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A Small and Piercing Voice: The Sermons of Spencer W. Kimball

Eugene England

Notwithstanding it being a small voice it did pierce them that did hear to the center.

3 Ne. 11:3

Spencer W. Kimball was one of the most valuable Mormon orators of the twentieth century. In fact it is quite likely that, because of his unique opportunities as President of the Church during a dramatic period of world-wide growth and change, he was the Mormon speaker we have most to learn from about living and speaking. Though President Kimball was not as obviously gifted as other great speakers he admired and learned from, such as J. Reuben Clark, David O. McKay, and Stephen L Richards, when Latter-day Saints in the future think of individual sermons that have affected their lives, they will, I believe, recognize him as standing foremost in our time as a prophetic spokesman.

The first sermon by Spencer W. Kimball that I remember hearing remains for me the most surprising, challenging, and influential speech in my experience. In April 1954 Charlotte and I had been married three months and had recently received letters calling us both to serve as missionaries in Samoa. We had begun to feel something of what might be called “the spirit of Lehi,” a powerful desire to help fulfill the remarkable promises made in the Book of Mormon about the “blossoming” of modern “Lamanites” and the prophecies of their crucial role in preparing for Christ’s second coming. As we sat together in the Tabernacle on Tuesday, 6 April, we heard the most powerful evocation of that spirit—and perhaps the most forthright denunciation of prejudice—that we have ever heard, before or since, and it changed our lives. First, Elder Kimball shocked us out of our complacency about race consciousness (including our own) by quoting from an anonymous letter to him: “I never dreamed I would live to see the day when . . . an Indian buck [would be] appointed a bishop—an Indian squaw to talk in the Ogden Tabernacle—Indians to go through the Salt Lake

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Temple.”¹ Addressing himself to “Mrs. Anonymous,” he proceeded to demonstrate God’s absolute scriptural condemnation of all forms of racism and intolerance: “If it be so wrong for fraternization and brotherhood with minority groups and their filling Church positions and pews and pulpits of the Lord’s Church, why did the Apostle Peter maintain so positively: ‘[God] . . . put no difference between us and them’ (Acts 15:8–9).”² Then he reviewed with impassioned rhetorical power the achievements of the ancestors of Jews and Indians and Polynesians and the promises made to their modern descendants:

O ye, who hiss and spurn, despise and scoff, who condemn and reject, and who in your haughty pride place yourselves above and superior to these Nephite–Lamanites: I pray you to not despise them until you . . . have that faith to burn at the stake with the Prophet Abinadi. It is possible that the prophet’s children may be among us. Some of them could be now called Lagunas or Shoshones.

I beg of you, do not disparage the Lamanite–Nephites unless you, too, have the devoutness and strength to abandon public office to do missionary work among a despised people . . . as did the four sons of Mosiah. . . . Their seed could be called Samoans or Maoris.

I ask you: Do not scoff and ignore these Nephite–Lamanites unless you can equal their forebears in greatness and until you can kneel with those thousands of Ammonite Saints in the sand on the field of battle while they sang songs of praise as their very lives were being snuffed out by their enemies. . . . Perhaps the children of the Ammonites are with us. They could be called Zunis or Hopis.³

This remarkable refrain, unusual in style and unique in content, continued through eight separate examples. It built to a climax with a reference to Christ’s personal appearance to the forefathers of these “Lamanite–Nephites”—and it left us moved and changed. We were made ashamed of the liberal condescension of our earlier desire to go “save” the Samoans. We were open for the first time to go and learn and to be permanently affected in our feelings by Polynesian peoples with a magnificent past, remarkable present qualities, and a marvelous prophetic future. Elder Kimball had helped prepare us to see all these things behind the labels and skin color and cultural trappings. He had changed our missions into a painful, exhilarating struggle toward new perceptions and emotional maturity and had so inoculated us with the spirit of Lehi that all our lives since have been significantly involved in learning from and trying to exercise intelligent responsibility toward “Lamanites.”

How could a twenty-minute conference sermon, not sophisticated in language nor elegant in style, have such a profound effect? It is my thesis that Spencer W. Kimball’s sermons are so powerful because they are modern examples of what Erich Auerbach has praised as the

epitome of Christian expression, the *sermo humilis*, the “lowly” or humble style which is characteristic of the New Testament and of the best writing and speaking through the Middle Ages, but which has increasingly given way to rhetorical and moral posturing since then.⁴ The *sermo humilis* was developed by the classical orators of Greece and Rome and codified by Cicero as part of a hierarchy of levels of literary ornament and sophistication parallel to three levels of subject matter: “low,” where financial dealings and ordinary people are concerned; “lofty,” where life and well-being, especially of the elite, is at stake; and “middling,” largely for artistic entertainment. But Paul and the early Church Fathers understood (and Augustine effectively demonstrated) that since God has created and Christ has redeemed *everything*, no such distinctions of the value of subject matter could be acceptable to Christians. Thus the whole range of rhetorical devices and levels that had been developed in classical oratory and literature could be used and mixed entirely as appropriate to each sermon’s *purpose*, which includes consideration of the *needs*, but not the social class, of the audience. The result was the *sermo humilis*, a humble style understandable to all.

In the best oratory, as in the best literature (measured not by popularity or critical acclaim but by influence for good on actual lives), style is a purposeful but natural expression of the author’s being and intentions. It is intelligent but not calculating, persuasive toward transparently unselfish and morally sensible ends, aimed at moving the hearers but courageous to the point of being willing to offend them—and all with the intent of bringing about eventual repentance and redemption.

A good example of such style, from early in President Kimball’s career, is a speech given at BYU in 1951 that, repeated in various versions, became famous as “A Style of Our Own.”⁵ That is an interesting title since the speech itself seems not at all designed to be “stylish.” It is not elegantly phrased or formally structured and certainly does not seem calculated to please—or even to be effective. It starts out, somewhat awkwardly and uncertainly, with a series of stories and examples centered around the general theme that the purpose of BYU is to build character in its students and that the students have a responsibility to take that purpose seriously, heavily subsidized as they are by the tithes of humble Latter-day Saints all over the world. The sermon then digresses into simple accounts of trips Elder Kimball had taken with his wife, recently to Mayan ruins in Central America, years before to Pompeii. Reflections on the human corruption suggested by those ruined cities are followed by scriptural accounts of licentiousness and divine judgment and destruction—until a theme begins to appear: “Unchastity is the great demon of the 1950s.

Avoid it as you would leprosy.”⁶ And finally this rather common speech takes on uncommon force through the unique potential of Spencer W. Kimball’s *sermo humilis*—his ability to speak, with the power of personal witness and specific detail, on an everyday human action that has eternal consequences:

I am not talking about something, my young brothers and sisters, of which I do not know. We interview thousands of missionaries, Church officers, and other people. . . . I know I’m not going to be popular when I say this, but I am sure that the immodest dresses that are worn by our young women and their mothers, contribute in some degree to the immorality of this age.⁷

The young Apostle gets increasingly specific and direct with his Mormon audience, many of whom were guilty—and still are:

I see in the [*Deseret News* and other] papers constantly, things that hurt me. These queen contests! It seems that every class, every group, every club, must have a queen. The flattery resulting is destructive. If I had a hundred daughters I would resist any one ever becoming a queen, the object of a beauty parade or contest. . . . Evening gowns can be most beautiful and modest if they clothe the body. But the Lord never did intend that they should be backless or topless. Now I want to tell you, it’s a sin. I tell you that the Prophet of the Lord abhors it. (I can see it isn’t going very well with some of you.) But—it is still true! . . . Women who [come to a dance] in strapless gowns, or with strap gowns, and there is very little difference . . . are an abomination in the sight of the Lord.⁸

In this sermon there is full acceptance of any subject matter, however “common” or even embarrassing, as relevant to salvation, and there is also that ingenuous mixture of styles, not according to prescribed classical categories but by inspired sense of effectiveness, that Augustine recommended in the Christian version of *sermo humilis*. As used by Roman theoreticians, the word *humilis* connoted inferior rank, but that adjective was taken over by Augustine and later Christian writers as the best word, in Auerbach’s phrase, “to express the atmosphere and level of Christ’s life and suffering”:

The Incarnation as such was a voluntary humiliation illustrated by a life on earth in the lowest social class, among the materially and culturally poor, and by the whole character of Christ’s acts and teachings. It was crowned by the cruelty and humiliation of the Passion.⁹

Christ’s life and death were “lowly” in that sense. And the gospel of Christ was addressed to the “lowly,” the dispossessed and uncouth whom the worldly wise disdained, the “weak things” who would confound the mighty and strong (1 Cor. 1:27). And the gospel itself, as contained in the scriptures, was “lowly,” even absurd, both in

content and style—it was to “the Greeks foolishness” (1 Cor. 1:23). The paradox of the *sermo humilis*, as of the gospel itself, was, and is, that the humblest subjects and examples, addressed in the humblest and most direct manner by humble servants of God to humble children of God, could produce the most sublime literature and profoundest effects, could indeed move people to identify with the humble Christ, “the least of these my brethren,” and thus to become like him.

Knowing about President Kimball’s own physical and spiritual humiliations helps us understand some of the fundamental sources of his sermon style. His biography quotes journal accounts of such emotionally devastating times as when he had difficulty accepting, or even believing, his call to be an Apostle: “I was in convulsions of sobbing. My wife was sitting by me on the floor, stroking my hair, trying to quiet me.”¹⁰ There are reflections about the terrible inadequacy he felt because of continuing physical ailments:

Thousands of people in the Church . . . look at me with my smallness, my ineptitudes, my weaknesses, my narrow limitations and say, ‘What a weak Church to have such weak leadership.’ It is one of the things that has brought me to my back now. I have tried by double expenditure of energy to measure up.¹¹

Those physical troubles—boils, heart disease, throat cancer—did not *end* because of miraculous blessings, though there were blessings and miracles. They continued, even after the miracles, to be painful and dangerous trials that had to be endured—and that made their contributions to President Kimball’s unique speaking style, to the form and content of his sermons, and even to the voice with which they were delivered. In 1957 he had an operation to try to stem the cancer in his throat. He pleaded with the New York specialist to remove as little tissue as possible because of the unique importance of his voice to his responsibility in the Church. Though this involved some risk of not getting all the cancer, the doctor left the larynx and part of one vocal cord. Through enormous, often painful and humiliating effort and the aid of a miraculous regrowth of some tissue,¹² Spencer W. Kimball learned to speak again: “I realize I cannot quit for anything, though the temptation is terrific when I stumble and stammer and halt.”¹³ The voice was forever changed, becoming small and raspy, full of the effort of breath required to sustain it—but emotionally piercing in a new way because it now constantly symbolized to his hearers what he had paid in courage and humility for that voice.

The voice changed in another way in 1974 when Elder Kimball was sustained as President of the Church after the unexpected death of Harold B. Lee. The sermons in the 1960s and early 1970s had been plain, straightforward, mostly single-subject, and usually directed to

a basic moral commandment or repentance—always focused on helping the Saints live better day by day. The new responsibility to speak as *the* Prophet, to and for the whole Church, made President Kimball's sermons often much more miscellaneous and general than before, shaped by the need to give counsel to the whole Church—and the world—on a number of matters, from cleaning up yards and planting gardens to missiles and abortion. But the directness, the challenging emotional and moral plainness fundamental to the *sermo humilis*, remained the same, and the combination of style and vision often reached up to the sublime that is paradoxically linked to the lowly.

Even before he spoke for the first time as President to the general Church in the solemn assembly at April conference 1974, the new prophet delivered a remarkable address to the Regional Representatives seminar that outlined in detail how the Savior's command to take the gospel to all the world could be literally obeyed—and soon. The speech was not flamboyant in style nor did it announce any dramatic new program. It merely reviewed the clear commands of Christ to his former- and latter-day disciples, reminded us of our supposed belief that the Lord would provide a way to fulfill his commands, and asked us to proceed in that faith, providing us with a clear vision of future possibilities, complete with maps and numbers:

I felt absolutely certain that I would die, when my time came, as president of the Twelve. I had no idea that this could ever happen. But since it has happened there is only one thing for us to do and that is to move forward. . . .

When I read Church history, I am amazed at the boldness of the early brethren. . . . Even in persecution and hardship, they went and opened doors which evidently have been allowed to sag on their hinges and many of them to close. . . .

I believe the Lord can do anything he sets his mind to do.

But I can see no good reason why the Lord would open doors that we are not prepared to enter. Why should he break down the Iron Curtain or the Bamboo Curtain . . . if we are still unprepared to enter? . . .

Suppose that South Korea with its 37,000,000 people and its 7,500 members were to take care of its own proselyting needs and thus release to go into North Korea and possibly to Russia the hundreds who now go from the States to Korea.

If Japan could furnish its own 1,000 missionaries and then eventually 10,000 more for Mongolia and China, if Taiwan could furnish its own needed missionaries plus 500 for China and Vietnam and Cambodia, then we would begin to fulfill the vision.¹⁴

That sermon helped transform the Church, releasing energies that almost doubled the missionary force in the next eight years, with similar

increases in converts, new stakes organized, and total members. But the new energies were felt in a variety of other ways consistent with the humility and directness as well as sublimity of Spencer W. Kimball's *sermo humilis*. I remember how great a sense of shock and loss we all felt at the sudden death of Harold B. Lee, whom we had expected to preside for many years, how little some expected of the little man with the small voice whom we knew had health problems and might not live long—a caretaker President. But then all barriers melted away when President Kimball began that solemn assembly in April 1974 by exclaiming, “Oh, Harold, we miss you,” and his voice pierced us with a sense of his open vulnerability as well as new visions and energy. Our expectations were changed especially when, after he matter-of-factly laid out his plan for converting the world, he sounded the call to “lengthen our stride”¹⁵ and then set the pace himself with personal action and expression and also with decisive leadership. He expanded the number of area conferences around the world and then spoke four or five times at each. He announced dramatic increases each year in planned temple-building throughout the “free world” (and the first temple behind the Iron Curtain) and then participated in increasing numbers of temple dedications, where he both spoke and gave many of the prayers. He directed major changes in the organization of the General Authorities and made the first modern additions to the LDS scriptures, culminating in the 1978 revelation that gave blacks the priesthood.

The announcement of that revelation itself (though it was a First Presidency statement, not written solely by President Kimball) is an excellent example of the style I am describing—simple, weighty but unflamboyant, personal but chaste:

Aware of the promises made by the prophets and presidents of the Church who have preceded us that at some time, in God's eternal plan, all of our brethren who are worthy may receive the priesthood, and witnessing the faithfulness of those from whom the priesthood has been withheld, we have pleaded long and earnestly in behalf of these, our faithful brethren, spending many hours in the Upper Room of the Temple supplicating the Lord for divine guidance.

He has heard our prayers, and by revelation has confirmed that the long-promised day has come. . . .

We declare with soberness that the Lord has now made known his will for the blessing of all his children.¹⁶

That first long sentence—reflecting the long wait of the Church, of faithful blacks and whites who prayed for the day to come, of President Kimball's own long struggle against our prejudices, culminating in those many hours at prayer in the Temple throughout the spring of 1978—is one example of how a natural style reveals itself. Another example is the brief clarity that follows, suppressing the emotion like

a spring in sentences that witness that God has spoken, until it is released by the arresting biblical phrase, "We declare with soberness."

President Kimball's most biblical sermon, in language, content, and general approach, was written for the June 1976 *Ensign*, apparently designed to be read by Church members at the very time they would be celebrating the American bicentennial in a somewhat self-congratulatory mood. The title, "The False Gods We Worship," provides fair warning of how severe the prophet will be, but the sermon opens with a gentle personal reminiscence of recent walks in his garden that brought back childhood memories. He injects a slightly ominous note with a reference to "dark and massive clouds of an early thunderstorm," then returns to what seems an innocuous patriotic theme, reflecting on the "mellow light" of his childhood valley, certain that if he were to create a world it would be "just like this one" and affirming that "there is much that is good in this land, and much to love." But with a sudden "nevertheless" he turns to his real theme, reinforcing the change with his imagery again: "The dark and threatening clouds that hung so low over the valley seemed to force my mind back to a theme the Brethren have concerned themselves with for many years now— . . . the general state of wickedness in which we seem to find the world." Using a device of the Old Testament prophets, particularly Amos, he allows his audience for a time to think he is denouncing the wicked world *outside* Israel, Babylon's "pollution" and "idolatry." Then, just as we have reached full agreement with that denunciation of the world at large and are even feeling a bit smug and superior, he makes it clear that *Americans* are also guilty and then that *Mormons* come under the judgment, in fact are in greatest danger because "where much is given much is expected."¹⁷

In one of the very few theoretical passages in all his work, President Kimball proceeds to explain his literal use of the word *idolatry*: "Carnal man has tended to transfer his trust in God to material things. . . . Whatever thing a man sets his heart and his trust in most is his god: and if his god doesn't also happen to be the true and living God of Israel, that man is laboring in idolatry."¹⁸ He identifies in unforgettable imagery and anecdotes the two chief idols of many of us Americans and Mormons—material goods and armaments—and then preaches as the only saving alternatives the individual living of the law of consecration and an active, affirmative loving of our enemies.

I am afraid that many of us have been surfeited with flocks and herds and acres and barns and wealth and have begun to worship them as false gods. . . . Forgotten is the fact that our assignment is to use these many resources in our families and quorums to build up the kingdom of God—to further the missionary effort . . . to bless others in every way, that they may also be fruitful. . . .

. . . We are, on the whole, an idolatrous people—a condition most repugnant to the Lord. . . .

We are a warlike people, easily distracted from our assignment of preparing for the coming of the Lord. When enemies rise up, we commit vast resources to the fabrication of gods of stone and steel—ships, planes, missiles, fortifications—and depend on them for protection and deliverance. When threatened, we become antienemy instead of pro-kingdom of God; we train a man in the art of war and call him a patriot, thus, in the manner of Satan’s counterfeit of true patriotism, perverting the Savior’s teaching [that we love our enemies]. . . .

We forget that if we are righteous the Lord will either not suffer our enemies to come upon us—and this is the special promise to the inhabitants of the land of the Americas (see 2 Ne. 1:7)—or he will fight our battles for us.¹⁹

President Kimball ends this sermon, which seems to me one of the most unusual and challenging given to twentieth-century Mormons, with an irrefutable explanation of why revenge and confrontation, name-calling and sanctions, indeed *any* form of *fighting* our enemies, even winning, will never resolve conflicts—and thus why all who call themselves Christians must do something with enemies other than fight them. We must rely primarily on love, on praying and giving and teaching, rather than on armaments, if we are ever to do away with those enemies in the only effective and permanent way, by *changing* them into friends:

What are we to fear when the Lord is with us? Can we not take the Lord at his word and exercise a particle of faith in him? Our assignment is affirmative: to forsake the things of the world as ends in themselves; to leave off idolatry and press forward in faith; to carry the gospel to our enemies, that they might no longer be our enemies.²⁰

One of the measures of great oratory, certainly of any in the Christian tradition of *sermo humilis*, is that it not be expedient, not obviously, or even unconsciously, designed to tickle anyone’s ears or serve any of the earthly powers that be. Sacvan Bercovitch, in *The American Jeremiad*, demonstrates that most American religious as well as political rhetoric has been expedient, has consistently tended (even when couched in what seem to be cries of doom and calls to repentance) to serve the purposes of a remarkably durable and essentially secular national dream. From John Winthrop’s early evocation of the wrathful watchfulness that God would turn on his chosen people in the New World, through the many doom-propheying “election day” and “fast day” jeremiads in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and the nineteenth-century “progressivist” calls to an individualistic, entrepreneurial patriotism, even through the “social gospel” and civil rights activism of many modern preachers—through all this there has

been a central ambivalence in American preaching. It has invoked the city of God but done so in order to promote the city of man. It has used, even created, anxiety about our failures and the threatening forces in and around us mainly to energize our commitment and our striving toward that powerful but morally questionable American dream of materialistic success and self-satisfaction. As Bercovitch writes:

The latter-day Jeremiahs effectually forged a powerful vehicle of middle-class ideology: a ritual of progress through consensus, a system of sacred–secular symbols for a laissez-faire creed, a “civil religion” for a people chosen to spring fully formed into the modern world—America, the first-begotten daughter of democratic capitalism, the only country that developed, from the seventeenth through the nineteenth centuries, into a wholly middle-class culture.²¹

Early Mormon orators were, of course, heavily influenced by the traditional Puritan sermons and also the revivalist preaching in their immediate frontier backgrounds, but they modified both the form and content. The usual structure of (1) biblical text, (2) argument, and (3) application was modified by less dependence on scriptural literalism—and by the Mormon emphasis on both reason and the influence of the spirit—toward a looser, much more personal shape. The Mormon sermon was organized around a threefold structure of doctrines, reasons, and applications, but it also employed extemporaneous examples and arguments suggested by the occasion and type of audience, even the individuals present. The best early example is the “King Follett Discourse,” in which Joseph Smith uses a specific funeral occasion to proclaim the startling and fundamental doctrine of God’s manlike origin and man’s godlike potential. He creates dramatic actions such as holding up his ring for a symbol of man’s eternal existence and speaks directly to individuals in the audience. And he ends with a poignantly personal cry for understanding of his role: “You never knew my heart. No man knows my history.”²²

Heber C. Kimball and Brigham Young unselfconsciously developed this form into high art that is fully in the *sermo humilis* tradition. Their sermons combine very personal and situational references with easy wit; careful, powerful (though sometimes highly personalized) doctrinal argument; dramatic prophecies; and spiritual witness. And this unique Mormon version of the basic Puritan sermon continues to this day in its basic form, though it has developed variations as diverse as the authority-teasing humor topped with direct moral and spiritual witness of J. Golden Kimball; the elegant, dignified but still anecdotal and spiritually direct sermons of Hugh B. Brown; and the dramatic, even breathless, crescendoing litanies of scriptural defense of the faith combined with personal anecdote and commonsense testimony of LeGrand Richards.

But the best Mormon orators have not succumbed to the inherent duplicity of the American jeremiad, the preaching of American materialism and jingoism under the banner of Christian witness. When Brigham Young and other Mormon orators of the latter part of the nineteenth century issued jeremiads on the failures of America, there was no self-serving hidden agenda aimed at an ideal national vision which would corroborate their own materialism or complacency as Americans. As the historian Davis Bitton has written, in describing Mormon denunciations of the America of that time:

Overcrowded cities, exploitation of industrial workers through wage slavery, prices determined purely by the market and at the expense of human needs, commercial insurance, and the social evil of prostitution, all came under fire from Mormon pulpits. This . . . was a structural criticism which denounced the built-in values and institutions of acquisitive capitalism and proposed to erect a radically different society. . . . Mormons could scarcely be accused of being apologists for the national Establishment.²³

The German scholar Ernst Benz similarly concluded that Brigham Young was uniquely successful in keeping Mormonism from the “false secularization” which had already in the midnineteenth century captured America. Instead, President Young fostered a “positive secularization” or proper involvement of the divine with the world, investing all of man’s honorable, but mundane, activities with sacred meaning by making them part of God’s penetration into the realities of the world for the purpose of developing mankind, thus “building up God’s kingdom.”²⁴

Bitton argues that a dramatic accommodation by Mormons to American culture followed the all-out attack by American society and government on Mormonism in the 1880s, and we might well wonder if some modern Mormon leaders finally succumbed to the compromise Bercovitch elucidates.

If so, Spencer W. Kimball was certainly not one of them. His unique quality is manifest in the paradox that he remained one of the most personally beloved and energetically obeyed Latter-day Saint prophets while challenging modern Mormons on crucial moral issues—particularly the assumptions of middle-class America, which is the domain or aspiration of most of us Mormons. The response to those specific challenges was mixed, but the sermons remain as a constant reminder and will, I believe, have unparalleled cumulative effect.

It is probably true that some of us American Mormons still think we can hunt for sport, can promote our daughters’ participation in skimpy-costumed drill teams or beauty contests, can engage

in conspicuous consumption, can be vaguely suspicious of other races, and can put more faith in missiles than in missionaries. But Spencer W. Kimball's denunciations of all of these actions and attitudes stand in the record, in powerful sermons that will touch and help change all who read carefully and humbly. And they stand in judgment on those of us who will not.

Even into the late 1970s, when physical problems began to slow him down, President Kimball continued to challenge all varieties of Mormons. First Presidency messages condemned abortion, the Equal Rights Amendment, the MX missile and by clear implication all primary reliance on nuclear deterrence and asserted that international conflicts as well as personal ones can best be resolved by obeying Christ's command to "love our enemies."²⁵ Earlier, President Kimball had reviewed the great prophecies and expectations past leaders had voiced concerning the development of a great Mormon art and literature and then added his own hopes. But he did so with unusual but characteristic advice, consistent with his own *sermo humilis*, about what would make such literature possible, that is, a willingness to deal with both the problematic and the exalting in Mormon experience rather than merely with the safe middle ground:

For years I have been waiting for someone to do justice in recording in song and story and painting and sculpture the story of the Restoration, the reestablishment of the kingdom of God on earth, the struggles and frustrations; the apostasies and inner revolutions and counter-revolutions of those first decades; of the exodus; of the counter-reactions; of the transitions; of the persecution days; of the miracle man, Joseph Smith, of whom we sing "Oh, what rapture filled his bosom, For he saw the living God" (*Hymns*, no. 136); and of the giant colonizer and builder, Brigham Young.²⁶

But the sermon of President Kimball's that perhaps best combines the qualities of both the lowly and the sublime, both the hard moral challenge and the comforting, exalting divine witness, came quite late in his career. At the priesthood session of the April 1978 general conference, he began with some very general exhortations about the family and the need for priesthood holders to guard it from evil influences through their selection of magazines and newspapers. But then he moved into a purely pastoral passage of reminiscences from his Arizona youth, much like that at the beginning of "The False Gods We Worship." This was extended with wonderfully personal, vaguely self-deprecating details and anecdotes, climaxing in a review of songs he sang in church, spiced with some witty interjections and repetitions:

I can remember how lustily we sang:

*Hark! Hark! Hark! 'tis children's music,
Children's voices, O, how sweet. . . .
That the Children may live long,
And be beautiful and strong.*

I wanted to live a long time and I wanted to be beautiful and strong—
but never reached it. . . .

*Drink no liquor, and they eat
But a very little meat*

[I still don't eat very much meat.]

They are seeking to be great and good and wise.

And then we'd "Hark! Hark! Hark!" again.²⁷

This apparently merely entertaining interlude united us powerfully with the "lowly" humanity in President Kimball, so that we were well prepared to accept, as coming from one like ourselves, the remarkable conclusion, in which he challenged (for the first time in a modern general conference) our complacent participation in a major Utah industry, hunting for mere sport:

I remember many times singing with a loud voice:

*Don't kill the little birds,
That sing on bush and tree. . . .*

I had a sling and I had a flipper. I made them myself, and they worked very well. . . . But I think perhaps because I sang nearly every Sunday, "Don't Kill the Little Birds," I was restrained.²⁸

The seriousness with which President Kimball took his subject is indicated by his repeating and expanding on this topic in the following October general conference, just before the Utah deer hunting season. The difficulty of taking this stand in the Mormon community was reflected in a statement issued by the Church Public Communications Office the next week that the Church had not officially condemned all hunting—and perhaps in the rather indirect title the earlier sermon was given in the *Ensign*: "Strengthening the Family—The Basic Unit of the Church."²⁹

The sermon ends with a different, though equally difficult, challenge, one that is spiritual rather than moral, but one that has also received little attention, perhaps because it was not really noticed. In the way characteristic of *sermo humilis*, the President moved without any transition or any dramatic explanation to a short, small, unique, typically humble and indirect, but piercing testimony of his prophetic calling and consequent experience with the divine:

"I know that God lives. I know that Jesus Christ lives," said John Taylor, my predecessor, "for I have seen him." I bear this testimony to you brethren in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.³⁰

NOTES

¹Spencer W. Kimball, "The Evil of Intolerance," *Improvement Era* 57 (June 1954): 423.

²Ibid., 425.

³Ibid., 425–26.

⁴See Erich Auerbach, *Literary Language and Its Public in Late Latin Antiquity and in the Middle Ages* (New York: Bollingen Foundation, 1965), 25–66.

⁵Given originally at a BYU devotional assembly, 13 February 1951, and published as "BYU Students Warned of Immodesty in Dress" in *Deseret News*, Church Section, 28 February 1951, 5. This speech was repeated in various forms and quoted in subsequent speeches by President Kimball; for instance, as "Immodesty in Dress" at the Portland stake quarterly conference MIA session, 9 September 1956, and as part of his devotional address at BYU, 12 September 1978.

A useful source for anyone wishing to study President Kimball's sermons is Edward L. Kimball, ed., *The Teachings of Spencer W. Kimball* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1983), a selection, by topic, from the sermons, with a complete index by year and useful information on sources. The file of materials used to produce *The Teachings of Spencer W. Kimball* (including copies of sermons not published in easily accessible form) is in the Harold B. Lee Library at Brigham Young University and can be consulted as I have done in writing this essay.

⁶Kimball, "BYU Students Warned of Immodesty in Dress," 5.

⁷Ibid.

⁸Ibid.

⁹Auerbach, *Literary Language*, 40–41.

¹⁰Edward L. Kimball and Andrew E. Kimball, Jr., *Spencer W. Kimball* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1977), 191.

¹¹Ibid., 253.

¹²Ibid., 318.

¹³Ibid., 312.

¹⁴Spencer W. Kimball, "When the World Will Be Converted," *Ensign* 4 (October 1974): 3, 6, 7, 12. This was a message that he had given before, but his new position at the head of the Church made it now particularly striking and powerful.

¹⁵This was his title and theme for the Regional Representatives seminar, 3 October 1974, developed in his address to the Mutual Improvement Association June conference, 29 June 1975, and soon a popular phrase throughout the Church.

¹⁶D&C Official Declaration—2.

¹⁷Spencer W. Kimball, "The False Gods We Worship," *Ensign* 6 (June 1976): 3, 4.

¹⁸Ibid., 4.

¹⁹Ibid., 4, 6.

²⁰Ibid., 6.

²¹Sacvan Bercovitch, *The American Jeremiad* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1978), 27–28.

²²The best version of the text is in Stan Larson, "The King Follett Discourse: A Newly Amalgamated Text," *Brigham Young University Studies* 18 (Winter 1978): 193–208.

²³Davis Bitton, "Anti-Intellectualism in Mormon History," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 1 (Autumn 1966): 118–19.

²⁴Ernst Benz, "Mormonism and the Secularization of Religions in the Modern World," *BYU Studies* 16 (Summer 1976): 627–39.

²⁵"First Presidency Statement on Basing of MX Missile," *Ensign* 11 (June 1981): 76; "First Presidency Christmas Message," *Church News*, 19 December 1981, 3.

²⁶Spencer W. Kimball, "The Gospel Vision of the Arts," *Ensign* 7 (July 1977): 5. This sermon had been given in 1967 at Brigham Young University.

²⁷Spencer W. Kimball, "Strengthening the Family—The Basic Unit of the Church," *Ensign* 18 (May 1978): 47.

²⁸Ibid.

²⁹Ibid.; *Deseret News*, Church Section, 7 October 1978, 14.

³⁰Kimball, "Strengthening the Family," 48.