineteenth

century, it was unquestionably distinct. Barbara Higdon notes that while "many

Protestant faiths" of the era held rather favorable views about human nature, "the

followers of Joseph Smith carried it to an extreme position" (Higdon 169). Indeed, the

LDS doctrine of divine human potential is so radical that much of the contention

surrounding LDS theology centers on this doctrine and whether it manifests outrageous

blasphemy. Lost, however, in much of this heated debate is recognition of the

epistemological and rhetorical consequences which this doctrine has had within LDS

culture. As a consequence of believing such ideas about their own 'divine nature,'

Latter-day Saints have an increased confidence in themselves and their abilities to

personally receive religious communication. Certainly, the LDS conception of

continuing, personal revelation seems particularly appropriate for a people who

consider even human nature to be a work-in-progress.

In addition to encouraging personal epistemological confidence, LDS theology

also has interesting implications for religious expression. At first the discursive

consequences of the doctrine of personal revelation may not be clear. Certainly, Latter-

day Saints privilege the personal and the experiential as religiously significant.

However, these very ideas might actually seem to discourage the *expression* of personal

experience. After all, Church founder Joseph Smith once asserted, "Reading the

experiences of others, or the revelations given to them, can never give us a

comprehensive view of our condition and true relation to God. Knowledge of these

things can only be obtained by experience" (qtd. in Richardson 57). The sheer

individualism of this statement might suggest that no preacher could adequately convey personally-acquired spiritual knowledge.

However, this potentiality is counterbalanced by the LDS understanding of the Spirit as a means of communication. In LDS scripture, the Lord promises that the "spirit of revelation" will accompany the declaration of truth, so that "he that preacheth and he that receiveth, understandeth one another, and both are edified and rejoice together" (D&C 50:22). In other words, an individual's articulation of a revelatory experience may promote further revelation in others. Thus, an individual's quest for religious truth need not be solitary; it will often be aided by the personal examples and testimonies of others.

Moreover, because Latter-day Saints believe God is consistent in his dealing with humans, they believe the experience of any individual can instruct and edify others. Individual experiences are seen as specific embodiments of a larger pattern. Thus, Latter-day Saints, despite their preference for the personal, are decidedly non-individualistic in their expression of it. Speakers tend to highlight the representative quality of their experiences. Latter-day Saints do not treat personalities as isolated atoms. Rather, LDS doctrines allow personal experience narratives and personal testimonies to become the shared experience of the community.

This focus on spiritual exchange curbs the individualistic possibilities of LDS doctrine. Latter-day Saints believe that they will know when others speak of their experiences truthfully because they will feel spiritual confirmation. Since the Spirit will not confirm all personal speech, it will provide an important check on 'false doctrine.' Latter-day Saints believe that revelation comes through authorized channels and is

systematically verifiable. Individuals cannot legitimately be spiritually independent in the manner implied by Mark Leone's description of a "do-it-yourself theology" (188). Rather, they are participants in a communally supportive project of advancement toward greater understanding. As personally-acquired knowledge is shared, Latter-day Saints believe it can be communally validated through the witness of God's Spirit. Through this means, individuals may use personal expression to contribute insights to a congregation's shared understanding.

The LDS Church's encouragement of personal expression is not only a means of ensuring community validation. It also reflects another important characteristic of Latter-day Saint theology—the belief that spiritual understanding is not complete until applied. Latter-day Saints do not feel it is religiously sufficient to be able to internally recognize the spiritual component of life. Rather, one must be able to act upon one's understanding. Receiving personal revelation is not sufficient; pragmatic action must follow.

This belief is supported by LDS doctrines which unapologetically connect spirituality to pragmatic concerns. The LDS worldview completely conflates the typical dichotomy between 'spiritual' and 'temporal' affairs. To Latter-day Saints, all aspects of life have a religious dimension. In 1844, LDS apostle Orson Hyde explained, "Latter-day Saints think proper to…unite [the spiritual and temporal]…whether it be to plough and sow the fields, to buy and sell good wares and merchandize, houses or lands; to go to the polls and vote, to the prayer meeting or to the sacrament of the Lord's supper" (qtd. in Higdon 157). Some 135 years latter, Mark Leone observed that when Arizona Latter-

day Saints rebuilt a diversion dam near the town of Woodruff, "their six weeks of work

represented one long uninterrupted Mormon act of worship" (102). Indeed, LDS Church

doctrines are emphatic on the point that everything, no matter how mundane, is within

the purview of religion. In an oft-quoted early Church revelation, the Lord states, "all

things unto me are spiritual" (D&C 29:14).

Thus, while Latter-day Saints strive to have a special quality of experience which

they call "spiritual experience," they do not limit the parameters of when or where this

experience can occur. Rather, their goal is to infuse all of life with spirituality—to make

one's entire life a spiritual experience. With such guiding assumptions, Latter-day Saints

have no compunctions about the religious discussion of very earthly experiences. They

are not puzzled by addresses such as the one given in a Snowflake, Arizona conference

in 1911, where the minutes record, "Proper sanitation, and salvation for the dead were

among the subjects dwelt upon" (qtd. in Leone 70). Since they believe that their religion

will solve practical as well as eternal problems, it does not seem incongruous to them for

religious authorities to focus on practical matters. In fact, they feel that the public

expression of one's personal knowledge is necessary to fulfill its religious purpose. In

Latter-day Saint understanding, the importance of knowledge can be both material and

spiritual, both personal and communal.

An especially important catalyst in making practical experience an important

part of religious discourse has been the LDS Church's reliance on lay leadership.

Throughout its entire structure, the Church depends for preaching on relatively

untrained lay members rather than on professional clergy. This practice, which derives

in part from the revelatory instruction that "when all have spoken…all may be edified of all, and…every man may have an equal privilege" (D&C 88:122), dates to the Church's early days. In describing common LDS practice during the nineteenth century, Davis Bitton writes, "Those who conducted or prayed or preached were not a class of specially trained pastors, but rather, members of the congregation itself, or, on occasion, itinerant missionaries or visiting General Authorities" (7). And, both then and now, even the more-experienced Latter-day Saint authorities have come from lay backgrounds. Since there is no professional-track LDS clergy, all Latter-day Saint preaching is, in a sense, lay preaching.

This tradition has factored heavily into the development of LDS discourse modes. During the nineteenth and into the early twentieth century, Latter-day Saints came predominantly from rural backgrounds and were unlikely to have had any formal oratorical training. The effect was a decidedly populist quality of expression. In Bitton's words, "One can well imagine that uneducated farmers or laborers wishing to communicate with a congregation of the same kind of people used colloquial language" (14). Even in formal address, early Latter-day Saint speakers were prone to "ungrammatical usage, slang, and down-to-earth comparisons" (14).

Such comparative informality erased prescriptive boundaries between 'proper' religious expression and more 'common' forms of speech. It also altered the potential substance of a religious message. The typical LDS speaker could not draw on a theological treatise studied in divinity school as fodder for rhetorical invention. Instead, Latter-day Saints "drew from their past experiences the figures that made their

discourses vivid" (Higdon 209). Thus, the LDS practice of lay preaching encouraged a style of reasoning grounded in personal experience.

Moreover, the experiential background of LDS lay leaders has had a noticeably pragmatic orientation. For example, early Latter-day Saint leaders, while not schooled in 'proper' modes of religious speaking, were often experienced in practical affairs. Speaking of the early LDS Church, Mark Leone explains, "Most Church leaders in the nineteenth century were competent as farmers, managers, organizers, or financiers….In addition to being an authority in the spiritual sense, [a Church leader] was one in a practical sense" (39).

These pragmatic characteristics easily spilled into religious discourse. Davis Bitton's study of nineteenth-century speaking found that LDS sermons took on such traditionally non-religious subjects as irrigation, housekeeping, cattle-raising, and boycotts (13, 17-18). Bitton's survey echoes Joseph Jarvis's assessment of late nineteenth-century LDS General Conference addresses: "Usually, matters of theology were discussed incidentally in sermons largely devoted to the real and pressing problems of unity, respect for the Church Authorities, tithing, building up Zion, etc." (375). Such topics naturally lent themselves to the discussion of knowledge which leaders had gained through experience.

In fact, such personal practical expertise was an important part of a leader's religious capability. A nineteenth-century bishop, for example, served as a community's spiritual leader but actually dealt with concerns that were "overwhelmingly temporal" (Arrington, 209). Thus, the LDS Church's reliance on lay leadership actually promoted

the religious value of pragmatic experience. Certainly, a religion that relies on lay

involvement will emphasize the importance of hands-on contribution. However, Latter-

day Saints do not merely equate involvement with commitment; they actually see

practical actions as religious acts and consider a person's experience to be a virtue.

Today, although LDS demographics are no longer so rural, attention to practical

matters is much the same. Throughout the late twentieth century and into the twenty-

first century, LDS leaders have spoken repeatedly on such 'temporal' matters as food

storage, debt avoidance, community involvement, and secular entertainment. Leone

believes that such a pragmatic orientation is an important qualification for Latter-day

Saint leaders: "As the nature of crises and problems changes, so do the criteria for

choosing leaders….Mormons find their religion effective in solving everyday problems

because their leaders are professional problem-solvers, who are convinced that those

very problems are the main business of religion" (39).

Leone's analysis is perceptive. In a way, Latter-day Saints link the knowledge

gained from experience with spirituality—and thus rhetorical authority. Of course,

practical experience alone is not sufficient to guarantee spirituality; still, for Latter-day

Saints, spirituality does have an important practical component. In fact, the LDS concern

with practicality dictates that spiritual understanding cannot just be hoarded within

one's own mind. Rather, to have true religious value, it must be expressed. This idea

helps explain the impetus for Latter-day Saints to share their personal insights and relate

accounts of their private experiences in public forums.

The LDS focus on practical action, in combination with other fundamental beliefs regarding spiritual revelation and the importance of mortal experience, has unquestionably influenced the LDS approach to discourse. LDS speakers tend to use a style that is personally-grounded, audience-oriented and experienced-based. This style is particularly accentuated during informal dialogue—and such discourse actually constitutes the bulk of religious speaking in the LDS Church. Under the current correlated 'block schedule,' roughly two-thirds of a typical member's weekly Sunday worship is spent in classroom settings, where open discussion is more common than monologues or sermons. These discussions are based on lessons outlines which often heavily encourage the relation of personal experience.

However, LDS speakers also use a personal style of expression in formal settings, even authoritative ones. The use of personal expression in such occasions both draws authority from the general commonality of LDS personal expression and also serves as a model which legitimizes the future use of such expression.

Because LDS doctrines emphasize the importance of personal experience, they also implicitly legitimize personal expression. In fact, by personally sharing religious experiences, Latter-day Saints actually reinforce their understanding of LDS doctrines. On the surface, a specific personal account may focus on illustrating only a single aspect of the gospel. However, simply by using the personal mode to illustrate principles, Latter-day Saints enact their commitment to fundamental portions of the LDS worldview: By using the personal voice, they implicitly testify of the value of personal witness as a means of religious justification. By focusing on their present experiences,

they acknowledge the ongoing availability of spiritual insight. By contributing their insight about a topic, they demonstrate their belief in the value of communal instruction.

An illuminating example of the impact which the LDS worldview has on the interpretation of personal experience accounts can be found in Elder Matthew Cowley's October 1952 General Conference address. Elder Cowley referred to a personal account shared by President McKay during a previous address and affirmed its communal significance: "This is an important experience for all of us, my brothers and sisters." For Elder Cowley, the significance of President McKay's account came from its reflection of a lifetime of enacting Latter-day Saint values: "What a beautiful sermon, his standing at the side of his wife, where he has stood for lo these many years, and in the presence of his mother, who also stood at the side of her companion for many years."

As Elder Cowley interprets it, President McKay's experience was reflective of experiences that many in the audience had participated in and could relate to. Hence, President McKay's feeling that a certain experience had personal religious significance to him could also be true for many in his audience. They could apply his experience to their own lives and feel an infusion of spiritual significance within their lives.

Elder Cowley's commentary illustrates the expansiveness with which Latter-day Saints may interpret accounts of personal spiritual experience. Often, they understand such accounts as symbolic of deeper truths. Of course, not every account of a personal experience by an LDS speaker is followed by such a clear enunciation of its religious importance. However, these ideas, even when they are not consciously articulated, are an important part of the LDS worldview. These are the very same assumptions to which

President Hinckley's audience responded when he stood in April 2006 and addressed the Church's General Conference by recounting a summary of his life experience.

In this case, because President Hinckley's audience appreciated the importance of personal experience within LDS theology, they understood that through sharing a personal account of God's hand in his life, President Hinckley was sharing the essence of the Restored Gospel. Because they were participants in a tradition of using personal experience to validate belief, they understood the connection between President Hinckley's fifteen minutes of autobiography and sixteen sentences of testimony. Because they believed that the prophetic office can serve as a model for how each Latter-day Saint can experience the divine, they understood what President Hinckley meant when he said, "The life of the President of the Church really belongs to the entire Church." Because of this shared understanding, President Hinckley's address, while uncommonly personal, could be received as relevant by every member of his LDS audience.

Recognizing the impact of these ideas, Elmer Richardson has asserted the importance of considering in religious terms even the most personal manifestations of LDS speech: "To treat the numerous testimonies based on personal revelation which have been recorded by Mormons as anything but religious is to misconstrue what is at the heart of Mormonism….It was and is about the claims of infusion of the supernatural into the natural world" (10). Because these claims are exemplified in the form of personal expression, this mode of discourse has, as will be discussed in chapter 4, a powerful function within LDS culture.

Chapter 4: The Functions of Personal Expression in LDS Culture

On April 6, 1985, Elder Bruce R. McConkie of the Quorum of the Twelve

Apostles of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints stood to speak in the

Church's General Conference. Elder McConkie, a powerful figure in the Church's

hierarchy for nearly four decades, was dying of cancer. There was no doubt that he

would leave a memorable legacy. Both inside and outside of the LDS Church, Elder

McConkie was recognized as one of the Church's most outspoken leaders. As a speaker,

he was known for strong pronouncements and an unflinching attitude; as a writer, he

was best-known through the authoritative voice of his theological compendium

Mormon Doctrine. If there was any leader in the LDS Church who, in the public eye,

represented Mormon orthodoxy, it was Bruce R. McConkie.

As Elder McConkie stood at the public pulpit for the last time in his life, his

demeanor was somewhat different. Sick and weak as he was, his persona invited

compassion. He became emotional and spoke in a voice that at times trembled. With the

specter of death looming behind his words, Elder McConkie delivered the address that

perhaps in the end, would represent his most treasured legacy.

Elder McConkie began his address by declaring that he would speak about the

"most important doctrine…the atoning sacrifice of the Lord Jesus Christ"

("Gethsemane" 9). After a few preliminary remarks on the subject, he made a

rhetorically interesting announcement:

> In speaking of these wondrous things I shall use my own words, though you
>
> may think they are the words of scripture, words spoken by other Apostles and

> prophets. True it is they were first proclaimed by others, but they are now mine,
>
> for the Holy Spirit of God has borne witness to me that they are true, and it is
>
> now as though the Lord had revealed them to me in the first instance. (9)

With all the solemnity inherent in the occasion and his situation, Elder McConkie

proclaimed his ability to personally speak with a testimony equivalent to past prophets.

For most of the rest of his address, Elder McConkie outlined the familiar story of

Jesus Christ's redemptive atonement. He told the account in a vivid manner.

Occasionally, he assumed a first-person voice, but interestingly, it was always the first-

person plural: "We know he sweat great gouts of blood….We know he suffered….We

know that he lay prostrated upon the ground….We know that an angel came to

strengthen him" (9). His grammar (highlighted by his use of the rhetorical figure of

anaphora) reflected the idea that this knowledge was communal knowledge. As he had

mentioned, this knowledge was shared with him by past prophets, and surely it was

also shared by many listeners in his current audience. Perhaps, his speech implied, there

were others who could, with him, echo the words of apostles and prophets.

Then, significantly, just at the climax of his talk, Elder McConkie resumed a

singular first-person voice and emphasized the individual nature of his testimony: "And

now…I testify that it took place in Gethsemane and at Golgotha…I testify that he is the

Son of the Living God….This I know of myself independent of any other person" (11).

Evoking the looming presence of his coming death, Elder McConkie made a powerful

comparison: "In a coming day I shall feel the nail marks in his hands and in his feet and

shall wet his feet with my tears. But I shall not know any better than I know now that he

is God's Almighty Son, that he is our Savior and Redeemer, and that salvation comes in and through his atoning blood and in no other way" (11). Through this comparison, Elder McConkie indicated that definite personal knowledge regarding the truth of central gospel doctrines was presently available and that he, for one, possessed it.

In this final testimony, Elder McConkie masterfully exemplified the rhetorical potential of the personal discourse mode in LDS oratory. The reception of Elder McConkie's address was exceptional. His audience felt that they, in listening to his words, had witnessed something sacred. Unquestionably, part of the speech's poignancy was due to an awareness of Elder McConkie's poor state of health (he died within a few weeks). However, this sympathy alone cannot explain the enduring status of the address as a classic of Latter-day Saint oratory. LDS Church membership has nearly tripled since Elder McConkie's death, so most members of the Church today cannot personally remember him. Yet his words still continue to seize the LDS imagination.

For Latter-day Saint audiences, the power of Elder McConkie's final testimony derives from the way in which he masterfully combined some fundamental components of LDS personal expression. In his address, Elder McConkie brought together community understanding and individual knowledge. He combined the expression of personal revelation and an adherence to orthodox doctrine. He declared that spiritual manifestations could be perceptibly present in one's life and that this life was just one part of a larger spiritual reality. In short, he exemplified the LDS approach to spirituality by expressing the possibility of a unified religious experience in which communally-

shared truths are verified by individual experiences and personal experiences are reflective of deeper doctrinal principles.

These connections represent the essence of the Latter-day Saint approach to personal expression. Far from being a license to tout the advantages of one's individual ideas, the culture's encouragement of personal speaking invites individuals to connect themselves to the LDS Church in a deeply personal way. The established conventions of LDS personal expression rhetorically reinforce fundamental LDS doctrines. Through such reinforcement, personal discourse plays a vital role in Latter-day Saint culture. The LDS personal mode of speaking acculturates individual Latter-day Saints by teaching them how to experience, interpret, and speak about their lives in ways consistent with the LDS community's doctrines and commitments.

Of course, this is not to say that personal expression is a uniquely LDS mode of discourse. Speaking from personal experience is recognized as a rhetorically-effective method in many situations. And certainly, LDS personal discourse can often be very similar to other examples of personal expression used by countless individuals in many sectors of society. Without question, in many specific contexts, general rhetorical principles can explain the reasons why LDS speakers choose to use this discursive mode.

For instance, personal experiences can be used as logical evidence to support claims. Often, throughout society, examples drawn from personal experience are used as inductive support for ideas. A clear demonstration of how personal declarations function as evidence in LDS settings is seen in many missionary uses of personal expression. For example, by providing personal testimony of gospel blessings,

missionaries bolster their overall message that the Church's teachings are valuable. Likewise, in slightly different settings, personal experience is used to bolster the intensity of existing Church members' convictions. When LDS speakers address believing audiences, the claims of the gospel are not in dispute, yet personal experiences are still often used as evidence of gospel principles.

A good example of how personal expression is used in congregational settings to support LDS religious ideas was documented by Carolyn Gilkey in 1981. A 'Sister M.' began a personal testimony by indicating that she would like to share "experiences that helped [her] testimony to grow." She then told of how her brother's family had "moved from North Carolina to New Hampshire" but could not sell their home. After living for three months "without money," the family did not know what to do. Sister M. tells of how she suggested a family fast. In her words, they "picked a time...[and] prayed and fasted at the exact same time." In her very next sentence, Sister M. indicates that the family fast had immediate results: "I just got a call from my bother [sic] in New Hampshire stating that they had a buyer for their home and he thanked us for our prayers and fasting." She then summed up the message which she felt the experience supported: "I bear testimony to you that I know it was Heavenly Father's hand in this matter that allowed this to happen."

Such rhetorical use of experiential evidence in support of gospel claims has been present in LDS speaking since the earliest days of the Church. In a 'practice sermon' given at the School of the Prophets in Kirtland, Ohio, Heber C. Kimball used a similar example from his own family. He told of how his daughter had been instructed by his

wife not to touch some dishes on penalty of a whipping. During her mother's absence, his daughter accidentally broke a number of the dishes. Knowing that her mother was "very punctual" in carrying out discipline, she "went out under an apple tree and prayed that her mother's heart might be softened." The prayer had its effect: Heber C. Kimball explained that his wife found herself "powerless to chastise" and unable "to raise her hand against the child" (qtd. in Higdon 70-71). This example, similar to Sister M.'s in many ways, demonstrates how experiences from individuals' personal lives can be interpreted as bearing evidence of doctrinal principles and can be shared with others as support for those principles.

Personal expression can also be used to lend emotional power to an event or an idea. The rhetorical importance of 'presence' was an idea particularly developed by Chaïm Perelman and Lucie Olbrechts-Tyteca. These scholars explained that "*presence* acts directly on our sensibility." The implication for speakers is that the emotional power of their ideas will be linked to their ability to make ideas vivid. Perelman explains, "One of the preoccupations of a speaker is to make present, by verbal magic alone, what is actually absent but what he considers important to his argument" (117).

Perelman identified illustrations as an important means of creating rhetorical presence, saying that they are used "to strengthen adherence…by providing particular instances which clarify the general statement, show the importance of this statement by calling attention to various possible applications, and increase its presence to the consciousness" (357). Thus, it is not surprising that "illustrations are…often chosen for their affective impact" (360). Rhetorically, first-hand expression has special power

because of its immediacy and concrete character. Because speakers are generally visible to their audiences, their personal expression has an increased degree of, if nothing else, physical presence.

Personal expression also often gains increased rhetorical presence because of a speaker's emotional attachment to their own experiences. This effect is recognized by LDS leaders, as is shown by Elder Gene R. Cook's explanation, "One reason why personal experiences are so effective is that they have touched our hearts and when we speak of things that we feel deeply, it is more likely that we'll be able to touch the hearts of others" (64).

This emotional element is evident in many LDS references to personal matters. For example, in Elder Henry B. Eyring's October 1998 address, "A Voice of Warning," the power of his message on missionary work is intensified by his personal recollection of sorrow over never sharing the gospel with a deceased friend. Similarly, when Elder Russell M. Nelson began his April 1995 General Conference address by soberly speaking about the recent death of a daughter, it imparted tenderness to his sermon and poignantly conveyed the importance of his message about eternal covenants in a way difficult to duplicate. In each case, personal expression had inherent emotional power. It movingly demonstrated the importance of a subject by showing its human dimension.

Finally, personal expression reflects personal experience with a subject which also implies, as the linguistic connection suggests, a degree of expertise. This expertise lends credibility and authority to a speaker's character. The nature of one's character, Aristotle felt, is "the controlling factor in persuasion" (38). In actual practice, most

attention is given to those who show "wisdom in deciding practical affairs" (Hauser 95).

Personal expression can provide a way for speakers to communicate their identity and

qualifications.

The importance of developing a qualified ethos is an important reason why LDS

speakers and teachers are instructed to speak personally. An example of such instruction

is found in the Church's official <u>Ensign</u> magazine: "People…are more likely to accept

our words when they know we have tried to live what we are teaching" (Nash 51).

When speaking with the authority of personal experience, LDS speakers may tangibly

demonstrate for audiences a desired way to live. For example, seven years after the

Latter-day Saints entered the Salt Lake Valley, Brigham Young gave a Pioneer Day

address in which he recounted his experience in leaving Nauvoo and used it as a model

for how the Saints should devote all their efforts to the work of the Lord. Lest his

audience miss the application to their lives, President Young made it explicit: "I want

you not only to do as I have done, but a great deal better" (19).

One effective way for speakers to build ethos is to establish commonality

between themselves and their audience. Many LDS personal experience narratives

recount simple incidents from daily life, the kind of experiences that listeners might also

have had. Another familiar way in which speakers establish common ground with LDS

audiences is by referring to their common cultural identity. Many LDS speakers refer to

personal experiences that have been intertwined with the larger Church experience in

ways that have shaped the speakers' individual characters. For example, in his October

1910 General Conference address, Elder Melvin J. Ballard reminisced,

I remember from a child having been anxious to come, and having made strenuous efforts in the days of my early youth to save means with which to come to this City for the purpose of attending conferences….For the past twenty years, nearly now, I have been to almost every conference of the Church….It has been an education to me in the doctrines of the gospel.

To this day, speakers frequently find common ground with their audiences and establish themselves as fit speakers by recounting their personal experiences within the LDS Church.

Of course, in many cases, the nature of what might make a speaker respected varies depending on occasion and audience. In an October 1988 General Conference priesthood session address given to an audience of adult men and teen-age boys, President Thomas S. Monson shared a number of amusing personal stories about his exploits playing basketball and softball as a young man ("Goal"). These experiences caught interest, prompted laughter, and gave him the authority to counsel his audience about the need for displaying better sportsmanship at Church activities. In this case, the attention and esteem of a specific segment of the LDS audience could be captured by sharing well-chosen personal experiences. Certainly, LDS speakers often use personal expression for this purpose.

At times of course, speakers need to address topics on which they don't have personal experience. Recognition of the authority which comes when speaking from personal experience can, in such cases, be seen in the frequent rhetorical incorporation of secondary personal expression. For example, often General Conference talks focus on

discouraging certain behaviors, such as involvement with pornography or homosexuality. General Authorities cannot effectively claim to speak from personal experience on these topics. In such cases, quoting from the personal expressions of others allows speakers to reinforce their points. In the October 2006 General Conference, both Elder Dallin H. Oaks and President Gordon B. Hinckley used this tactic.

The example used by President Hinckley as he spoke in the Conference's priesthood session classically illustrates the application of general rhetorical principles. In his address, President Hinckley quoted from a letter he received from a 35-year-old man struggling with a pornography addiction. The letter itself represented evidence of President Hinckley's larger point about the evils of pornography. Its writer lamented, "I have no freedom.…[Pornography] is a trap for me, and I can't seem to get out of it." Likewise, because the quoted expression was personal, it contained a good deal of emotional poignancy. President Hinckley's anonymous first-hand source vividly expressed his anguish and reinforced President Hinckley's warning:

> *Please, please, please* plead with the brethren of the Church not only to avoid but eliminate the sources of pornographic material in their lives….Please pray for me and others in the Church who may be like me to have the courage and strength to overcome this terrible affliction. I am unable to sign my name, and I hope that you will understand.

By thus introducing the personal voice of an individual affected by his subject, President Hinckley gave the subject particular immediacy and power. Likewise, by citing this man's pronouncement that "the Church can't do enough to counsel the members to

avoid pornography," President Hinckley lent the authority of personal experience to his own point without actually being the one to make the point.

As this example shows, in many cases, general rhetorical principles can explain the effectiveness of specifically-chosen personally-oriented examples within particular LDS speeches. However, these general principles still do not adequately explain why this particular mode of discourse is so heavily encouraged within LDS culture. In general society, personal expression is recognized to be situationally effective, but it is not understood to be persuasively predominant. In LDS culture, on the other hand, personal expression is constantly encouraged and privileged. Indeed, the very frequency of such encouragement suggests that, within the culture, this mode of expression is not seen as simply one rhetorical tool among many, but rather that it is understood to have deeper cultural significance.

This deeper influence stems from the power of personal expression to connect the experiences of individuals with general principles and larger communities. In LDS use, personal expression links individual Church members with both the institutional Church and with its teachings. As a mode to be used in creating such connections, personal discourse is particularly effective. In its very nature, this type of speaking represents a bridge between interior *personal* experience and an exterior *discourse* community. It likewise represents a connection between internal knowledge and its external enactment.

The bridging of such dichotomies—between the individual and the community, between the spiritual and the temporal, between conviction and action—is a major focus

of LDS theology. Indeed, a quest for experiential unity is at the heart of why Latter-day

Saints understand their religion as significant; in their belief, the Restoration of the

gospel joined past authority with present experience. It means that religion is not just a

set of creeds to adhere to, but rather a living power to be experienced. Through personal

expression, Latter-day Saints can, in the words of Elder McConkie, put "a seal of living

reality" on abstract doctrinal ideas ("Stories" 5).

Within LDS culture, several genres of personal expression are specifically

encouraged as means for religious expression. These genres of LDS personal expression

reinforce the LDS worldview by allowing speakers to connect individual experiences

with the transcendent and universal by establishing connections between people, ideas,

and events and placing them all within a meaningful interpretive framework.

First, official LDS Church materials frequently encourage the telling of personal

experience narratives that relate to gospel principles or that demonstrate conviction. For

example, in a 1978 article which was published in the Church's New Era magazine,

Elder Bruce R. McConkie clearly endorsed the practice of sharing what he termed 'faith-

promoting stories.' He said that the sharing of such stories "should be encouraged to the

full"—especially, "ideally," when dealing with "us as individuals" ("Stories" 4-5).

Another example of such official sanctioning can be found in a September 2002

Ensign article by Richard Nash entitled "Telling Personal Stories." In this article, Nash

writes, "One of the most effective methods we can use when teaching or participating in

a discussion is to share a personal experience" (49). In his article, Nash indicates that this

guidance is supported by official Church instruction. He quotes encouragement from

both the Church's official teacher training manual ("Relating personal experiences can

have a powerful influence in helping others live gospel principles. When you tell about

what you have experienced yourself, you act as a living witness of gospel truths") and

the Church Handbook of Instructions ("This [practice of sharing personal experience

accounts] helps teachers and class members strengthen friendships and see how gospel

principles apply to daily life") (qtd. in 50). These official expressions of encouragement

suggest that personal experience narratives are understood to play a useful role in LDS

culture.

Most commonly, official encouragement of the personal narrative genre comes

through the placement of prompts in lesson manuals. These manuals also frequently

include quoted accounts of experience related in the first-person voice. In classroom

settings, such written accounts are generally read aloud. However, the personal

narrative genre is also commonly experienced in written form. For decades, official

Church magazines have included first-person religiously-oriented narratives as a

popular standard feature. Likewise, non-official publishers targeting LDS audiences

have long found compilations of personal experiences to be a popular genre. From the

1935 collection Modern Miracles: Authenticated Testimonies of Living Witnesses

through the No More Strangers series of the 1970's and 1980's to the Saints at War

volumes of today, these collections have constituted an important part of popular LDS

literature. As another offshoot of the personal mode, the personal essay has also

flourished among LDS authors, leading Eugene England to comment that among

literary forms, "the personal essay has the greatest potential for making a uniquely

valuable contribution both to Mormon cultural and religious life and to that of others"
(xxvii).

In some ways, in LDS culture, written expressions of the personal narrative genre
are treated similarly to oral ones. Often, personal experiences that are especially valued
will be expressed in several ways. Written stories are frequently quoted in sermons,
while spoken accounts may be recorded and incorporated into written forms. Such
overlap suggests both the pervasiveness of personal experience accounts in LDS society
and the multiplicity of influences affecting the oral manifestations. Still, although
written personal experience narratives are very common and well-appreciated, oral
expressions are especially privileged. While it is certainly acceptable for LDS speakers to
quote others' stories second-hand, the extemporaneous first-hand iteration of a story is
especially valued. This emphasis on oral immediacy reinforces the central role of oratory
in LDS society.[4]

In many ways, personal experience narratives may be considered as a sub-genre
of the broader narrative form. In two articles published during the mid-1990's, William
A. Wilson describes how "the LDS Church is awash with stories" ("Folklore" 179) and
how these narratives "play a significant role in Mormon life" ("Narratives" 313). Wilson
explains that "the bulk of Mormon narratives…are stories generated…as contemporary
Mormons have come to terms with the joys and pains of their own lives" (314). For
Latter-day Saints, all types of narrative may be religiously significant. However,

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[4] Walter Ong has written extensively on the different cultural impacts of oral and literary modes
of expression. For example, see his *Orality and Literacy.*

personally-related stories, because of their authoritative first-person voice, have particular consequence.

The first-person voice is a fundamental feature of another, even more privileged genre of LDS personal expression: the personal testimony. Encouragement toward the expression of testimony is prevalent throughout LDS culture. Official sanctions of the testimony genre set it apart as "the lifeblood…of the Church" (Kimball "Lifeblood") and a type of expression which "is recorded in heaven for the angels to look upon" (D&C 62:3). The very fact that every LDS congregation reserves a day each month for testimony-bearing suggests the important role this genre plays within the culture. In addition to these 'testimony meetings,' Church members also have frequent opportunity to bear testimony as they give talks and participate in lessons. Church materials recommend the use of testimony in both settings.

Linguistically, the term 'testimony' is complex because it means "simultaneously at least two things." First, it refers to "a metaphor portraying one's internal commitment to the Church and the community." This commitment is clearly personal. However, the term also refers to "a ritual practice" (Knowlton 21). This ritual involves the public affirmation of one's personal religious convictions before an audience. The very name of the genre "conveys the almost legal idea of deposition or witness" (Mandelker 17).

Significantly, the linguistic conflation of these two ideas implies a link between personal experience and community beliefs. This conceptual link affects the focus of LDS personal expression. David Knowlton has described how when LDS speakers bear testimony, they speak personally but rely upon Church doctrine as their "dominant

interpretive mode" (Knowlton 25). In their common form, testimonies communicate no new ideas. Rather, they verbally link speakers to existing, communally-accepted ideas. Testimonies are expressive, but not of innovative feelings. Instead, "testimony links emotions—personal and motivating emotions—with the social process, with…daily life, and with the gospel" (Knowlton 27). Thus, even though the testimony genre assumes a personal form, it functions as a culturally cohesive force.

This function is reinforced by LDS guidelines regarding the approved means of expressing testimony. In official instructions, personal testimonies have prescribed content. Elder Bruce R. McConkie described this content when he taught,

> Three great truths must be included in every valid testimony: 1. That Jesus Christ is the Son of God and the savior of the world; 2. That Joseph Smith is the prophet of God through whom the gospel was restored in this dispensation; and, 3. That the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is the 'only true and living church upon the face of the whole earth.' (qtd. in Gilkey 121)

In practice, of course, these three ideas are not always stated in all LDS testimonies. In fact, in popular use, Gilkey has noted that "the fact that a Mormon says something in the context of the 'testimony bearing' segment of the services labels his/her remarks as testimony" (iv). Still in nearly every case, LDS testimonies are intended "to bear witness to the congregation feelings about spiritual convictions or experiences" which are perceived to be somehow linked to LDS Church teachings (143).

Much as in the case of testimonies, in LDS society, the relatively unstructured personal narrative form is generally oriented towards privileging the status of the LDS

Church. Carolyn Gilkey has written that as used in LDS testimonies, personal experience narratives contain only "culturally salient material generally agreed upon by members…to be self-evidently important and true" (Polanyi qtd. in Gilkey 92). Not all personal experience accounts are seen as religious significant by Latter-day Saint audiences, and thus not all kinds are encouraged. Rather, LDS guidelines privilege narratives that demonstrate the relationship between experience and gospel principles. As speakers relate their own stories in LDS religious settings, they mentally arrange their experience within a hierarchical interpretive framework which privileges certain elements—specifically, those elements that demonstrate the importance of the Church and its teachings. In their culturally-encouraged form, personal experience narratives emphasize the continuing availability of spiritual experience.

Elder Bruce R. McConkie emphasized this point in a 1978 Ensign article entitled "The How and Why of Faith-Promoting Stories." He advised, "Perhaps the perfect pattern in presenting faith-promoting stories is to teach what is found in the scriptures and then to put a seal of living reality upon it by telling a similar and equivalent thing that has happened in our dispensation and to our people and—most ideally—to us as individuals" ("Stories" 5). Importantly, in this guideline, the experiential element of speaking is not supposed to involve just any experience. Rather, it should represent a type of experience in line with scriptural models. For Latter-day Saints, not every personal experience is equal; experience in line with scriptural models is privileged. One should first "liken the scriptures unto" oneself, and only then express what is learned (1 Nephi 19:23).

Through this standard, the legitimacy of personal accounts is constrained by the interpretive assumptions of the community. Latter-day Saints are taught to consider their lives within the framework of the gospel. This framework, which has tremendous epistemological influence, is created, at least in part, through the use of LDS personal experience narratives. As individual speakers tell their stories, they make rhetorical decisions about the relationship between their own identities and a larger collective identity.

These rhetorical decisions have important social consequences. Kenneth Burke has explained, "'Belonging' is rhetorical" (28). By this, Burke means that through their discourse, people identify themselves with each other, with institutions, and with philosophies. The way in which LDS discourse builds connections between individuals and the larger Latter-day Saint community has been recognized by multiple observers, including David Knowlton, Carolyn Gilkey, and Mark Leone. As David Knowlton has described, the effect of LDS discourse is that "internal commitment is given context and purpose within a set of communally validated meanings" (21). This contextualization connects individual identity with the congregational community: "Life experience becomes anchored to the Church" (24). Thus, when LDS individuals engage in personal expression within religious settings, they link themselves to their religious community.

Not only do Latter-day Saints become internally connected to the Church through expressing personal commitment and experience; they also become connected to each other. Rhetorically, accounts of LDS personal experience function through the mechanism which Burke termed "consubstantiality" (21). By this, Burke means that

communicants identify with each other so powerfully that they see their experience as somewhat vicarious.

In Latter-day Saint theology, this union is understood to be at least partially effected through the medium of the Holy Spirit. The feeling of spiritual unity which comes as individuals tell each other about the religious dimension of their personal experience is a powerful cohesive force in the LDS community. Thus, somewhat ironically, in LDS culture, it is often the expression of individual experience that links people together and provides them with a sense of communal solidarity. Indeed, David Knowlton believes that perhaps the most important function of LDS personal expression is that "it unifies the congregation within a sense of community" (25).

Yet, despite this communally-connective function, LDS personal expression derives a good deal of its rhetorical power from its personal focus and adaptable structure. Knowlton has written that the testimony genre's "great strength is that it functions in the minds of members as an unstructured entity" (25). LDS theology rests on the assumption that individually internalizing conviction is the essence of religious experience. Because of the testimony genre's capacity for individualization, it acts as the expressive embodiment of the doctrine of personal revelation—applicable and available in any situation, yet always in concert with previously-revealed truth. Indeed, the two meanings of the word 'testimony' reflect the dual ideas that truth is both personally-acquired and communally-validated.

The connection between the two meanings of the word 'testimony' also reflects an important link in LDS thought between a person's inner experience and their public

expression. In his analysis of the LDS testimony genre, David Knowlton sees this

connection as significant. He explains that by 'bearing testimony,' Latter-day Saints

"actualize and make concrete the abstract metaphors" of their commitment. Their

expressions enact their beliefs. Thus, a testimony is not complete until it is expressed. By

acceding to the encouragement of such expression, Latter-day Saints enact their beliefs

in a tangible way.

The LDS perception of the relationship between conviction and expression is

manifest in a December 1993 <u>Ensign</u> article by Emerson R. West. West writes,

> Bearing our testimony, after we have carefully thought through and evaluated
>
> our feelings, often helps us realize how deep our convictions really are. As we
>
> share with others our personal experiences in living the gospel, we often see
>
> more clearly principles and situations we never fully recognized before. The
>
> inward search, accompanied by the outward bearing of testimony, becomes a
>
> great source of personal spiritual strength. (26-27)

This relationship between conviction and expression was more succinctly expressed by

President Spencer W. Kimball in 1981—"Every time you bear your testimony it becomes

strengthened" ("Testimony" 6-7)—and echoed by Elder Boyd K. Packer in 1983: "A

testimony is to be *found* in the *bearing* of it!" ("Candle" 54). These statements reflect LDS

ideas about the importance of externally expressing one's internal convictions.

Because of how personal discourse represents LDS philosophies regarding the

connection between individual conviction and public expression, it has special meaning

within LDS culture. Through the use of culturally-encouraged genres of personal

expression, LDS speakers enact their religious beliefs. In its very form, a personal mode of expression embodies some of the most fundamental LDS ideas. Specifically, it tangibly enacts ideas about the availability of personal revelation, the meaning of mortal experience, and the importance of infusing one's own life with spiritual experience. In this way, a personal mode of discourse rhetorically reinforces the LDS worldview.

Because of such reinforcement, the rhetorical power of personal expression within LDS culture is deeper than can be explained by its effectiveness in other contexts. Even in specific cases, where general rhetorical principles can elucidate the effectiveness of specific LDS uses of personal expression, these general principles do not fully explain the depth of meaning which personal expression has for Latter-day Saints.

For instance, in LDS settings, personal examples are certainly used to support claims; however, they are not just another type of evidence. They are the best kind of evidence. Latter-day Saints hear frequent reminders that they 'cannot live on borrowed light'—or in other words, that they need to be individually immersed in religious experience. For Latter-day Saints, accounts of personal religious experience always rest on the assumption that the Spirit is presently available for individual guidance. This message is central to many LDS accounts of personal experience.

The importance of the testimony genre also stems from its character as the expressive embodiment of the doctrine of personal revelation. One representative example was documented by David Knowlton. Knowlton writes of a young man who bore testimony of "struggling with the world" in a science class, and desiring to find out the truth of the gospel. In his own words, he described a "simple, quiet manifestation"

which showed "it was true" (25). This account, "in some ways a minimalist testimony," clearly illustrates fundamental components of LDS doctrine. It demonstrates the availability of personal revelation and it places that availability within a specific everyday context (25).

For Latter-day Saints, religious personal expression does not just illustrate specific principles; it also implies the larger idea that because of the Restoration, God's power is present in the LDS Church's teachings and organization. In the phraseology of Elder Bruce R. McConkie, such stories deal with things "that happened in our dispensation…that occurred in the lives of living people whom we know, whose voice we can hear, and whose spirit we can feel" (4). For Latter-day Saints then, personal expression is important in manifesting the continuing reality of the Restoration. The currency of personal expression is important because it show that the same things are happening in the lives of Latter-day Saints today "as transpired among the faithful of old." This similarity is significant, because as was expressed by Elder McConkie, "Unless we enjoy the same gifts and work the same miracles that marked the lives of those who have gone before, we are not the Lord's people" ("Stories" 4).

Accordingly, whenever revelatory events occur which impact either the members of the entire LDS Church or the members of an individual congregation, participants bear firsthand testimony to the actuality of the event. A good example of such an instance can be seen in a 1988 Church-wide commemoratory fireside address where President Gordon B. Hinckley told of his involvement with the 1978 revelation to extend the priesthood to all worthy males. As a participant, President Hinckley was able

to offer first-hand verification of the revelatory event's authenticity: "All of us [who were present for the decision] knew that the time had come for a change and that the decision had come from the heavens. The answer was clear. There was a perfect unity among us in our experience and in our understanding" ("Priesthood" 70). Such first-hand testimony is appreciated by Latter-day Saints as primary evidence of an event's reality.

Significantly, in his account, President Hinckley compared his own experience with previous events in Restoration history. He said, "I was not present when John the Baptist conferred the Aaronic Priesthood. I was not present when Peter, James, and John conferred the Melchizedek Priesthood. But I was present and was a participant and a witness to what occurred on Thursday, June 1, 1978" ("Priesthood" 69). Through this comparison, President Hinckley reinforced the idea that the Restoration had tangible, current power.

This focus on personal, present, ongoing revelation is reinforced by official LDS Church guidelines outlining how to best express personal experiences and convictions. One of the necessary qualifications of a good testimony is that it is personal. Generally in LDS settings, since a personal focus reinforces the doctrine of personal revelation, the more personally-oriented a testimony is, the better. Based on her two-year anthropological study of LDS speaking, Carolyn Gilkey concluded that "The subjects presented in a testimony can be any event, idea or emotion as long as the audience perceives it to be relevant to the gospel in some way, and personal but not too personal" (Gilkey 135).

Gilkey's qualifier is interesting. She outlines her caveat more fully later in her

work while the standards of acceptance held by LDS audiences: "A good testimony has

personal details, but not intimate ones and spiritual experiences but not mystical ones"

(Gilkey 145). Gilkey's description is supported by official LDS Church instruction. A

1993 Ensign advised, "Use wisdom in telling sacred experiences…It is not appropriate to

reveal intimate details of sacred experiences….Share personal experiences only as you

feel the promptings of the Holy Ghost" (West 28-29). Likewise, in his 1975 book Teach

Ye Diligently, Apostle Boyd K. Packer wrote, "There are some things just too sacred to

discuss. Remember that that which cometh from above is sacred, and must be spoken

with care, and by constraint of the Spirit" (87). Interestingly, these prohibitions only

elevate the status of the personal, reserving experience of special significance from

public consumption.

Perhaps even more importantly, these prohibitions also suggest that Latter-day

Saints only value the public personal expression when it will have communal

application. Such communal focus lies behind much of the official instruction given

regarding how to properly employ personal expression. Emerson R. West's Ensign

article delineates several additional guidelines for testimony-bearing. West writes, "As

we share a brief, heartfelt testimony, we might also share a faith-promoting experience

that has brought us to our knowledge of truth. It may be appropriate to tell why we

have the convictions we do. However, we should avoid giving travelogues, preaching,

or telling others how to live" (27). West also advises, "Remember, testimony time is not

confession time. We should avoid discussing our faults and sins and the weaknesses and

sins of others.…It is much more uplifting and motivating if we relate faith-promoting experiences that demonstrate the Lord's help" (28). In each of these pieces of advice, West's instructions suggest that the purpose of sharing individual testimony is communal.

This focus was similarly echoed in a 2002 Ensign article which dealt with personal experience narratives. The article included a sidebar with "cautions for sharing personal experiences." Here, LDS readers are instructed that speakers should "avoid making [themselves] the hero of…stories." Likewise, they should "make sure [a] story relates to a gospel principle" since as is explained, "A story told merely to entertain will defeat the purpose of why [a congregation has] gathered" (Nash 51). This purpose, it is clearly implied, is not to give opportunity for individual free expression, but rather to provide a chance for the reinforcement of communally-shared ideas.

Such guidelines reinforce the acculturative role which personal expression plays in LDS society. This role is especially established through the use of personal expression as a religious ritual. Anthropologist David Knowlton has examined the cultural significance and function of testimonies in LDS culture and concluded that, because of its perceived significance, testimony serves as the "high ritual of Mormonism" (23). Knowlton's analysis describes public testimony as an LDS worship ritual that uses words as symbols to "bind…personal lives with the community's myth" (24). In his analysis, Knowlton refers to the work of Victor Turner who described how "ritual takes the formative myths of any society…and presents the myths as a type through which individuals play out their own life stories" (24).

In the LDS culture, important community myths—in other words, stories that are understood by members of the culture to be historically true and culturally important—include Joseph Smith's First Vision narrative, accounts of the persecution suffered by early Latter-day Saints, and stories of the nineteenth-century pioneer exodus. From these stories, Latter-day Saints extrapolate lessons about the importance of personal revelation, the meaning of difficult experience, and the significance of community gathering. These lessons have become infused into the LDS worldview. They influence the ways in which Latter-day Saints interpret their own experiences. When their experiences corroborate these lessons, Latter-day Saints feel their religious convictions strengthened. Then, when they speak in a personal vein, Latter-day Saints select occurrences to relate which illustrate these lessons. LDS speakers often include accounts of such experiences in their testimonies. Even when they do not, their testimonies are presumed to imply this type of experience.

Thus, even 'straight' testimony—a non-narrative or unembellished expression of a speaker's personal confidence in LDS religious doctrines—can be understood as a means of ritually connecting an individual's life with community models. Furthermore, Latter-day Saint testimonies are often characterized by familiar patterns of expressing belief. In her two-year study of LDS worship practices, Carolyn Gilkey identified a number of "formulas of testimony." In her research, the most commonplace of these were the phrase "I know this church is true," the expression of gratitude for family members, the idea "I know that God/Heavenly Father lives/is real/there is a God," and the articulation of belief in a current prophet (259). These themes reinforce basic LDS

doctrines. By speaking in the personal voice while enunciating the established ideas of LDS orthodoxy, Latter-day Saints link their own identities to the foundational precepts of the LDS community. Learning to perform this ritual successfully is an important part of Latter-day Saint acculturation. In all human cultures, group membership is demarcated by language use. As Latter-day Saints learn to speak the language of testimony and to express religiously-oriented interpretations of their personal experience, they identify themselves as bona fide Latter-day Saints.

Importantly, a distinguishing feature of this LDS ritual, which sets it apart from many other religious rituals, is its flexible focus on personal experience. While Latter-day Saint testimonies often contain stock phrases, they are arranged to fit individual circumstances and to match individual ideas of priority. Certainly, the testimonies of young children are often "indistinguishable"; however, as children mature and become more fluent in the mode, "they expand their remarks beyond the formulaic," adapting the basic genre to the circumstances of their own lives in a way that reflects creative thought about the personal meaning of their religion (Gilkey 249). Through their speech, Latter-day Saints thus learn to consider their religious affiliation in personal terms.

It should be noted that it is possible to misinterpret the importance of the public performance aspect of the testimony ritual. In LDS understanding, personal expressions reflect personal experience. An expression is valued, not so much for its own merits, as because it is understood to reflect a deeper interior commitment. This interior experience, Latter-day Saints believe, is the essence of true religion. In actuality, perhaps the most important feature of LDS personal discourse is not the ritual expression of

personal experience, but the prior shaping of interpretation. An LDS speaker's use of

personal expression to relate religious ideas represents a triumph of acculturation not

only because it takes part in a specific discursive tradition, but more importantly

because it reflects the individual interiorization of that tradition.

In his analysis, David Knowlton affirms that, as they bear testimony, Church

members "reinterpret…individual experience to fit the structure of the form" (25).

However, Knowlton's description may not be quite broad enough. Because of their

internalization of LDS Church teachings and LDS discourse conventions, many Latter-

day Saints may not even need to "reinterpret" their experience. For acculturated Church

members, the framework of LDS doctrine often structures how they actually experience

things in the first place.

A good example of this is related by Mark Leone. He writes of a teenage girl who

while bearing testimony spoke about an experience with depression. She indicated that

she "felt like dying" until she read her patriarchal blessing. The blessing provided her

such comfort that she had a desire to "[share] the solace derived from the church's truth

with her fellow ward members" (181). Unquestionably, this girl's familiarity with the

culturally-recognized power of patriarchal blessings guided her to read her blessing in

the first place. In a reciprocal pattern, her expression of the experience then reaffirmed

the idea that "something exists inside the church which is designed to give…comfort in

crises" (181).

Similar examples of individual experiences being used to teach and to reaffirm

general principles are replete throughout LDS discourse. Each one reinforces the idea

that an individual's personal experience can teach communally significant lessons. Each

one also implies the assumption that sharing such experiences can motivate others.

Of course, in Latter-day Saint understanding, the most powerful motivating force

is direct spiritual experience. In consequence of this idea, the Church's most general

oratorical instruction throughout its history has been that the preaching should provide

an opportunity for the Holy Spirit to touch others. During the nineteenth century,

Brigham Young taught, "The eloquence of angels…would be a combination of useless

sounds" without the accompanying "power of the Holy Ghost" (qtd. in Bitton 11). A

similar theme was expressed by President Ezra Taft Benson in a 1985 address to mission

presidents: "If there is one message I have repeated to my brethren of the Twelve, it is

that it's the Spirit that counts. It is the Spirit that matters. I do not know how often I have

said this, but I never tire of saying it—it is the Spirit that matters most" (qtd. in

Teaching, No Greater Call 199).

This focus on spiritual verification produces natural concern with two elements

of discourse: validity and sincerity. These concerns impact the rhetorical preparation of

LDS speakers. As was explained in the Church's Ensign magazine, "Any variation from

the truth will cause you to lose the Spirit" (Nash 51). This means that in order to speak

effectively, Latter-day Saints believe they must be careful to speak truthfully. Likewise,

they must be sure to, in the words of Emerson West, "Bear testimony for the right

reasons." In explanation of this counsel, West elaborates, "We should not bear testimony

simply because all of our friends are doing it….We should avoid bearing testimony

simply out of habit." These instructions represent an underlying emphasis on the importance of always speaking in concert with the Spirit's guidance.

The concern with spiritual guidance prompted one of the most noteworthy characteristics of nineteenth-century LDS oratory. During that era, "it was virtually unthinkable…to give a memorized or prewritten sermon" (Bitton 8). This practice, which was no doubt partially inherited from the Separatist and evangelical traditions, also had scriptural warrant. The words of Jesus Christ originally given in Matthew were reinforced for Latter-day Saints in D&C 84:85: "Neither take ye thought beforehand what ye shall say; but treasure up in your minds continually the words of life, and it shall be given you in the very hour that portion that shall be meted to every man." In this vein, an 1892 editorial in the Church-produced <u>Contributor</u> magazine instructed, "Error lies in the elders who are likely to be called to speak determining before the hour arrives for them to address the congregation what subject they will treat. It should be left to the Spirit of the Lord to suggest the subject" (90). Such counsel was common throughout the nineteenth century and was reflected in many addresses recorded during that era.

This preference for extemporaneity was reflective of the importance emphasis which Latter-day Saints give to the doctrine of revelation. Joseph Jarvis indicates that throughout the second half of the nineteenth century, "continuous revelation was closely associated in the Mormon mind with…impromptu speaking" (201). Early Latter-day Saints felt that when speakers were not constrained by prior plans, the Spirit would have freer reign to speak through them. It would prompt the direction of an address and

bring to mind details providing the necessary development. The Lord's promise, they felt, was that general preparation would yield appropriate results in specific circumstances (Bitton 8-9).

This practice certainly foregrounds the personal aspect of the LDS understanding of revelation. Spontaneously-developed speeches cannot pause to refer to libraries containing scholarly treatises and reference works; rather, they must rely on the limits of human memory and the dictates of inspiration. Certainly, a sermon springing from an individual's lifetime of experience might naturally draw upon specific elements of that experience. Indeed, without specific preparation or the aide of reference materials, this lifetime of experience would be all a speaker could draw on. Early Latter-day Saints did not see this as a limitation. One's entire life was one's preparation—and hence, the quality of one's life would be reflected in one's rhetorical power.

Of course, today pre-written speeches are no longer taboo in LDS speaking. Bowing to the constraints of modern broadcasting media, General Authorities now prepare their Church-wide addresses well in advance. Likewise, rank-and-file members are encouraged to "prepare every needful thing" when they are assigned to give lessons and sermons (D&C 88: 119; see also Teaching No Greater Call 230-233). Generally, topics are actually assigned to speakers and teachers, either by local leaders or through Church-wide correlation. However, there still is a strong tradition of impromptu speaking in LDS culture. General leaders still give unrehearsed speeches for regional audiences. Likewise, on all occasions, personal experience narratives are still told in a largely unscripted manner and testimonies are almost never read—and would actually

be suspect if they were. Indeed, there is a strong cultural ideal that any member should be able to bear impromptu testimony at any time. The inspiration of the Spirit is still seen as the key to real insight. In fact, special significance is attached to leaders' words when they indicate they "feel impressed" to leave their prepared address and proceed in a different direction.

In any case, the decreased emphasis in LDS culture on spontaneity does not seem intended to stifle the expression of personal feeling. Rather, it seems meant to direct it. Such direction has become more important in the LDS tradition as an increasingly larger proportion of the LDS Church membership has become involved in speaking.

In the early days of the LDS Church, worship services were community-wide, sometimes involving as many as 8,000 people. Not until the Latter-day Saints moved west to Utah did individual wards begin holding separate worship services. This division meant that "more local members participated in Sabbath activities." However, visiting General Authorities continued to be frequent speakers at local meetings. Also, for a time, typical Sundays included both community and ward meetings. Still, as time passed, meeting schedules became more and more locally-focused (Hartley 21-23).

During the second half of the nineteenth-century, Latter-day Saint congregations initiated other religious activities which also encouraged increased oral involvement by congregation members. The first Sunday School in Utah was assembled in 1849. This meeting was imitated by other congregations, so that "for the first time women and children participated directly in a Sabbath meeting as teachers and students." In time, the Sunday School organization—along with other LDS 'auxiliaries' such as Relief

Society, Primary, etc.—was standardized (Hartley 23). Gradually, through their

gatherings and through an increased general participation in sacrament meeting

speaking and even in missionary service, a larger and larger percentage of the LDS

Church membership has become involved as speakers in religious settings. This shift has

clearly transferred an important portion of the responsibility for creating religious

meaning to the general Church membership.

In many ways, this diffusion reflects the fruition of a philosophy in which all

individuals should be personally involved in religious experience. The ideal is clearly

enacted in the responsibility given to individual lay members to personally address their

congregations. If anything, any specific restraints on personal speaking must be

considered against this backdrop. No doubt, many leaders feel that it is wise that they

assign topics to speakers in order to discourage the potential for individual excesses.

However, the very practice of surrendering the pulpit to members of a congregation

suggests the degree to which individual involvement is understood as a key element of

the LDS religion.

Even in the LDS Church's early days, when extemporaneity was the norm,

leaders placed restraints on expressions which they deemed too individualistic. For

example, Joseph Smith found it necessary to issue official pronouncements outlining the

balance between individual religious expression and institutional control (D&C 28; see

also Higdon 9). This balance is suggestive of why the Spirit is considered so important in

LDS discourse. The Spirit, Latter-day Saints believe, provides the ultimate validation.

Accordingly, it is to be earnestly sought. Both speakers and listeners are responsible for

being in tune with the Spirit. This responsibility returns attention to the personal nature

of religion. Since heeding the Spirit is an internal matter, each individual must be

personally involved in the reception and production of religious discourse.

Learning to be thus personally involved in religious discourse is an important

part of LDS acculturation. In the Church, children are encouraged to begin speaking at

an early age. Beginning at age three, all LDS children join the Primary program. For two

hours each week, Primary children participate in lessons that teach them the

fundamentals of LDS doctrine and involve them in religious expression. In Primary,

children are taught to be personally involved in expressing their relationship to LDS

Church doctrines. For example, the September 1999 issue of the Church's Friend

magazine for children includes a lesson that is intended to be used by leaders during the

Primary's activity-based 'Sharing Time.' The article, which is entitled "Sharing Time: We

Can Testify of Jesus and His Gospel," demonstrates how at a very young age, children

begin to be taught the importance of religious testimony (S. Reynolds).

Childhood instruction in this LDS genre of personal expression is general

practice throughout the Church and is often specifically guided. In his 1993 Ensign

article on testimony, Ernest R. West instructs that children "should be taught early in life

to bear their testimonies." West is particular in encouraging instruction in the

specifically LDS approach to testimony. He does not encourage undifferentiated

religious expressions. Rather, he advises that children should be taught to understand

the internal, personal component of testimony, warning that "to mimic others prevents

[a] child from understanding what a true testimony is and may lead him to think he has

a testimony as soon as he can use the vocabulary of testimony." To avoid this problem, West recommends, "We should help children understand that bearing a testimony is a spiritual experience and that it is not a means of attracting personal attention. We should teach them that bearing their testimony is sharing their love and experiences."

Such instruction was echoed several years later in a 1999 Ensign article entitled "Helping Children Learn to Give Talks," which provides additional instruction on how to acculturate children in the LDS personal mode of discourse. In answer to the rhetorical question "How can parents help children learn to speak about the gospel?" the very first suggestion is "Parents can help children make connections between their experience and gospel principles" (45). In its direction, this article emphasizes that expression should be preceded by experience. The article directs, "Parents can help instill confidence in their children by showing them how to receive Heavenly Father's direction as they prepare talks." This article also encourages the early development of a personal religious voice, instructing "Children should…be encouraged to tell stories in their own words" (45). As is demonstrated by these examples, learning to speak from personal experience is recognized as an important part of a child's LDS religious training.

Fluency within the LDS personal mode is also important in allowing adults to identify themselves with the general Latter-day Saint community. Within the Church, LDS conventions often act as more powerful rhetorical standards than traditional measures of eloquence. Carolyn Gilkey's study of LDS verbal worship practices found that "a person who stumbles, pauses, changes pronouns, [and] misuses verbs" can still

be "competent" if they exemplify LDS values of "humility, sincerity, and heartfelt feeling." This tolerance exemplifies the LDS privileging of actual experience.

On the other hand, speakers who fail to recognize LDS conventions or who misuse LDS genres are generally unsuccessful in their efforts to influence others. David Knowlton writes of a high counselor who "gave long, beautiful talks [which] were well-constructed, well-presented, and well-acted." Yet, Knowlton's congregation was "generally dissatisfied with the talks." Knowlton writes, "I even heard the bishop complain, 'he sounds like a Baptist preacher.'… What [the high counselor] said was not heretical, but to be interesting, he had violated the [LDS] canons of performance….He was defeated by his own rhetorical skill. It called attention to itself as performance" (27). This story demonstrates the impact which established conventions have on the reception of LDS discourse.

Similarly, Carolyn Gilkey documented examples of "ridicule" by both adults and children of one woman's expressions of testimony. As Gilkey explains, the woman "regularly bore her testimony, filled with details of her ill health, priesthood blessings and distant family….Before long…the subjects…were perceived as unbelievable, too personal, and redundant." In this case, the ridicule was exacerbated because within the ward society, "she was dependent, never self-sufficient and unpleasant….Ward members consistently gave her help and companionship but she was rude and unappreciative." These qualities culturally invalidated the legitimacy of her expressions (139). As is shown by this example, if speakers are not perceived as speaking personally

from the heart or if they do not show deference to LDS community values, they are

likely to be dismissed as hypocritical and self-serving.

Of course, fluency within the personal mode is only one element of LDS

identification. While Latter-day Saints depend on the power of speech to bind people

together, they never view speech as an end in itself. Rather, Latter-day Saint affiliation is

demonstrated even more fundamentally by action. This value inevitably influences the

focus of LDS discourse, making it audience-oriented and pragmatic. It also influences its

reception. Carolyn Gilkey notes that often "when Brother K. tells a self-aggrandizing

story or Sister R. is trite, the audience is touched rather than annoyed because they know

the sacrifices these people make for others and of their genuine humility" (142). Gilkey's

assessment is that in LDS culture, "speaking does not establish righteousness, a good-

faith effort establishes righteousness" (142). Speech is most important not as the "social

diacritic" that David Knowlton portrays it to be, but as a possible tool for motivating

others to increased efforts.

This does not mean that the instruction to speak personally does not concern

LDS speakers. In fact, precisely because they believe in the necessity of speaking

genuinely from the heart, earnest Latter-day Saints may feel some anxiety about their

ability to produce acceptable personal speech. This burden suggests research done by

Patricia Caldwell concerning American Puritan conversion narratives. Caldwell's

research muted previous stereotypes which had described Puritan personal experience

accounts as being "not so much composed as recited" (Shea 106). She found, rather, that

far from feeling that their forms were mechanical, New England's applicants

"experienced some trauma when they were called upon to give a relation" (85). It was a challenging exercise to explain how God's plan might be evidenced in the actual events of one's own life. In agreement, Owen Watkins writes that earnest Puritan narrators were "anxious not to oversimplify the record" (29).

This sort of anxiety is not unknown in LDS speaking. In fact, it is considered a topic of common enough concern that it is directly addressed in the "Question & Answer" section of the October 2006 Ensign (interestingly, an issue of the Ensign specifically intended for new converts, suggesting a perceived need to help recent converts become comfortable with LDS speaking conventions). This feature, which represents the input of Church members throughout the world, includes the advice "You may not know how to voice your feelings. This happens to almost everyone. You don't have to be eloquent. All it takes is a sincere statement of what you know to be true." Such expression, in LDS understanding, will be accompanied by the presence of the Spirit and thus will be convincing to others who are 'in tune' with the Spirit.

The responsibility to speak through the Spirit places a burden on speakers. They must be sure when speaking that their hearts are in the right place. A similar burden is also placed on audiences. They are responsible to have their hearts prepared to receive the Spirit. Davis Bitton has identified the existence of this idea in early LDS speaking, writing, "From the 1830s, it has been recognized that…the tolerance and receptivity of the congregation is vital in making a sermon successful" (21). The idea is certainly present in the LDS tradition today, as both lesson structures and explicit precept indicate the obligation to be actively involved in the reception of a religious message.

This approach to communication encourages what Wayne Booth has called, in other situations, a "rhetoric of assent." Within such a discursive culture, "the line between [individuals] grows dim; in the ideal case it disappears" as speaker and audience become involved in "the mysterious process of two becoming one" (xvi). Through their willingness to identify with each other, speakers and audiences create strong communal bonds. Their desires for shared identification foster a certain type of rhetoric. As Booth explains, "for a rhetoric of assent…ethical proof"—the very type of proof that is accomplished by referencing personal experience—"looks much more important." In other words, the value of personally-oriented discourse is magnified when personal experiences are ontologically linked to a group tradition.

LDS leaders, by encouraging the personal discourse mode in their religious settings, are acting upon rhetorically sound principles. The mode itself is a powerful binder. Speakers both enhance their ethos and further develop their own internal sense of a shared identity. Likewise, listeners employ group conventions to interpret the personal experiences of others as relevant to their own experience. They are persuaded by identification with the experience of others.

Moreover, in Latter-day Saint contexts, a personal mode of discourse suggests a shared understanding of the importance of personal experience. Because of LDS doctrines regarding personal revelation, this focus on personal experience is perceived as particularly legitimate. By employing LDS conventions of personal expression, speakers reinforce an epistemological framework based on LDS doctrines.

Of course, not all LDS references to personal experience reflect conscious rhetorical maneuvers. At times, such reference can be a product of an individual's desire for self-expression. At other times, it can be a formalistic habit, even a mechanical crutch. However, in many cases, Latter-day Saints do reference their personal experiences with distinctly rhetorical intent. Moreover, the idea of personal experience is at the heart of Latter-day Saint history, doctrine, and identity. Thus, the personal mode itself—through its persistent use—reinforces LDS doctrines and traditions and exemplifies the LDS world view. It teaches a way of looking at the world and one's experiential place within it. Individual speakers speaking in specific circumstances may not even be consciously aware of this function. However, this does not make it any less real.

Unquestionably, the selection of when to use this rhetorical tool is a choice involving multiple considerations, some related to very individualized circumstances. The importance of the mode could be overstated. It is not always used, and when used it does not always have a powerful rhetorical effect. However, its successful use acculturates Latter-day Saints, teaching them to identify with the LDS worldview in deeply personal ways. Although the mode is personal, its importance is communal.

Chapter 5: Rethinking LDS Personal Identity

In 1983, Patricia Caldwell published an important study of Puritan conversion narratives in which she asserted that the real Puritan literary heritage was deeper than such matters as "architectural arrangement, use of tropes, or other rhetorical techniques." Instead, she showed that "what did evidently make an impression, and what had real literary consequences, was the overall set of attitudes and values that the ministers managed to convey in all that they said, about the possibilities of human expression" (144). A similar idea was expressed by Larzer Ziff in an essay considering the literary legacy of Puritanism in America. Ziff wrote, "Revolutionary cultural movements like Puritanism affect literature by changing the way men perceive and describe reality rather than by simply providing a different set of customs to serve as subject matter" (44).

In these statements, both Caldwell and Ziff maintain that the creation of a new worldview has experiential and rhetorical consequences of the most profound kind. In many ways, the establishment of an altered worldview is at the heart of religious experience within the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. LDS Church members ascribe to doctrines that imply a rather radical conception of the potential of human experience and expression. LDS theology posits a way of looking at the world in which individuals are seen as capable of receiving divine revelation and in which temporal and spiritual experiences are so tightly fused that all action is seen as having spiritual significance.

This theology is incorporated into a culture where community expression is oriented towards motivating individual internalization of the theology. Within such a setting, personal discourse is central. It represents an important way in which authority is mediated within the LDS religion. By speaking personally, LDS authorities demonstrate their experience with spiritual things. Latter-day Saints treat such experience as having central religious significance. Because of this assumption, speaking personally about spiritual experience allows LDS speakers to both draw authority from their religious tradition and also to reinforce that tradition.

Importantly, the use of personal discourse is diffused throughout LDS culture. Through their participation in religious speaking, the general membership of the LDS Church takes part in the LDS tradition of personal expression. As they speak in religious settings, Church members use the personal voice to identify themselves with the LDS Church. Their personal expression reinforces their personal identification with the Church.

Such personal identification then impacts these Latter-day Saints' reception of subsequent discourse. LDS audiences accept the expressed experience of Church authorities as analogous with their own experience. Rather than merely passively accepting authoritative pronouncements, Latter-day Saints strive to replicate in their own lives the authenticity of these pronouncements. As they do so, they become personally engaged with official Church doctrine. Such engagement can then itself be expressed in a personal manner. Thus, through a cycle of personal discourse, the Latter-day Saint identity is both solidified and extended.

Understanding this function of LDS personal discourse provides essential insights into LDS culture. For example, such understanding helps clarify an existing debate about the degree of authoritarianism present in LDS culture and practice. Often, descriptions of the LDS Church portray it as an authoritatively repressive institution. As Mark Leone has described, Latter-day Saints are very frequently "characterized as hierarchical, authoritarian, and literalistic" (171).

At first, the frequent LDS reliance on personal expression seems to contradict such depictions of repression. Indeed, in qualified opposition to these portrayals, Leone has interpreted the commonality of LDS personally-grounded discourse to mean that Latter-day Saints give such authority to personal experience that "the essence of Mormon theology…is centered on the individual" (192-193). In this characterization, Leone is echoed by Elmer Jay Richardson, who asserted in 1997 that a "radical individualism…is at the heart of the [LDS] religion" (149).

Of course, Leone's depiction of extreme LDS individualism seems at odds not only with harsh caricatures of Latter-day Saints as browbeaten religious conformists but also with more favorable descriptions portraying them as a group-conscious people with an unrivaled capacity for social organization. Certainly, many scholars believe that at least for early Latter-day Saints, communitarian concerns were a stronger force than the more prevalent ideas of Jacksonian individualism. Marvin Hill, for example, has written that for nineteenth-century Latter-day Saints, paramount ideals were "social harmony, cooperation, and brotherhood…not individualism" ("Counter-Revolution" 29).

In reality, both Hill's characterization of an LDS "distaste for democracy" (26) and Leone's and Richardson's interpretations of extreme LDS individualism need to be tempered by a fuller understanding of how personal discourse actually functions within LDS society. While it is true that "Mormon theology clearly puts free will at the very heart of its understanding of the gospel" (Richardson 149), it does not automatically follow that Latter-day Saints emphasize the individualistic potentialities of free will. Rather, LDS speakers generally urge voluntary submission of the will to a higher authority. To illustrate this submission, they often share personal examples of what it means to 'live the gospel'—essentially, to conform to God's plan as taught in the teachings of the LDS Church. Thus, LDS personalism does not reflect a cultural acceptance of extreme individualism.

However, at the same time, an overbearing domination by church authorities does not seem evident in the Church's heavy reliance on lay leadership or the active use of relatively untrained missionaries since the earliest periods of the Church's history. The notion of a rigid authoritarian hierarchy is further undermined by the recognition of how much allowance exists for speaking by individual members of each LDS congregation. Every week, the leaders of local LDS Church units yield their pulpits to members of their congregation. Once a month, these pulpits become completely free-access zones where anyone may stand to bear testimony. At the pulpit, LDS Church members generally speak personally about their own interpretations of the gospel. The reception of a speaker's ideas is, of course, mediated by a given audience's understanding of how these ideas relate to the principles of LDS orthodoxy. Still, the

regularity of such lay speaking means that much of a typical member's understanding of official LDS doctrine will have been created by similar addresses presented to them by other members much like themselves.

In some points, the LDS worldview and personal discourse mode stem from the extension of a general Christian, or perhaps even a specifically Puritan worldview. However, in many ways, these ideas represent a revolution of their own. Of course, the origin of Latter-day Saint religious practices represents an ongoing theme of debate among historians of LDS culture.

In the past, too many historians fell into one of two camps. Many treated LDS culture as purely a product of its time, a sort of zealous overreaction to impulses in the larger culture. Others (particularly LDS Church members) often treated the movement as an entirely exceptional case in history, almost peculiarly out-of-time. In truth, neither extreme reflects reality. In his seminal history <u>Mormon Experience</u>, Leonard Arrington critiqued both of these approaches. Arrington asserted that LDS historians should recognize "secular influences on developments in Mormon history" (xiv). However, he also quoted Gary L. Bunker's general defense of the independent character of religious movements: "To say that [believers] simply [take] over existing notions and [restate] them seems a naïve reductionism" (qtd. in xiv). In reality, Arrington suggests, LDS religious practices have been externally-influenced but not historically-conditioned.

Fortunately, in recent decades, portrayals of LDS history have become more nuanced. However, this complexity has not been sufficiently extended to the treatment of LDS discourse. Far too often, some aspects of LDS speaking have been portrayed as

merely reflexive, almost automatic, consequences of existent historical trends. The

postulation of such cultural conditioning never does justice to the complexity of human

interaction and imagination. In actuality, the LDS personal mode of speaking

demonstrates how discourse can both draw meaning from existing traditions and at the

same time also be creatively shaped by its users to generate new meanings.

A more balanced approach to Latter-day Saint speaking recognizes the existence

of a contextualized yet independent LDS identity. For many Latter-day Saints, an

affiliation with the LDS Church represents one of the most fundamental features of their

personal identity. Certainly, this LDS identity is perceived by Latter-day Saints

themselves to be unique and independent. And in many ways, this perception creates

reality. Since Latter-day Saints conceive of their tradition as independent, they feel free

to speak in ways that they perceive to be uniquely LDS. This perception of

independence, as it was expressed in early LDS history, has been well-described by

Susan Stryker: "Mormonism…acted primarily according to its own understanding of its

role in the world, and only secondarily with reference to how it would be perceived by

others….Mormonism had its own agenda, its own reasons for pursuing it, its own voice

to speak about it" (Stryker 232-233).

As described by Stryker, this voice reflects an independent LDS cultural identity.

As in many other cultures, the LDS identity is partially created and maintained through

discourse. By speaking in culturally-sanctioned ways, individual Latter-day Saints link

themselves with a communal Latter-day Saint identity.

Of course, this conclusion about LDS culture is general. Certainly, the actual application of the cultural pattern will vary in individual situations. This study has not included much focus on how the LDS tradition of personal discourse has developed over time. Likewise, it has not given any attention to the cultural variability with which personal expression is used by LDS speakers in various locations around the world. Such considerations would be productive directions for future research.

At present, all signs seem to indicate that the importance of personal expression within LDS discourse is becoming ever-more established. Of course, the mode is not ubiquitous. Plenty of important LDS addresses do not reflect it. However, it should be remembered that the most important thing about this mode of discourse is not its use in any particular setting, but rather its function in establishing a particular way of viewing the world.

It will be interesting to see how Latter-day Saint personal expression develops in the future, especially as LDS Church missionary work spreads to areas where, historically, Christian ideas about personal religious experience have had little resonance. It may be that a cultural willingness to accept this standard of authority will have an important impact on the degree of success experienced by the Church in various cultures. Of course, societies themselves also experience change. Currently, the democratizing influences of modern communications technology are having important impacts on the worldwide use and acceptance of personal expression.

In any case, recognition of the importance of personal discourse in LDS culture can contribute important insights to the study of the Latter-day Saint culture. This mode

of discourse serves as a means for balancing cultural tensions between community and individuality, spirituality and pragmatism, obedience and agency. It involves individual LDS Church members in the expression of LDS doctrine and gives them a personal stake in the doctrine. Through its unique modification and extension of Christian ideas about the importance of personal religious experience, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints has created a tradition of personal discourse which has enormous influence within Latter-day Saint culture and which explains much about the nature of the Church membership's own understanding of their LDS identity.

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