A Kingdom Transformed: Themes in the Development of Mormonism

By Gordon Shepherd and Gary Shepherd

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Sociologists Gordon and Gary Shepherd believe that leader rhetoric is generally an accurate reflection of organizational and ideological change, especially in regard to Mormonism. Hoping to learn something about how the LDS church has changed and maintained itself, they made a detailed analysis of general conference addresses. The Shepherds divided Mormon history into five thirty-year periods beginning in 1830 and systematically recorded the themes and subthemes which appeared in each paragraph of each address sampled from conference records. All of the themes identified in a given address generated scores based on the number of paragraphs in which each theme appeared, divided by the total number of paragraphs in the address. The Shepherds focused only on the most salient general themes addressed in each thirty-year period of conference history.

Some scholars will question the underlying assumption of this work and argue that leader rhetoric is representative only of an urbanized, Wasatch Front strain of Mormonism. While allowing that isolated communities of Saints receive (or have received) leader rhetoric in a filtered form, I think it is clear that a majority of Church members in all generations have regarded sermons given by General Authorities at general conference as divine "marching orders," and that, therefore, the perception of the Shepherds is accurate. Perhaps less accurate is their claim that by examining official records "it is possible to discern..."
organizational patterns and long-term institutional trends which would not otherwise be apparent" (3). Informed students of Mormon history will not find much that is novel in this study, and certainly historians have little need to revise or discard cherished notions. Still, it is reassuring to know that current historical interpretations are validated by statistical analysis.

The Shepherds found some conference themes that clearly belong to past eras, others that are distinctly modern, and several that have persisted since the inception of the Church. Those themes that went out of vogue long before the nineteenth century elapsed were utopian and defiant. They included Church government (institutional governing procedures), building the kingdom of God and Zion, plural marriage, and persecution, enemies, and Gentiles. Many themes which are exclusive to the twentieth century are family-oriented, such as parenthood, family, and marriage. Other modern themes include preoccupation with respectability and public image, Word of Wisdom, and Church growth.

Not surprisingly, the themes which have endured through time deal with fundamental teachings which stress the uniqueness and advantages of Mormonism. Among these are God’s plan, missionary work, restoration and divinity of the Church, Joseph Smith, and Jesus Christ. Interestingly the Shepherds found that while the elect status of Mormons has been a constant, the means of imprinting or demonstrating it has varied. In former times Church leaders stressed the hardships Church members endured and the need for divine protection. In the less combative twentieth century the emphasis has shifted to the unique blessings and special virtues of Latter-day Saints.

A major portion of the book deals with Mormon commitment mechanisms and commitment rhetoric. Transcendence themes (those which emphasize the ultimate divinity of the Church) have been and continue to be a major motivation for Church members. Church members take comfort in their ideology and their continued guidance from inspired leaders. They derive satisfaction from being involved in establishing the kingdom of God on earth. Clearly, transcendence themes will continue to exert influence on Latter-day Saints.

Commendably, the Shepherds rely on historical sources to fashion social contexts. Their reading of Mormon sources is extensive, and I was impressed with their grasp of Mormon history. The book consists of far more than statistical tables and explanations of sociological models, and even those readers who are numbed by lifeless numbers and graphs or uninterested in sociological theory will find the observations and interpretations of the authors rewarding. While I have few qualms about their basic interpretations, I did detect some hard-edged
observations that need softening. The statement that "members are encouraged to fraternize with nonmembers insofar as the ultimate goal of proselytization is facilitated" (110) is not representative of consensus leader rhetoric. While many Church members are occasionally frustrated by heavy demands on their time, few become inactive because of it (112). I suspect that comparatively few Latter-day Saints make mental notes as to who doesn’t participate in testimony meetings (118). To state without qualification that testimony meetings serve a surveillance function is unfair. While it is admittedly true that Mormon suborganizations can promote "invidious aspirations for leadership" (120), I would like to think that this happens less often than the Shepherds would have us believe. I would also emphasize that Mormonism has not canceled its ideas about societal reconstruction (157–58, 161, 202); it has merely postponed them until the Millennium.

There are other observations that are similarly unflattering (and some that are flattering) but which candid Latter-day Saints would find some validity in. The intensity of Church involvement can make it difficult to develop or maintain meaningful non-Mormon relationships (114). The Shepherds are probably right when they point out that Mormonism is plagued with its fair share of pharisaism (122). Their observation that "the Mormons’ appetite for social respectability has become a powerful force for shaping their course in the world" (163) might even be understated. Certainly there is a segment of Mormons who believe the superiority of the Church can best be demonstrated by beating the world at its own games, be they beauty contests or athletic events. Finally, one could hardly contest the observation that modern Mormonism has had comparatively little theological explication (198).

The epilogue is very good. The Shepherds rightly conclude that Mormonism will never become mainstream because of its claims to truth and authority and its distinctive theology. They observe that the primary appeals of the Church haven’t changed much in its history and by implication suggest they will not change. Active involvement in a transcendent cause, a strong central authority, and a strong community involvement will always be attractive inducements for significant numbers of people. The authors assert that future challenges of the Church are severe: sheer growth, the status of women, and the extension of the Church into Third World nations. While they suggest that the future of Mormonism is not entirely removed from its own institutional control, I suspect I am probably more optimistic than they are that the Church will make whatever adjustments and adaptations are necessary to survive and succeed.