

# Mormon Funeral Sermons in the Nineteenth Century

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All cultures employ rituals in the burial of their dead. The Mormons of the nineteenth century were, on the surface, not strikingly different from many Protestants in their burial rituals. Unlike Catholics and Episcopalians, Mormons were not given to liturgy, nor did they consider pomp and extravagant displays of mourning to be necessary.<sup>1</sup> But this did not mean the avoidance of form. Mormon funeral services included prayers, sermons, music, and sometimes a procession to the cemetery. It is the content of these forms, especially the sermons, that can inform us whether, beneath the outward shell, there was something distinctive about the Mormon way of saying good-bye to the dead. While pursuing a doctorate at the University of California at Los Angeles, John L. Sorenson prepared a study of funeral behavior among several religious groups, and a portion of that study was recently published under the title “Mormon Funeral Behavior.”<sup>2</sup> Other scholars have considered additional aspects of Mormon death and dying,<sup>3</sup> but to my knowledge no one has yet provided an analytical cross section of funeral sermons.<sup>4</sup>

In the process of examining sixty-five complete funeral sermons and summaries or partial accounts of other sermons, I prepared synopses with careful attention given to repetitive themes and scriptural texts. On the basis of this sampling, I offer here a look at the defining features of the Mormon funeral sermon as it became standardized during the nineteenth century. Anyone familiar with Mormon funerals of the twentieth century will, I think, conclude that the continuity of sermon content has been strong. This study, however, concerns the first seventy years of Mormon history.

## **Eulogy: The Mormon Character Ideal**

Most Mormon funeral sermons included, but were not restricted to, reminiscences on the life of the deceased. These sermons were not eulogistic orations of the classical rhetorical tradition, with its standard praise of the noble family heritage, descriptions of extraordinary character in childhood, recitation of heroic virtues such as courage and magnanimity, and peroration urging the auditors to go and do likewise,<sup>5</sup> although, as in so many of our cultural forms, broad features of that tradition lingered. Far removed from the aristocratic estates of Europe, where the great Bossuet could wax eloquent in praise of bravery in battle, largesse, public service, and magnificence of style, the Mormons loved and valued their dead for simpler, more rudimentary virtues. They praised them for having been kind, truthful, unselfish, patient, and cheerful; for having been obedient, dutiful children; or for having given selfless service as parents. Fortitude in the face of life’s challenges was also often commended. This naturally required mentioning some of those trials, including, often, the final cause of death.

The most characteristic Mormon virtues seem to have been being *faithful* and *true*. Faithful and true, we ask, to what? At the funeral of Mormon Church president John Taylor in 1887, Elder Heber J. Grant said: “He has been a faithful Latter-day Saint, and no more can be said of any man. Every Latter-day Saint has had the privilege of receiving a testimony of the Gospel, and those of us who live true to that testimony, and that fill up a life of usefulness and do nothing that will rob us of the light of the Holy Spirit, when we come to lay down this body, can have no greater thing said of us than that we have been faithful.”<sup>6</sup>

What Elder Grant was praising was steadfastness—unwavering commitment to the restored gospel. In other words, it was more than generalized trustworthiness. To describe someone as faithful and true was to commend

that person for fidelity to the gospel or, more specifically, to the baptismal covenant and the later priesthood and temple covenants. The scripturally based adjectives *faithful* and *true* regularly appeared in Mormon funeral sermons from early times to the present.<sup>7</sup>

The opposite adjectives, *unfaithful* and *untrue*, referred to apostates, those once loyal, practicing members of the church who had abandoned the faith and ignored or repudiated their commitments. In secular terminology, the equivalent would be treason. Less dramatic, those who were lax and indifferent concerning their duty were also considered to be unfaithful and untrue. Funerals for Latter-day Saints who had not been faithful and true could be awkward. The speakers would probably mention happy memories or other positive qualities of the deceased, perhaps giving a general statement about the justice of God and the reality of the future life. But such sermons generally were not those that were preserved in printed form.<sup>8</sup>

Because their primary purpose was to comfort the bereaved, Mormon funerals were not occasions to dwell on the deceased's misdeeds or otherwise condemn him or her. At the February 1879 funeral service of Dimmick B. Huntington, a longtime church member who died in good standing, John Taylor said, "I am reminded of an item in Brother Dimmick's written request, desiring that only his good deeds should be spoken of at his funeral, and also of a remark . . . that we should not speak anything but good of our friends whether living or dead." Pursuing that theme, President Taylor gave a scriptural basis for emphasizing the positive—all that is "good and amiable":

I am really astonished sometimes to witness the hard feelings and rancor that exist among men. They come—I do not know where they come from; yes, I do too, they come from beneath. The fruits of the Spirit of God are love, peace, joy, gentleness, long-suffering, kindness, affection, and everything that is good and amiable. The fruits of the spirit of the devil are envy, hatred, malice, irritableness, everything that tends to destroy mankind, and to make them feel uncomfortable and unhappy. The fruits of the Spirit of God are love and peace, and joy in the Holy Ghost; and the man that says he loves God and hateth his brother, is a liar, and the truth is not in him. I do not care who he may be, or what his name, or where he lives. This is the way I read the Scripture, and the way the Gospel teaches me. "By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if ye have love one to another."<sup>9</sup>

At the funeral of William Clayton in December 1879, Joseph F. Smith acknowledged the deceased's faults but minimized them because "they were of that nature that injured nobody perhaps except himself and his own family." He explained that whatever Clayton's faults were, Clayton would have to answer for them in the next life. In urging the surviving family members to emulate the deceased, Elder Smith made a distinction: "Follow in the footsteps of your husband and father, *excepting wherein he may have manifested the weaknesses of the flesh*; imitate his staunch integrity to the cause of Zion, and his fidelity to his brethren; be true as he was true, be firm as he was firm, never flinching, never swerving from the truth as God has revealed it to us."<sup>10</sup>

Abraham H. Cannon, an apostle who died in 1896 at age thirty-seven, was described by Wilford Woodruff as "willing to take a great load upon him, and to do all that he could for the benefit of the Church and of his brethren wherever he has been."<sup>11</sup> According to Joseph F. Smith, second counselor in the First Presidency at the time, Elder Cannon was faithful in the ministry, united with his brethren, patient, and persuasive but never by coercion. President Smith continued:

I thank God that we have had an Abraham Cannon. I thank God that he was called to the glorious ministry to which he was called. I thank God that he has not polluted it; that he has honored it, that he has

maintained his integrity, that he has fought the good fight, that he has kept the faith, and that he has gone home to the Father of light, with whom there is no variableness nor shadow of turning, unsullied, undefiled, honest, virtuous, pure, high-minded and intelligent, with the testimony of the truth rooted and grounded in his heart and in his soul till it was a part of him and he a part of it.

President Smith considered Cannon to be a good role model: “I would to God that all the young men of Zion would follow in his footsteps, would emulate his example, would be as *true and faithful* as he has been, and would eschew evil as he has, and be as industrious as he has been in acquiring knowledge and in fitting and preparing himself for the work of the ministry and for the labor that was imposed upon him in life, in which he excelled always.”<sup>12</sup> Of course, President Smith’s use of the phrase *true and faithful* was altogether befitting such a paragon as Abraham Cannon.

One purpose of praising the dead was to urge others to do likewise. As the eulogist of Samuel H. Smith wrote in 1844, “When a faithful saint dies, like this, our lamented brother, calm, faithful and easy, all Israel whispers, as expectants of the same favor, ‘let me die the death of the righteous, and let my last end be like his.’”<sup>13</sup> Thus, whereas many sermons urged surviving family members to emulate the virtues of the deceased, the injunction was also applied more generally to the entire congregation with the phrases *let us* and *may we*.

At his funeral in 1899, Franklin D. Richards was praised for his speaking and writing abilities and his “amiable and engaging” personality, yet his other attributes were considered more important. Richards was described as full of generosity, charity, forgiveness, and kindness: “During all our long and intimate acquaintance with him we do not remember a single instance where he spoke unkindly of any one.”<sup>14</sup> These homely virtues were not manifest only in his small private circle, for he was devoted to something larger than himself—the cause of the latter-day work of the gospel. In his leadership positions, he demonstrated a love of his fellowmen, and he diligently labored in their behalf.

### **The Gospel of Comfort**

In the course of eulogizing the deceased, speakers often recalled specific experiences in order to evoke fond memories and thereby involve family members and the rest of the congregation in a collective “reappreciation.” Colloquial sermons in the settlements, those unlikely to be recorded for posterity, may well have been largely anecdotal, but Mormon funerals have never been solely devoted to remembrance of the deceased. They were also designed to provide comfort and understanding.

When speaking of the purpose of life and the different stages of existence, Mormon preachers naturally called upon their religious faith. Looking forward in time, they described the spirit world, resurrection, judgment, and eventual reward in one of the three degrees of glory. Noting the death of Samuel H. Smith in 1844, the *Times and Seasons* reported, “The highest point in the faith of the Latter Day Saints, is, that they know where they are going after death, and what they will do, and this gives a consolation more glorious than all the fame, honors and wealth, which the world has been able to heap upon her votaries or ever can.”<sup>15</sup> This comment describes and anticipates an invariable feature of Mormon funerals—reference to the continued life of the spirit after death.

According to Mormon theology, the spirit survived the death of the physical body and was released from it. An oft-repeated trope described the disembodied spirit as relieved from suffering, no longer having to endure the tribulations of this “vale of tears.” The spirit of the deceased, according to one commonplace expression that communicated reassurance, was “all right.”

Drawing upon both the Bible and modern scriptures, the speakers would then elaborate: the spirit was now in paradise. In this realm of the spirit world it joined the many other righteous spirits who had preceded it, a thought that invited scenes of joyous reunion as parents and other departed loved ones welcomed the spirit of the deceased individual.

When someone died at an advanced age, his or her “tilt” toward the other side was sometimes noted; that is, more and more of those people the deceased had known and loved were not on earth but had passed beyond.<sup>16</sup> Even a small child would find loving arms on the other side, but for elderly people the drawing power was strong and natural. They had every reason to welcome the transition to a place where parents, siblings, and most of their friends were already awaiting them.

The Mormon conception of life in paradise was not one of simply basking in eternal glory. Quite early in the history of the church, the immense task of preaching the gospel to the spirits in spirit prison was seen as the primary activity in the spirit world. A scriptural basis for this doctrine was found in premises implicit in the teachings of Jesus Christ—namely, that a just God would not condemn any individual who had had no opportunity on earth to accept the gospel<sup>17</sup>—and in the vicarious work for the dead as revealed through the Prophet Joseph Smith.<sup>18</sup> The work for the dead performed in the Endowment House in Salt Lake City and in the temples on earth had its corollary in the preaching in the spirit world.

The knowledge of missionary activity in the spirit world enabled survivors to envision their departed loved ones as still active and striving in the work of the Lord. It also provided a possible explanation for untimely deaths. The Mormon preachers could have limited their comment on untimely death by observing, as did John Calvin, that by definition the will of God is just, a doctrine that is true enough in abstract terms but does little to comfort the bereaved and promote understanding. Instead, these preachers longed for something more and thought they had a possible explanation in the continued work of the gospel in the spirit world.

For some, the preaching activity, general social environment, and even the surroundings of the spirit world were communicated in dreams and visions. A remarkable example of this was the after-death experience of Jedediah M. Grant. Heber C. Kimball described the experience as follows:

I laid my hands upon him and blessed him, and asked God to strengthen his lungs that he might be easier, and in two or three minutes he raised himself up and talked for about an hour as busily as he could, telling me what he had seen and what he understood, until I was afraid he would weary himself, when I arose and left him. He said to me, brother Heber, I have been into the spirit world two nights in succession, and, of all the dreads that ever came across me, the worst was to have to again return to my body, though I had to do it. But O, says he, the order and government that were there! When in the spirit world, I saw the order of righteous men and women; beheld them organized in their several grades, and there appeared to be no obstruction to my vision; I could see every man and woman in their grade and order. I looked to see whether there was any disorder there, but there was none; neither could I see any death nor any darkness, disorder or confusion. He said that the people he there saw were organized in family capacities; and when he looked at them he saw grade after grade, and all were organized and in perfect harmony.<sup>19</sup>

Grant went on to describe the reunion with his wife Caroline, who held in her arms her child who had died on the plains. Buildings, gardens, flowers—everything was glorious and beautiful.

The importance of this personal account lies in its detail and in the fact that it came from a member of the church's First Presidency and was, at the funeral, endorsed by both Presidents Young and Kimball. Similar experiences became part of the lore of later Mormons,<sup>20</sup> and one of the most detailed experiences, that of President Joseph F. Smith, was canonized as scripture in Doctrine and Covenants 138.

One consolation that became a commonplace of Mormon funerals was the continuation not merely of the individual soul but also of the family unit beyond the grave. Despite their profound sorrow, those who survived found comfort and reassurance in the knowledge that they one day would be brought back together as husband and wife, parents and children. Faith in this reunion touched the deepest wellsprings of emotion.

But this could also be a discomfiting doctrine, for what of children who led dissolute lives or were otherwise unworthy of the celestial kingdom? A partial buffer was provided in the idea of possible repentance in the spirit world, but this could not be presented as a kind of carefree second chance. The real answer was the same as that for salvation in general: the promise of joyful family reunion beyond the grave was sure for those who followed Christ and were faithful in all things. Those who did not make the grade had no one to blame but themselves, for they had their moral agency and had been given a fair opportunity to make the right choices. The promise of being together forever with those most dear was a comfort to those nearing death and an inducement for survivors to live worthy of that reward.

Beyond the spirit world, an indeterminate period of existence, was the resurrection of the body and the final judgment. Mormons believed in a universal physical resurrection in which the immortal spirits of all mankind would be united with their glorified and immortal bodies. They did not claim to know how this miracle would occur; they simply pointed to the resurrection of Christ as the prototype and to modern scriptures that verified the reality of the resurrection.

Many funeral sermons stopped early in commenting on the postmortal trajectory of the soul. That the individual survived in spirit and was out of pain might be all that was said; that the deceased would rejoin loved ones was a bonus. Mention that the later physical resurrection was a reality was usually added as a fitting conclusion.

Some sermons, however, drew upon modern revelation to discuss the different degrees of glory. Because it was not of particular comfort to think about the lower degrees, sermons generally concentrated on the celestial, or highest, kingdom, where those who were worthy regained God's presence and, if they qualified for the highest gradation, went on under God to have their own glory and dominion. In funeral sermons this ultimate reward for righteousness was often expressed in less explicit terms, most likely because it would be presumptuous to claim exaltation, for the Lord, after all, was the judge. Thus the general assurance of exaltation in the highest degree of glory was more appropriately conveyed by references to thrones, principalities, powers, dominions, and related expressions.<sup>21</sup> Even the "crown of righteousness" that Paul expected to receive (2 Timothy 4:8) was seen by many Mormons as a symbol of exaltation.

What about the death of infants and children? Before the rise of public health standards and modern medicine, the death of infants and children was common on the American frontier. In 1875 the terrible death of two children, ages six and four, by burning seemed unusually hard to deal with. Wilford Woodruff began the funeral sermon by reading the first chapter of Job, then remarked, "The loss of these little children, taken away as they were, is certainly painful, not only to the parents, but to every person who reflects; and it is a very hard matter for any of us to enter into and appreciate the depth of sorrow which parents feel on occasions like this, it is difficult to bring the matter home to our own hearts unless we have been called to pass through similar affliction and sorrow."<sup>22</sup>

Continuing his remarks, Woodruff made the astounding statement that “there are many things in this world that are far more painful and afflicting than to have our children burned to death.” More tragic by far than the death of young children, in Woodruff’s view, was the loss of older children “who have gone to the grave disgraced, and a dishonor to themselves and to their parents.” After all, he explained, young children were “innocent” and “not in transgression,” and although their deaths were “very painful,” they were no longer suffering. They would arise unmarred in the resurrection and would rejoin their parents “in the family organization of the celestial world.” Because they each had obtained a physical body, they would be resurrected. Elder Woodruff suggested that although we know little about such things, these children who had died so young would be resurrected as children who would then grow to adulthood. Struggling bravely with a difficult assignment, he assured the congregation that God’s purposes would be fulfilled and that ultimately all would be made right. “Why our children are taken from us it is not for me to say, for God never revealed it unto me,” Elder Woodruff added. “We are all burying them.” Of his own thirty children, he reported, “ten of them are buried, all of them young.”

The question of “baby resurrection” had been unsettled and even, at times, a bone of contention among some members. A sermon of Joseph Smith, as recorded in longhand, seemed to state that babies would be resurrected but remain of that small stature throughout eternity. In 1873 Orson Pratt challenged the idea head-on: “But I doubt very much in my own mind if those who reported that sermon got the full idea on this subject; and if they did, I very much doubt whether the Prophet Joseph, at the time he preached that sermon, had been fully instructed by revelation on that point, for the Lord has revealed a great many things to Prophets and revelators, and among them to Joseph Smith, the fullness of which is not at first given.”<sup>23</sup> Pratt went on to list several reasons why, in his belief, those who died as infants would “grow up to the full stature of manhood or womanhood, after the resurrection.”

In 1877 Franklin D. Richards declared that children who died would grow to their full stature after the resurrection and during the millennium. Apparently unaware of Orson Pratt’s earlier statement, Joseph F. Smith explained the sequence of this teaching: “The first man I ever heard mention this in public was Franklin D. Richards, and when he spoke of it I felt in my soul: the truth has come out, the truth will prevail. It is mighty and will live; for there is no power that can destroy it. Presidents Woodruff and Cannon approved of the doctrine, and after that I preached it.”<sup>24</sup> President Woodruff later recalled hearing Joseph Smith teach this same doctrine.

Because of faith in the overarching plan of life and salvation, mourning presented a kind of paradox. On the one hand, it was natural to shed tears over the departure of dear ones, and no funeral speaker would attempt to deprive the bereaved of that needed emotional outlet. Those left behind would inevitably have great cause to mourn. Yet many funeral sermons also declared mourning to be somehow inappropriate. Knowledge of the gospel plan and certitude of God’s mercy and justice should help the survivors realize that all is right. “Let us rejoice,” some speakers urged, meaning that for the moment anguish was natural but in the long run should give way to faith in God and his eternal, merciful plan. We do not weep or mourn, said some funeral speakers, “as those who have no hope.”<sup>25</sup>

The earliest sermons do not indicate that because the spirit survived and retained its individual identity, it might still be present on earth, even in the very room in which the funeral was held. However, this idea appears in later sermons. For example, at the funeral of Elizabeth H. Cannon in 1882, Wilford Woodruff observed: “Whether her spirit is present witnessing these funeral services, or whether she, on opening her eyes in the spirit world, would say, ‘I leave my body for my friends to bury, I must enter upon my mission,’ that is something we are not able to speak definitely about. God not having revealed it unto us.”<sup>26</sup>

Speaking at the same funeral, Joseph F. Smith was characteristically less tentative. After noting that the lifeless body was present, although “the intelligent and the immortal part [had] gone to God from whence it came,” President Smith added, “Not but what she might be present if she desires to be here, and her desire be consistent with the will and pleasure of our heavenly Father; for those who live here in the flesh have a claim upon this earth, and upon the bodies they have occupied while they sojourned here.”<sup>27</sup> Elaborating on the nature of angels (who, according to D&C 130:5, “do belong or have belonged” to the earth), the visits to earth of ancient prophets, and the several earthly visits of Jesus Christ, President Smith concluded: “In like manner our fathers and mothers, brothers, sisters, and friends who have passed away from this earth, having been faithful and worthy to enjoy these rights and privileges, may have a mission given them to visit their relatives and friends upon the earth again, bringing from the divine Presence messages of love, of warning, of reproof and instruction to those whom they had learned to love in the flesh. And so it is with Sister Cannon.” Although an essential qualifying phrase—*provided it be in accordance with the wisdom of the Almighty*—is present in President Smith’s exposition, strong encouragement was being given to the idea that the spirit of the deceased was present at the funeral service and that there could also be visitations by other loved ones from the spirit world.

In short, the consolation of the gospel was that life had meaning and would continue after death and ultimately come to a glorious fulfillment. This idea was the consolation of all Christian preaching expanded upon by Mormon teachings about the preexistence, the spirit world, and the ultimate reward of the faithful.

### Funeral Texts

Mormon funeral sermons were not required to start with a scriptural text. Some did, but more typically, scriptural references were incorporated into the sermon. The nonchalance toward having a specific text was once conveyed by President Brigham Young:

I will not go to the Bible, to the Book of Mormon, nor to the Book of Doctrine and Covenants for my text, for I will give you a text which comprehends the sermon also, so that if I do not dwell directly upon it, I trust that what I say will be true, for it will be incorporated in my text, and the text alone will be a sermon. On this occasion I will say, as on other occasions, blessed are they that hear the Gospel of salvation, believe it, embrace it, and live to all its precepts. That is the text, and a whole sermon in and of itself.<sup>28</sup>

Scriptural language, including phrases and sometimes whole verses, was often included in a sermon without any reference to its source. This language resonated with the congregation, one assumes, and shows the ease with which the early preachers moved into and out of sacred texts. Certain scriptural passages occurred with enough regularity to be considered standard within the funeral preaching tradition:

*“Know ye not that there is a prince and a great man fallen this day in Israel?”* (2 Samuel 3:38). King David’s comment about Abner captured in a few words the feeling of the people whenever a beloved leader died. Robert B.

Thompson quoted David’s words at the funeral of Joseph Smith Sr. on 15 September 1840.<sup>29</sup>

*“The Lord gave, and the Lord hath taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord”* (Job 1:21). Job’s statement of submission in the face of great loss could appropriately be repeated at any funeral. When used at the funerals of those who died at a young age or otherwise unexpectedly, the words perhaps implied more than they strictly state. “I do not understand, but I will not renounce my faith in God, who does understand and in whose ultimate justice and mercy I repose my confidence”—such would seem to be the intent of the well-known passage.

*“For I know that my redeemer liveth, and that he shall stand at the latter day upon the earth: And though after my skin worms destroy this body, yet in my flesh shall I see God”* (Job 19:25–6). In a traditional Christian reading, this passage testifies of both Jesus Christ and the bodily resurrection of the dead.

*“Well done, thou good and faithful servant: thou hast been faithful over a few things, I will make thee ruler over many things: enter thou into the joy of thy lord”* (Matthew 25:21). These words from the parable of the talents were from the beginning seen as referring to the last judgment. For early Mormons, the word *faithful* and the expression *I will make thee ruler* dovetailed beautifully with the grand truths revealed in Doctrine and Covenants 76 and 88. At the funeral of President John Taylor, a sheaf of wheat bore the inscription *Well done, good and faithful servant*.<sup>30</sup>

*“Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace, according to thy word: For mine eyes have seen thy salvation”* (Luke 2:29–30). Simeon pronounced these words, according to Luke’s gospel, after holding the infant Jesus in his arms. The Holy Ghost had previously informed him that “he should not see death, before he had seen the Lord’s Christ” (Luke 2:26). In the context of a funeral, Simeon’s words conveyed the idea that the deceased had lived a full life and had been faithful.<sup>31</sup>

*“Jesus said unto her, I am the resurrection, and the life: he that believeth in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live: And whosoever liveth and believeth in me shall never die”* (John 11:25–6). On one hand, this well-known verse provided simple reassurance of the reality of the resurrection. In a strict sense, because all spirits are eternal, they will never die. But this verse conveys something more as well: the indispensable role of Jesus Christ in making possible both resurrection and the *eternal* life that for Mormons meant exaltation in God’s highest kingdom. John Taylor elaborated on this concept in 1845:

There is faith and power connected with the gospel of Jesus Christ, whereby the sleeping dead shall burst the barriers of the tomb as Jesus did. “He that liveth and believeth in me, shall never die.” They have begun to live a life that is eternal, they have got in possession of eternal principles. They have partaken of the everlasting priesthood, which is eternal;—without beginning of days or end of years. They have become familiar with eternal things and understand matters pertaining to their future destiny, and are in possession of an exalted glory. They have become familiar with all these things and consequently their life is hid with Christ in God; Christ lives and he in them, and they in him. Though he is dead, he ever liveth to make intercession for us, and all who partake of the same spirit, live to him and for him and to and for eternity, or in eternal glory.<sup>32</sup>

For Taylor, who later became president of the church, Latter-day Saints had an eternal perspective larger and more glorious than that of the rest of the Christian world.

*“If in this life only we have hope in Christ, we are of all men most miserable. . . . For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ shall all be made alive. . . . O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory?”* (1 Corinthians 15:19, 22, 55). All of 1 Corinthians 15 was appropriate for funerals. It essentially insists on the reality of the resurrection, without which life would be meaningless. These particular verses were appreciated for their pithiness.<sup>33</sup>

*“I have fought a good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith”* (2 Timothy 4:7). If the deceased had been faithful, Paul’s memorable words to Timothy seemed a fitting tribute. Indeed, the expression was so familiar that speakers simply inserted it into the sermon without attribution. The next verse (2 Timothy 4:8) completes the

thought and seemed highly appropriate for faithful Mormons who had ears to hear: “Henceforth there is laid up for me a crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, shall give me at that day.”<sup>34</sup>

“And when he had opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of them that were slain for the word of God, and for the testimony which they held” (Revelation 6:9). This verse seemed especially relevant for Mormon missionaries who were murdered while preaching the gospel. This passage and several subsequent verses were read at length by George Q. Cannon at the funerals for Joseph Standing (1879) and John H. Gibbs (1884), both of whom died at the hands of persecutors.<sup>35</sup>

“After this I beheld, and, lo, a great multitude, which no man could number, of all nations, and kindreds, and people, and tongues, stood before the throne, and before the Lamb, clothed with white robes and palms in their hands” (Revelation 7:9). Here was another reference to the righteous souls who worshiped God. As the passage continues, those in the white robes are identified as souls who are “before the throne of God, and serve him day and night in his temple” (Revelation 7:15). In 1845, at the funeral of Caroline Smith, widow of the Prophet Joseph Smith’s younger brother William Smith, Orson Pratt began his sermon with this passage.<sup>36</sup>

“Blessed are the dead which die in the Lord from henceforth: Yea, saith the Spirit, that they may rest from their labours; and their works do follow them” (Revelation 14:13). Especially reassuring for those who have been believing and faithful, this passage appears as early as the 1833 funeral of David Johnson in Kirtland, Ohio.<sup>37</sup> It includes the idea of surcease of earthly burdens and responsibilities and also recognizes the importance of works, which in Mormon parlance meant that beyond resurrection and the simple assurance of continued existence in a resurrected state, individual persons would receive different degrees of reward according to their reception of gospel ordinances and their faithfulness in keeping the commandments.

Most often, however, only the opening words of this passage were quoted: “Blessed are the dead which die in the Lord.” The expression could be left without comment, allowing the congregation to draw its own conclusion that the deceased person being honored did so qualify.<sup>38</sup> At the funeral of Daniel Spencer in 1868, President Brigham Young explained the meaning of the phrase *die in the Lord* as follows: “In other words, blessed are those who have received the Priesthood of the Son of God, and have honored it in their lives. Those who have honored their calling and Priesthood to the end die in the Lord, and their works do follow them.”<sup>39</sup>

“And I saw the dead, small and great, stand before God; and the books were opened: and another book was opened, which is the book of life: and the dead were judged out of those things which were written in the books, according to their works” (Revelation 20:12). This passage conveyed to the congregation that the dead did survive, for they would be judged. The expression *according to their works*, which did not fit easily with the *sola fide* tradition, was tailor-made for the Mormons, who did indeed proclaim that after the universal resurrection by grace, one’s works did determine future status. This verse was also a good starting point for paying tribute to the good deeds of the deceased.

These scriptural passages were not, of course, exclusively Mormon. They are the traditional funeral texts of all Christendom, as any study of patristic or medieval sermons would demonstrate. However, in quoting and expanding on these verses, the Mormon preachers sometimes gave them a special interpretive twist. Before long, modern scripture was also used in funeral sermons, and of course this provided a framework of meaning unique to the restored gospel. The texts used most often were Alma 40–2 (on the resurrection and the spirit world), Doctrine and Covenants 76 (on the three degrees of glory), Doctrine and Covenants 88 (on the degrees of glory

and obedience to law), and Doctrine and Covenants 132 (on exaltation and the possibility of attaining godhood). Doctrine and Covenants 42:46 was also used: “And it shall come to pass that those that die in me shall not taste of death, for it shall be sweet unto them.”<sup>40</sup>

Even when the exact words of the traditional biblical passages were not quoted, the ideas contained in them were repeated over and over. The difference in the way Mormons used them was in their placing them in the context of the restored truths of an all-encompassing gospel plan of salvation. It was in relation to that plan that each life found its meaning and purpose.

## Conclusion

On occasion, Mormon funeral sermons may have strayed from the norm by awkwardly trying to make a scoundrel appear faultless, speculating too freely about the future, or unknowingly distorting the latter-day doctrine. But such variation apparently was not at all common, for we have no evidence that this was a concern requiring instruction or correction. Thus in my view the examples considered in this chapter are sufficient in number and variety to give a good idea of the nature of Mormon sermons in the late nineteenth century.

Read in the spirit in which they were delivered, these funeral sermons still have power to comfort, explain, and inspire. But what more have we discovered? Were Mormon funerals simply the same as those common throughout the Christian world? Of course there is overlap, but two significant differences should not be overlooked. First, the virtues describing a model Latter-day Saint were not those of a crusader or ascetic. If many of the virtues seem to be innocuously Christian, it is by context that we realize the unique slant or understanding the Mormons placed upon them. Second, after 1850 Mormon preachers drew upon modern scriptures in their funeral sermons, thus amplifying the understanding of the premortal existence, the future life, and the purpose and meaning of the earthly probation. As they did so, these preachers continued to cite biblical passages in support of the plan of salvation as proclaimed by the restored gospel.

Mormon funerals included much that had long been established in Christian usage, but they were Christian funerals with a difference. The repetition of praiseworthy traits in the sermons reveals the Mormon cultural ideal, specifically the ideal individual personality. The funeral sermons expressed the teachings of the restored gospel not abstractly but as reassurance and comfort extended to individuals and families at a time of emotional distress. For Mormons, the universal human experience of grief and the sense of emptiness triggered by death were placed in the context of the merciful plan of the great Creator.

## Notes

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1. See *Journal of Discourses*, 4:131, 135; 22:355. This compilation of sermons is hereafter abbreviated *JD*.
2. See John L. Sorenson, *Mormon Culture: Four Decades of Essays on Mormon Society and Personality* (Salt Lake City: New Sage Books, 1997), 157–68. For another cross-cultural comparison, see C. Paul Dredge, “What’s in a Funeral? Korean, American-Mormon and Jewish Rites Compared,” in *Deity and Death*, ed. Spencer J. Palmer (Provo, Utah: BYU Religious Studies Center, 1978), 3–31.
3. For example, M. Guy Bishop and others in “Death at Mormon Nauvoo, 1843–1845” (*Western Illinois Regional Studies* 9 [fall 1986]: 70–83) utilize sextons’ reports to analyze causes and ages of death, while

Craig R. Lundahl in “The Perceived Other World in Mormon Near-death Experiences: A Social and Physical Description” (*Omega* 12/4 [1981–82]: 319–27) focuses on descriptions of the hereafter. Truman G. Madsen itemizes Mormonism’s reassuring teachings about death in “Distinctions in the Mormon Approach to Death and Dying” (in Palmer, *Deity and Death*, 61–76) but provides no historical context. For general orientation, see L. Kay Gillespie, “Death and Dying,” in *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, 1:364–6; and Lester E. Bush Jr., “On Death and Dying,” in his *Health and Medicine among the Latter-day Saints: Science, Sense, and Scripture* (New York: Crossroad, 1993), 9–39.

4. Earlier treatments of similar subject matter include M. Guy Bishop, “To Overcome the ‘Last Enemy’: Early Mormon Perceptions of Death,” *BYU Studies* 26/3 (summer 1986): 63–79 (this article is limited to the Nauvoo period, from which almost no funeral sermons survive); Mary Ann Meyers, “Gates Ajar: Death in Mormon Thought and Practice,” in *Death in America*, ed. David E. Stannard (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1975), 112–33; Klaus Hansen, “The Mormon Rationalization of Death,” in *Mormonism and the American Experience*, ed. Klaus Hansen (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 84–112; and M. Guy Bishop, “The Celestial Family: Early Mormon Thought on Life and Death, 1830–1846” (Ph.D. diss., Southern Illinois University, 1981).
5. On the encomium, see, for example, Aristotle, *Rhetoric*, bk. 1, ch. 9.
6. In *Collected Discourses*, comp. Bryan H. Stuy (1987), 1:49. Hereafter this useful work is abbreviated *CD*.
7. In addition to describing the Savior (see Revelation 19:11), *faithful* and *true* can also apply to his dedicated followers, such as Helaman’s stripling warriors (see Alma 53:20–1; 57:26–7; 58:40) and those who endure in righteousness (see D&C 23:16–18; 76:53) and thus will inherit eternal life (see D&C 51:19). An extension of the scriptural linkage of these terms is seen in the title of Joseph Fielding McConkie’s biographical work *True and Faithful: The Life Story of Joseph Fielding Smith* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1971).
8. One exception is the sermon that John Taylor, president of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, delivered on 8 February 1880 at the funeral of a nephew of his by marriage, Joseph M. Cain, a young drunkard. See *JD*, 21:14–22.
9. In *JD*, 20:141.
0. In *JD*, 21:13; emphasis added.
1. In *CD*, 5:169.
2. In *CD*, 5:173; emphasis added.
3. *Times and Seasons* 5 (1 Aug. 1844): 606.
4. George Q. Cannon, in *Juvenile Instructor* 34 (15 Dec. 1899): 770.
5. *Times and Seasons* 5 (1 Aug. 1844): 606.
6. See Brigham Young, in *JD*, 14:227–32.
7. On the equity, mercy, and righteousness of divine judgment, see, for example, Luke 12:48; John 5:25, 30; Romans 2:11–16; 1 Peter 3:18–20; 4:6.
8. See D&C 76:71–5; 137:7–10; JST 1 Peter 3:18–20; 4:6; cf. D&C 138:32–4.
9. In *JD*, 4:135–6. See Lundahl, “Perceived Other World.”
0. One example was the out-of-body experience of Brother John J—, in which he observed apostles preaching to many of his progenitors in the spirit world and then had his diseased lungs healed by the angel who conducted him there (see C. C. A. Christensen, “A Glimpse of the Spirit World,” *Juvenile Instructor* 28 (1893), 56–7.
1. See Revelation 5:10; 20:6; D&C 76:56; 132:19.
2. In *JD*, 18:30.
3. In *JD*, 16:335.

4. As quoted in Franklin L. West, *Life of Franklin D. Richards* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News Press, 1924), 184.
5. See *JD*, 12:179–82; *CD*, 4:244–52.
6. In *JD*, 22:349.
7. In *ibid.*, 350.
8. In *JD*, 4:129–30.
9. See *Times and Seasons* 1 (Sept. 1840): 171.
0. See *CD*, 1:40.
1. For an example of this application, see *Times and Seasons* 1 (Sept. 1840): 173.
2. *Times and Seasons* 6 (15 Jan. 1846): 1098.
3. See *Times and Seasons* 6 (1 June 1845): 918–20; and *JD*, 18:306–13, 324–35; 22:347–9.
4. For more information on the meaning of crowns and their relationship to the expression *kings and priests*, see Orson Pratt's funeral sermon of 25 July 1852, found in *JD*, 1:290–1. Other direct and indirect citations of *I have fought a good fight* include *JD*, 12:180, 186; 25:285; and *CD*, 1:41–5, 113–14; 5:170–4.
5. See *JD*, 20:244–52; 25:275–80.
6. See *Times and Seasons* 6 (1 June 1845): 918.
7. See *Evening and Morning Star* 2/15 (Dec. 1833): 117.
8. See *JD*, 15:341–7; and *CD* 1:113–14; 5:167–70. An exception is *JD*, 13:75–7, in which Brigham Young explains the meaning of the phrase *die in the Lord*.
9. In *JD*, 13:75.
0. See, for example, *JD*, 10:365–8.