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Twentieth-Century Mormon Eloquence: A Stylistic Analysis of Two Sermons by Neal A. Maxwell

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Public address and oratory in Mormon culture constitute a long and rich tradition that has been largely neglected by ethnographers, rhetoricians, and linguists. While oral discourse among Mormons has received some attention by folklorists, so far very few and limited studies of Mormon sermons or preaching have been published, and little study has been done of the general conferences of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, those semiannual gatherings in which the faithful worldwide spend a weekend listening attentively to ten or more hours of formal sermons. It has been by way of these general conferences that so many individual orators have become part of the texture of Mormon history, faith, and discourse. From the stentorian cadences of Bruce R. McConkie to the evangelical rhapsodies of LeGrand Richards; from the memorable homilies of Thomas S. Monson to the doctrinal explications of former justice Dallin Oaks, a rich diversity of approaches to the sermon characterizes the general conference address.

Regrettably, few of these orators have received any significant appraisal of their preaching methods. I hope, in small measure, to begin rectifying this lapse in the appreciation of Mormon sermons by speaking today on the sermon style of Neal A. Maxwell, an Apostle whose speeches are consistently compelling and popular. My purpose is to characterize Maxwell's sermons linguistically and rhetorically, and to answer the question, "What is it that makes Maxwell's sermons the object of such rapt attention?" I draw for my examples upon two of his addresses, "Willing to Submit," delivered in April 1985, and "According to the Desire of [Our] Heart," delivered October 1996.

There is a characteristically intellectual quality to Maxwell's style, reflecting his background as an educator and as a person well read in both literature and contemporary culture. Thus, at times he articulates heady abstractions of a philosophical nature, such as when he describes Christ's suffering in Gethsemane as "enormity multiplied by infinity" (85:48). At other times, he draws upon registers of diction more commonplace and general, such as when he echoes the mundanely comprehensible realm of automobile insurance by referring to the "no fault" philosophy of our day (96:8). Maxwell mixes his idioms, suggesting that although he contemplates life from the transcendent heights of faith and theology, he also lives life with the rest of us in the trenches. Consider the following passage, which he introduces by acknowledging that at times God causes or permits some of our suffering:

This sobering reality calls for deep submissiveness, especially when God does not remove the cup from us. In such circumstances, when reminded about the premortal shouting for joy as this life's plan was unfolded (see Job 38:7), we can perhaps be pardoned if, in some moments, we wonder what all the shouting was about. (85:38)
Maxwell here blends somber reflection and biblical allusion with a gentle irony achieved through the pleasant juxtaposition of scriptural idiom with the everyday. The net effect of this blend is that Maxwell communicates as much empathy as doctrine. His use of the first person plural buttresses his empathetic ethos, for in using it he joins his audience in wondering, at times, what all the shouting is about.

Maxwell’s mix of educated and everyday diction is also evident in the many comparisons, analogies, metaphors, and similes that he employs. Maxwell’s prose is unusually rich in such figurative language, and this means of expression, in addition to his penchant for alliteration, has become a signature element of his sermons. His analogies and metaphors simultaneously challenge the mind and appeal to the commonplace, making them particularly memorable and rhetorically effective.

For example, in accounting for the necessarily difficult nature of mortal existence, Maxwell warns us not to embrace too superficial a view of life lest we mistakenly speak of this mortal experience only as coming here to get a body, as if we were merely picking up a suit at the cleaners. Or, lest we casually recite how we have come here to be proved, as if a few brisk push-ups and deep knee bends would do. (85:11)

Once again, his metaphors are effective because they appeal to the commonplace, yet also communicate his idea with concision and force. As one imagines the little effort required to go to the cleaners or to do some half-hearted calisthenics, the contrast that Maxwell intended comes clear.

This example also illustrates Maxwell’s characteristic use of hypothetical comparisons. In another instance, he aligns a series of three hypothetical comparisons to illustrate the folly of holding back one’s complete submission to God’s will:

This holding back is like leaving Egypt without journeying all the way to the Holy Land, or waiting in Nauvoo for the railroad to come through, or staying permanently at Winter Quarters. (85:3)

Unlike the previous example, rather than employing a comparison that appeals to contemporary experience, his analogies appeal to the cultural and religious memory of his audience. What if the freed Israelites escaped Egypt never to cross into Canaan? It is a question anyone from the Judeo-Christian tradition could imagine with discomforted concern. Latter-day Saints would recognize the foolishness of anyone who would stay in Nauvoo, a place of all too temporary security before it was overrun by anti-Mormon mobs. Likewise, knowing what would await the early Mormons in the Salt Lake Valley, Latter-day Saints would cringe at the foolishness of remaining in the makeshift camp of Winter Quarters. In each of these three hypothetical situations, Maxwell allows his audience to exercise a simple kind of hindsight: of course any of these choices would be foolish, given what we know God has planned for his children. Suddenly, the abstraction “holding back one’s submission to God” takes on a concrete form to which Maxwell’s audience will relate by imaginatively placing themselves among those who would not make the foolish choices Maxwell hypothesizes. The comparison does not simply relate the idea more memorably; rather, it causes the audience to actively participate in imagining themselves to be the sort of person to make a better choice.

Indeed, Maxwell’s comparisons and figurative language constitute different means towards this same end, involving the audience imaginatively, engaging his hearers and listeners, not just informing them. One method for so doing is the use of what in poetry is called a “conceit,” or an analogy that is developed with respect to several different attributes, a metaphor writ large (but not so large that it becomes allegorical).

Examples of these sentence- or paragraph-level comparisons abound in Maxwell’s sermons. For example, Maxwell opens his November 1996 address with a simple metaphor, which he then amplifies:

Brothers and Sisters, the scriptures offer us so many doctrinal diamonds. And when the light of the Spirit plays upon their several facets, they sparkle with celestial sense and illuminate the path we are to follow. (96:1)

Doctrine can be dull indeed, but this metaphor piques our interest because Maxwell plays it out, almost teasingly. On the one hand, we understand his point that dull doctrines grow bright in the light of the Holy Ghost; on the other, we don’t yet know which doctrine he means to discuss. Like people at a jewelry store, we are dazzled at what has met our senses, perhaps enough to make a further investment.
His 1985 address opened similarly with an extended metaphor, another comparison to something in the natural world, something that would not reveal his theme, but would incite the listener or reader to proceed in order to learn. Referring to an unnamed quality, Maxwell claimed “the lack of it keeps so many of us struggling in the foothills and off the peaks in the adventure of full discipleship.” His comparison is appealing, for it takes a concept of ten associated with privation or discipline—discipleship—and does all but name Indiana Jones in making discipleship sound like a journey of excitement. We are compelled to wonder, what is this quality that could so enliven one’s religious life? The balance of his speech becomes the answer to the question that he has caused us to pose to ourselves.

Maxwell’s extended metaphors, or conceits, prove interesting in their variety. From the positive connotations of nature scenes he can turn to the darker domains of urban life to make his point. In his 1996 speech on the topic of “desire,” he asserts the importance of properly understanding the doctrines pertaining to desire

because of the spreading effluent oozing out of so many unjustified excuses by so many. This is like a sludge which is sweeping society along toward “the gulf of misery and endless wo.” (96:8)

Here, the act of self-rationalization is graphically compared to pollution or sewage. Perhaps Maxwell was editorializing indirectly on his impatience with those unwilling to accept responsibility for themselves, but in any case. Maxwell makes the business of excuse-making a very dirty one indeed.

Interestingly, for a man whose delivery is characterized by a meek and moderate demeanor, Maxwell uses metaphors that sometimes prove incongruous with his peaceful approach. War and battle are repeated metaphors upon which Maxwell draws. “Righteous desires need to be relentless,” he affirms, then quotes Brigham Young, who said that seekers of the celestial kingdom must “battle every day.” “Therefore,” Maxwell concludes, “true Christian soldiers are more than weekend warriors” (96:14). Once again, he mixes registers of diction, evoking smiles by combining the seasoned comparison of Christians to soldiers with the term “weekend warriors,” a phrase that has come into American parlance only this past decade. A “weekend warrior” is one of those would-be athletes that can devote their off days only to pursuing sports. It is a catchy shorthand to describe the amateur or dilettante. Obviously Maxwell, echoing Brigham Young, believes Christians must be career soldiers. He continues the metaphor later in the same speech, claiming that “only by educating and training our desires can they become our allies instead of our enemies” (96:22). The political realm thus becomes a lens for the personal. Describing that part of ourselves over which, in contrast to genetics and environment, we have control, Maxwell says,

There remains an inner zone in which we are sovereign, unless we abdicate. In this zone lies the essence of our individuality and our personal accountability. (96:3)

In another passage, Maxwell draws upon the realm of physics to make his comparison.

Each assertion of a righteous desire, each act of service, and each act of worship, however small and incremental, adds to our spiritual momentum. Like Newton’s Second Law, there is a transmitting of acceleration . . . associated with even the small acts of goodness. (96:21)

The variety of linguistic and cultural domains upon which Maxwell draws reflects more than his wide reading. His incessant and shifting metaphors are rhetorically significant in terms of the audiences he addresses, the themes he chooses, and the unconventional pattern of arrangement he employs.

Although Maxwell’s audience can be assumed to be Latter-day Saints, this group becomes less homogenous with time and now comprises people of starkly different educational, cultural, economic, and geographical character. As one sixteenth-century critic said in defending the use of figurative language in poetry, through these means one is able to “feed diverse tastes.” The experience of individuals will differ widely. The more domains of experience upon which the speaker draws in making comparisons, the more likely he will be to reach more people.

Another reason why Maxwell uses such variety in his metaphors and comparisons has to do with the subject matter he is attempting to animate. Nothing is more hackneyed or dull than the themes of religion that preachers have rehearsed for centuries. It is a daunting task to address an audience of millions with nothing new to say. The
task, it appears, is not so much to inform as it is to inspire, to prick the hearts of listeners to act upon what their heads already knew before hearing the sermon. Maxwell seems to be conscious of this very dilemma when he describes the process that Christ underwent as he began to take upon him his expiatory burden in the Garden.

When the unimaginable burden began to weigh upon Christ, it confirmed His long-held and intellectually clear understanding as to what He must now do. . . Jesus knew cognitively what He must do, but not experientially. (85:42, 44)

Maxwell’s metaphors and comparisons thrust us into the Garden, as it were, to experience the reality of the doctrines in terms that are viable, alive to us, steeped in the human dramas that we relate to better than the best-intentioned maxims on morality. As when we read his own description of Jesus’ experience, we are at times astonished and awestruck as we take upon ourselves the curious burden of Maxwell’s prose.

It may seem strange to refer to his prose as a burden, but anyone who has listened to or read Maxwell will agree that listening to him requires work, simply to follow what he is saying. Once we abandon the transmitter model of communication and recognize that the goal is not to transfer knowledge but to incite action, we can better realize the virtue of prose that requires more for us to comprehend.

In an age that favors the plain speech of business communication or the no-nonsense approach of scientific writing, it may be difficult to appreciate ancient Greek and Roman literary standards that considered prose to be defective if not properly adorned with figurative speech. The Romans called this vice aschematismus, or lack of ornament. The Greeks had a term as well, skotizon, a verb which meant “to darken.” For communication as serious as religion, what was needed was sufficient ornament to engage the listener. If the matter were stated too clearly, too baldly, it would not have a motivating effect upon the listener.

Today, “ornamentation” suggests something that is superfluous to the substance. However, until the purifications of prose that occurred in the wake of the Enlightenment, the ornamented nature of language was considered essential. as the terms aschematismus or skotizon suggest. The word “ornamentation” comes from the Latin verb ornare, which means “to equip.” Ornament was not so many entertaining frills—it was the verbal equipment necessary to get the job done.

Thus, we can appreciate Maxwell’s prose as being highly ornamented; that is, his rich figurative language is the equipment to accomplish his purpose of engaging, interesting, and motivating an audience to do what it already knows it should. The ornamentation that characterizes Maxwell’s sermons is found not only in his diction and comparisons, but in the sound qualities and patterns of repetition he employs. His prose appeals not only to our heads, but also to our ears.

This appeal is most evident in Maxwell’s use of alliteration, the repetition of initial consonants in nearby words. This is so prominent a feature in Maxwell’s prose that at times it seems to fall into the vice known as paroemion (alliteration) or cacemphaton (unpleasant sound). However, this ornament of sound more often drives his purpose home and renders his sermons more memorable. Sometimes his alliteration simply underscores related terms, such as when he explains that giving of ourselves involves “giving time, talent, and treasure” (85:18). The ideas are more likely to be remembered together because they are linked cohesively through the sound.

At other times, Maxwell’s alliteration serves to place ideas into a closer relation with one another. For example, when he says “spiritual submissiveness means . . . community and communion” (85:16), the proximity in sound of these last two words suggests a proximity in what they represent: as we draw closer to our neighbors, we draw closer to God.

Maxwell often employs alliteration to appeal through pathos, either evoking humor or indicating vehemence. An example of the first is when he claims Christ was not merely a “Palestinian Plato”; of the latter, when he speaks of God trying us by stripping away the “malignant mole of materialism” (85:35). Alliteration is not simply some catchy ear candy—it can carry strong connotations to buoy up the semantic content. For example, Maxwell capitalizes upon the suggestively sinister nature of sibilants when referring in a mildly sardonic way to one having “a statusful cell of selfishness” (85:15), or those having “a sad unsettlement of soul” (96:23).

If such sound qualities can be a bit unsettling, suggesting by their aural qualities the dangers their words denote or their metaphors connote, Maxwell employs other uses of repetition and sound for the opposite effect. Listen to the following passage,
not for its alliteration, but for the use of repeated endings in the two clauses of the second sentence:

Spiritual submissiveness means, instead, community and communion as the mind and the heart become settled. We then spend much less time deciding, and much more time serving; otherwise, the more hesitation, the less inspiration. (85:16)

This illustrates two different figures of speech common to Maxwell’s prose: homoioteleuton and antithesis; and two methods of arrangement: balance and contrast. Homoioteleuton occurs in all rhymes, but it can also occur in prose, as it does in this passage, by placing in parallel position words of the same grammatical form or carrying the same etymological suffix. In this case, “deciding” and “serving” are parallel participles, coming at the end of successive phrases: “hesitation” and “inspiration” are nouns placed in parallel position that share the same latinate noun-ending, “-tion.” In the same sentence occurs antithesis, the use of opposing terms: “much less time” is opposed to “much more time”; “the more hesitation” is contrasted with “the less inspiration.” The two clauses themselves are opposed, as signaled by the transitional word “otherwise”: the first clause indicates the positive results of submissiveness; the second, the negative results. All of these opposites and contrasts are couched in neatly parallel phrases and clauses that occur in pairs. By employing such symmetry, Maxwell produces a balanced effect that connotes having thought things through. The evenness of such coupled thoughts suggests stability and balance.

When symmetry and balance work with antithesis, the effect is to give clarity to contrasts. Consider the following:

The tilt of our souls in first moments is so vital. Will what follows be viewed with disdain or as having some design? Which will we do most, murmur or ponder? (85:37)

“Disdain” is aligned with an opposing attitude, “having some design,” while “murmur” is made parallel to a contrasting action, “ponder.” Thus, employing parallelism, homoioteleuton and antithesis, Maxwell heightens our sense of choice in the matter of directing our souls’ attitudes.

This same combination of balance and opposition works well to communicate the paradoxes of submission that are a common theme in Maxwell: “subjection to God is really emancipation” (85:37). The irony of this statement is lessened, the paradox proven more true, by the very sound of the words. “Subjection” is, in the ending and in the end, much like “emancipation.” Maxwell applies this method of underscoring paradox to his description of Christ: “Jesus knew cognitively what He must do, but not experientially.” This returns us to the justification for Maxwell’s highly figurative, ornamented prose—he intends for us not simply cognition, but experience, not just knowledge, but action. His rhetoric tailors itself to our understanding, but by engaging our ears and moving our hearts, he does more than simply teach; aurally, imaginatively, and cognitively, we are by his language brought into an engagement with the principles that is closer to experience than to naked cognition.

Finally, I would like to make some observations on Maxwell’s general patterns of arrangement across the entirety of his speeches. While listeners and readers confess having to work in order to appreciate Maxwell, this is not because his themes are complex, but because his organization is unconventional. Rather than following a linear pattern of development in outline form, as others at the same pulpit so often do, Maxwell follows a circular pattern. He identifies a theme early in his speech, such as “submissiveness” or “desire,” and then presents observations on these qualities that follow no necessary order; rather, they all follow the simple order of referring back to the original theme. This can be jarring, for in the flow of listening or reading our expectations are that paragraphs will be linked cohesively to one another, like a chain. But Maxwell’s addresses follow a pattern more akin to a hub with spokes. The net effect is that listeners or readers can rarely trace back in their minds how they arrive at any given point in his sermons, but they never forget what the overall message concerns. It is as though Maxwell makes only one claim, which is then very fulsomely supported as he ranges across scripture and invents effective analogies. His ornamentation is complex, but his arrangement is simple.

Had I more time, I would point out the ways in which this method of arrangement is consistent with medieval methods of preaching that were founded upon the principle of dilation. By this, a scriptural theme was chosen and amplified
according to eight standard modes that included, among others, the word plays and metaphors I have identified today in Maxwell’s sermons.3

Given this affinity with medieval sermons, it is ironic that many believe Maxwell’s sermons more fit to be read than heard. His reliance upon the sound qualities of language, his vivid comparisons, and his circular pattern of composition are more redolent of oral discourse than written, and Maxwell thus continues a long tradition in which sermons were to live on—not in printed reports stored on a shelf, but in the memories of the listeners.

Maxwell’s sermons make demands on his audiences, whether listeners or readers. Rather than resist his unconventional richness, we would do better to relish Neal A. Maxwell’s figurative language, for in the unraveling, his words both require and reward our most attentive thought.

Notes


3. See Joseph Boyer Jarvis, “Preaching in the General Conferences of the Mormon Church, 1870–1900,” (Ph.D. dissertation, Northwestern University, 1958), for a useful, if dated introduction. No study has yet been published regarding the phenomenon of the general conference as a shaping force in Mormon culture, nor has there been any assessment of how these formal sermons have varied with the advent of electronic media.

4. In 1983, the Association for Mormon Letters presented its Special Commendation for Sustained Excellence in the Mormon Sermon to Neal A. Maxwell, the only award given for the sermon by this body in its history. The text of the awards citation can be found at the Association’ website, http://www.aml-online.org/awards/a/A198314.html.


8. These included (1) “notificando” (definition, description); (2) “dividendo” (division); (3) “collatio” (comparison); (4) “per auctoritates” (authorities); (5) “ex conjugatione” (notation and conjugates); (6) “expondendo metaphoras” (explaining metaphors); (7) “thema diversimode exponere” (explaining diverse themes); and (8) “per causas et effectus” (cause and effect). Number 6, of course, comes closest to Maxwell’s method.