1-1-2002

"Strange Ramblings": The Ideal and Practice of Sermons in Early Mormonism

Davis Bitton

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/byusq

Recommended Citation
Available at: https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/byusq/vol41/iss1/2

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in BYU Studies Quarterly by an authorized editor of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact scholarsarchive@byu.edu, ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu.
FIG. 1. Brigham Young in the Mormon Tabernacle at Salt Lake City. President Young preached dozens of sermons in the Tabernacle. This portrayal of the April 1873 general conference depicts Brigham Young resigning as business director of the Saints. *Daily Graphic*, April 16, 1873, 4, courtesy Gary L. and Carol B. Bunker.
“Strange Ramblings”
The Ideal and Practice of Sermons in Early Mormonism

*Davis Bitton*

People who attended meetings of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints during its first seventy years heard many sermons preached (fig. 1). But the sermons often seemed different from those heard in Protestant and Catholic congregations. For the Saints, this was further evidence that Mormonism was not tied to a professional clergy but, like primitive Christianity, allowed wide participation by parishioners. Outsiders, however, were often less than favorably impressed with Mormon sermons. According to one observer, most Mormon speakers he heard were guilty of “strange ramblings.”¹ Before examining in detail the peculiarities of preaching among the Latter-day Saints, let us set the stage.

**Sermons in American Oral Culture**

To underline the importance of sermons in an earlier age, some historians have emphasized the significance of “oral culture,” by which they mean a cultural setting in which the spoken, rather than the written, word is primary, as it is when literacy is low.² In such cultures, the spoken word always has an extraordinary impact. From the first settlements in the New World, sermons were a common feature of the oral atmosphere in which people lived; even those who could read found sermons a central feature in their verbal surroundings.

The sermons of the colonial period and early republic were numerous. A number were published in periodicals or as pamphlets or later as collections. They varied in style and content, including political sermons³ as well as those on the obligations of Christian faith.⁴ Training for the ministry

*BYU Studies 41, no. 1 (2002)*
ranged from the formal instruction received in colleges and divinity schools by the more affluent classes to the complete lack of such training received by itinerant Methodist circuit riders.

Not surprisingly, the style of sermons extended along a spectrum. At one extreme were such carefully prepared addresses as those by Jonathan Edwards and, to mention only some celebrated examples, William Ellery Channing, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and Theodore Parker. Such was the ideal in most churches. The pastor was expected not only to minister to the congregation but also to demonstrate each Sunday the fruit of his seminary training in homiletics and his many hours of study and preparation for the specific topic to be treated.

At the other end of the spectrum were the more informal sermons heard in evangelical churches and camp meetings. Revivals relied on preaching that appealed strongly to the emotions. Holiness, or Pentecostal, groups exhibited a high degree of the emotional fervor that had earlier been disparaged as “enthusiasm.” The populist, anticlerical strain in American Christianity in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries has been convincingly described by historian Nathan O. Hatch: “Obscure Christians without social grace and literary education,” he writes, “went beyond merely denying the right of the clergy to ascribe authority to themselves” by inverting “the traditional assumption that truth was more likely to be found at the upper rather than at the lower reaches of society.”

A graphic example of a sermon that made no pretense of scholarship or careful preparation comes from Indiana in the 1820s. An itinerant preacher came to a backwoods settlement. He preached in a house with swine and geese sheltered directly beneath the floor. Using a chair for a pulpit, the preacher thumped it to emphasize points. He began:

Thare’s some folks, howsomever, ... what thinks preachers must be high larn’d, afore they kin tell sinners as how they must be saved or be ‘tarnally lost: but it ain’t so I allow—(chair thumped here and answered by a squawk below)—no, no! This apostol of ourn what spoke the text, never rubbed his back agin a collige, nor toted about no sheepskins—no, never!—(thump! thump! squawk and two grunts).—Oh, worldlings! How you’d a perished in your sins if the fist preachers had a stay’d till they got sheepskins! No! no! no! I say, give me the sperit.

Baynard Rush Hall, whose descriptive words recreate the sermon, says his family always returned from such meetings “more and more convinced that a learned, talented and pious ministry was, after all, not quite so great a curse as many deem it.”
Nineteenth-Century Mormon Sermons

Depending on their backgrounds, early converts to Mormonism had their own expectations and qualifications. Some of the more publicly visible early Mormon preachers—Sidney Rigdon, Orson Hyde, Parley P. Pratt, John Taylor, and Orson Spencer—had been ministers before their conversions. As time went on, some Mormons accumulated considerable experience preaching in the mission fields or in their home congregations. There was even a brief effort to provide formal training in the School of the Prophets at Kirtland, Ohio. Yet, for the most part, those who preached Mormonism, like others who challenged the genteel tradition, were untrained and inexperienced. At regular Sunday worship services, those who conducted or prayed or preached were not a class of specially trained pastors but, rather, members of the congregation itself or, on occasion, itinerant missionaries or visiting General Authorities.

The number of sermons preached to Mormon congregations, as well as the number heard by an individual over an average lifetime, is astounding. Someone with fifty years of faithful attendance at worship services would hear something like one hundred sermons a year and thus a total of five thousand sermons.

The number of Mormon congregations grew as the Church organization matured from the 1830s to the end of the century—as wards and stakes were established and chapels and tabernacles were constructed in the West. Brigham Young is given credit for establishing over three hundred settlements. If, in each of these settlements, two sermons were given per week (an underestimate), that is more than six hundred per week. Assuming fifty weeks per year for ease of calculation, the total number of sermons given per year throughout the Church was thirty thousand, and of course it was quite possible, especially during stake and general conferences, for more than two sermons to be preached to a single congregation in a given week.

Given the staggering number of sermons delivered throughout Mormondom in the nineteenth century, it is not surprising that the great majority of them were never stenographically taken down or printed. In rare cases, a permanent record remains in minute books or a diary kept by someone in the congregation, and some diaries contain reactions to sermons given in ward meetings. Diarists and stenographers such as Wilford Woodruff and Willard Richards kept notes that were later used in attempting to reconstruct Joseph Smith's sermons.

Especially in the second half of the century, talks by General Authorities were often recorded stenographically, although not all of these were transcribed or published. Venues for publication included periodicals such
as The Latter-day Saints' Millennial Star, which began in 1840, and from 1850, the Deseret News. Starting in 1854, the Journal of Discourses appeared annually until 1886, with two or three variations from that schedule, and included the text of sermons by General Authorities. Some of these had first been published in the Deseret News, and some were published in the newspaper but not included in the bound volume. The speaker normally had the opportunity to review the transcription before it was published and, quite understandably, made adjustments and improvements.

My evaluation of nineteenth-century preaching therefore rests on a sample that is far from comprehensive and not "representative" in the strictest sense. Valuable work in researching and analyzing Mormon sermons has already been accomplished, but much remains to be done in both stylistic and content analysis. Fortunately, much of Mormon sermonizing survives, and from it some conclusions can be drawn. In the remainder of the article, I will focus on (1) a central characteristic of Mormon preaching in the nineteenth century: its reliance on the Spirit instead of an elaborately prepared written script; (2) the reaction of both non-Mormons and Mormons in the congregation; and (3) a specific effort at the end of the century to improve the quality of preaching in the Church. As those familiar with Latter-day Saint worship will recognize, some of the characteristics noted here continued through the twentieth century, but with modifying influences, and that, in any case, is another study.

The Spirit. Delivered by nonprofessional, although sometimes quite experienced, preachers, Mormon sermons were not models of unity or carefully contrived rhetorical devices. Just as it was unheard of for a person to read a testimony or a prayer, it was virtually unthinkable in the nineteenth century to give a memorized or prewritten sermon.

The scriptural foundation for Latter-day Saint preaching is Doctrine and Covenants 84:85: "Neither take ye thought beforehand what ye shall say; but treasure up in your minds continually the words of life, and it shall be given you in the very hour that portion that shall be meted unto every man." This revelation, given in 1832, was itself a modern restatement of Matthew 10:18–19: "And ye shall be brought before governors and kings for my sake, for a testimony against them and the Gentiles. But when they deliver you up, take no thought how or what ye shall speak: for it shall be given you in that same hour what ye shall speak."

Both anciently and in 1832, the mandate to "take ye [no] thought beforehand" was specifically directed to apostles and missionaries, but the principle was understood to have general application. The preparation should be general, a storing up of understanding and reflection, while the inspiration of the moment would call forth the words needed to
reach the hearts of a specific audience or congregation. In no case, according to these instructions, should the Mormon sermonizer read a prepared text. What he should seek, indeed the sinea quanon of a truly successful sermon, was “the Spirit.”

One of the effects of the Spirit was overcoming stage fright. “The feeling of fear when it rests upon a man, drives away the Spirit of God. The two spirits cannot exist in the same bosom,” wrote George Q. Cannon in 1881. “One must have the mastery. If the Spirit of God has the mastery, it drives away all fear, and enables a man to speak under its influence with power.”

Speaking out of his own experience as a young missionary and a mission president, President Cannon acknowledged that fluency and mastery might take time to develop. Those discouraged with their initial efforts were urged to “persevere, nothing doubting.” In the human setting, lack of pretense could well evoke sympathy, and if a successful sermon is one that convinces and moves, then the early Mormon preachers seem to have enjoyed a remarkable degree of success.

The sensation of enjoying a natural flow of expression was often described in the nineteenth century by the word “liberty.” “Had liberty,” or “enjoyed liberty,” the Mormon elders would record. Lorenzo Hill Hatch preached Mormonism for the first time on June 2, 1844, and, as he wrote in his journal, “the Lord told me that I could not preach of myself and I was confounded.” Later in the month, in Vermont, he tried a second time with different results: “The Lord blessed me and I had great liberty.” Orson Pratt, one of the great missionaries of the nineteenth century, also had the experience when God “favored me with liberty of utterance and with the power and gift of the Holy Ghost.” His meaning is more clearly understood by his recognition of the opposite, contrasting experience: “I have seen a few times... when my mind seemed to be entirely closed up, and when what few words I could stammer forth before a congregation, were altogether unsatisfactory to my own mind, and I presume to those who heard me.”

This usage of “liberty” is rather frequent in personal journals of the period. The journals of William E. McLellin provide many examples. Likewise, in 1839, Arza Adams preached “on the first principles with liberty and the Lord was with me so that I could not be confounded by any man preaching for hire.” Like Adams, Henry Boyle confronted gainsayers with liberty: “I had great liberty in speaking, the Lord blessed me, and the priest was utterly confounded and put to shame before all the people.” In most instances, the sensation of enjoying liberty was simply recorded with gratitude. “I had great liberty and spoke at length,” wrote Jesse Crosby in 1844. “Br. Brown and others bore testimony. The Spirit of God was there.”
Many other examples confirm the reality of speaking with liberty.24

Humility was both a prerequisite and a natural consequence of preaching by the Spirit. Once when William E. McLellin (fig. 2) attempted to preach, he was tongue-tied and lethargic: “I had no animation in it, no memory, and in truth I had lost the spirit of God.” Going into the woods to pray, he confronted his own weakness, discovering “that it was not me who had preached so many gre[al]t sermons—But that the Lord had given me Light & Liberty.” Having put down a Methodist minister who challenged him, McLellin had become proud: “This was the whole secret” of his failure.25 About six weeks after this experience, McLellin addressed a congregation that included Joseph Smith and other prominent Latter-day Saint leaders. He felt inadequate but spoke for an hour and a half. “And it was not I but the spirit and power of God which was in me,” he wrote, “and it did seem to me before I finished as though it was not I or that I had got into another region where all was light & glory.”26

On one occasion, Benjamin Johnson spoke “with good liberty, and perhaps began to feel a degree of self importance not approved of by the Lord.”27 He recognized that pride was a sure means of extinguishing the Spirit and that, without the Spirit, enjoyment of such liberty was impossible. George Q. Cannon had a similar experience in 1851, when he was preaching the gospel in Hawaii:

It was a weak attempt. I had to pull everything out that I said. It did not come easy. The only way that I could account for it was I had made up in my own mind yesterday what subject I would speak upon—and the Lord had left me to my own strength to show me my weakness. It is a fact. I have proved it to my satisfaction that I cannot preach this gospel unless aided by the Almighty.28

FIG. 2. William E. McLellin, 1867. McLellin learned firsthand that pride would turn away the Spirit and leave one unable to preach effectively. Courtesy Church Archives.
One might object that these instances of depending so heavily on the Spirit when sermonizing were experienced by missionaries and apostles, not by lay members. But all who addressed Mormon meetings—including lay members, women as well as priesthood holders—sought to be guided by the Spirit. Brigham Young addressed this subject in 1852:

I would rather hear men tell their own experience, and testify that Joseph was a Prophet of the Lord, and that the Book of Mormon, the Bible, and other revelations of God, are true; that they know it by the gift and power of God; that they have conversed with angels, have had the power of the Holy Ghost upon them, giving them visions and revelations, than hear any other kind of preaching that ever saluted my ears. If I could command the language and eloquence of the angels of God, I would tell you why, but the eloquence of angels never can convince any person that God lives, . . . independent of that eloquence being clothed with the power of the Holy Ghost; in the absence of this, it would be a combination of useless sounds.29

In October 1880, George Q. Cannon, recently sustained as First Counselor in the First Presidency of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, addressed a congregation in Tooele, Utah. He was speaking off-the-cuff—not reading from a prepared text. Indeed, he said, this was one major difference between the Latter-day Saints and ministers of other churches. President Cannon explained:

We do not cogitate in our private apartments or in our libraries or in our studies what shall be said to the people, and to frame discourses to deliver to them. It is right and proper that the Elders of this Church should try to inform themselves respecting the principles of the Gospel; but it would not be right, neither is it right for them to prepare their discourses and arrange before hand what they say to the people. We might tickle your ears, we might say pleasing things to you, we might give utterance to fine moral sentiments which you would think very beautiful; but they might not be what the people need. It requires the inspiration of the Almighty to take of the things of God to impart to the people. Without that I know it is useless for any Elder in this Church to attempt to teach, and that if he taught his teachings could not result in any possible good to those who listened.30

President Cannon went on to acknowledge eloquence and even beauty in the sermons and writings of a Church of England minister he had heard and especially Henry Ward Beecher, who was “noted for his eloquence and the good sense which characterizes many of his discourses.”31 Pleasing, charming, and mellifluous the sermons of these preachers could be, but they did not represent the model of Mormon pulpit sermonizing. Despite
the many good qualities exhibited by preachers of other churches, they lacked something essential. President Cannon explained:

It is not that they do not believe in good moral sentiments, and are not capable of teaching them; it is not that they are ignorant, for they have a great deal of what is called worldly wisdom; but it is that they are destitute of the power of God, the inspiration of the Almighty, and the gift of the Holy Ghost; therefore their teachings do not bring people to a knowledge of the truth.32

President Cannon did not deny all value to their sermons. They might make the world better “to some extent.” But they lacked the priesthood and the power of God that had been restored to earth with Mormonism and that all Mormon elders possessed. President Cannon noted:

There have been Elders of this Church who could not read, who have gone forth to preach; but they had in them the power of God, they had the inspiration of the Almighty, they had the everlasting Priesthood, by authority of which they were authorized and empowered to declare unto the people the principles of life and salvation. These men, although ignorant and unlearned, and not capable of teaching by their own wisdom, have been the means of bringing salvation to hundreds and thousands of souls, and of bringing them into the Church of Christ, and into a condition where they could receive the Holy Ghost.33

A little later, President Cannon reemphasized the point:

A man who has the spirit of God given unto him through obedience to the Gospel, and who is ordained to minister in the things of God, even if he can scarcely read, as I have said, goes forth among the people accompanied by the power of God, and searches out the honest in heart. He does not use flowery words, he does not deliver great swelling discourses; but he preaches the truth in simplicity, in meekness, he tells people what to do to be saved, and he has the authority from the Lord to administer the ordinances of salvation to the people; and when they repent humbly before God, and confess their sins, he baptizes them for the remission of their sins, and lays his hands upon their heads for the reception of the Holy Ghost; and they become new creatures.34

George Q. Cannon had no apologies to make. The Latter-day Saints marched to a different drummer, and for him there was no doubt which of the two models represented the power of God on the earth.

Language, Style, and Substance. Mormon preachers sometimes followed a practice well established in the homiletic tradition of Christianity: preaching on a specific scriptural text. In a two and a half hour sermon given in 1832 in Middlebury, Ohio, William E. McLellin “expounded prophecy after prop[he]cy and scripture after scripture.”35 Gordon Irving’s important thesis analyzes the scriptural passages used most often during
the 1830s. McLellin and those who accompanied him preached frequently on John, 1 Corinthians, and 2 Peter.

More often, Mormon preachers disregarded the practice entirely or modified it beyond easy recognition. No doubt the early missionaries often utilized the approach now disparaged as “proof-texting,” but in their minds they were simply unfolding what the scripture said about a certain topic. And in the spirit of good humor, Mormon preachers occasionally advanced extrabiblical, even extrascriptural, statements as “text.”

“Blessed are they that hear the Gospel of salvation, believe it, embrace it, and live to all its precepts,” said Brigham Young. “That is the text, and a whole sermon in and of itself.”

Reacting to the specific challenges of the moment, the early sermonizers included both religious and secular references, a distinction often meaningless at the time. Anecdotes and personal experiences helped to bring ideas home. Few sermons were unified. Without apology, the speakers, who were not being graded by speech professors, moved from one topic to another, stringing together two, three, or more ideas. If there were several things that needed to be said, they would say them one after another, ignoring the Aristotelian unities; the speakers were interested first and foremost in teaching and encouraging the Saints.

There were sermons (or sections of omnibus sermons) on irrigation, childrearing, housekeeping, the missionary obligation, the gathering, and new settlements. There were sermons of celebration and, not surprisingly, sermons of comfort and condolence. The doctrine of the two ways, the contrast between Zion and Babylon, was an inexhaustible theme, interpenetrating almost everything else when it was not the primary message. The Saints were praised and coddled, criticized and harangued. Why were they not living up to their profession? Too often they followed the ways of the world. The assumption that all Mormons were in lockstep behind an authoritarian leadership collapses in the face of the repeated injunctions to attend meetings, keep the Word of Wisdom, avoid contention, and practice polygamy.

At times, Mormon speakers used strong language to get the point across. Said Brigham Young in 1856:

I will tell you what this people need, with regard to preaching; you need, figuratively, to have it rain pitchforks, tines downwards, from this pulpit, Sunday after Sunday. Instead of the smooth, beautiful, sweet, still, silk-velvet-lipped preaching, you should have sermons like peals of thunder, and perhaps we then can get the scales from our eyes. This style is necessary in order to save many of this people. Give them smooth preaching, and let them glide along in their own desires and wishes, and
they will follow after the traditions of their forefathers and the inclinations of their own wicked hearts, and give way to temptation, little by little, until, by and bye, they are ripe for destruction.  

What members needed, in President Young’s view, was not to be soothed and reassured in their worldly ways but to be told forcefully to repent and follow counsel: “I wish to have every man who rises to speak from this stand, lay aside the smooth tongue and velvet lips and let his words be like melted lead, that they may sink into the hearts of the people.”

During the Mormon Reformation of 1856–57, some sermons may have been a bit earthy. One can well imagine that uneducated farmers or laborers wishing to communicate with a congregation of the same kind of people used colloquial language and sometimes slipped into ungrammatical usage, slang, and down-to-earth comparisons. Even Heber C. Kimball complained that the “music” was taken out of his sermons when Albert C. Carrington edited them for publication. However, Mormon sermons were far from commonly and deliberately vulgar or profane.

Lengthy sermons seem to have been common in the early days of the Church. One evening in 1831, William E. McLellin spoke for two hours, and the meeting was not over, for Samuel Smith then “ex[plained] and invited the people to embrace the truth,” after which McLellin spoke again. Such long discourses may have been the reason for Joseph Smith’s advice to “preach short sermons, make short prayers,” although his own sermons could go on for great length.

Heber C. Kimball stated an ideal but also recognized a problem in practice:

The people are often fed too much, with too long sermons. . . . Stop your long sermons, except God leads and dictates. I should advise you, if you have but a little water in the pond, not to let your saw run the full length of the log. Get up when you have something to say, and sit down when you have done. Long sermons will not answer. Preach short sermons, you Bishops.

President Heber C. Kimball did not want bishops, after a meeting had already run its course and two or three speakers had spoken, to tax the patience of the congregation by giving another long discourse. “You Bishops are always there, and you can preach when the sheep are not crammed to death. There is too much of this cramming, for by it you will gag the people and throw them overboard.”

Outsiders’ Opinions

From the beginning, Mormon preachers were heard by many non-Mormons. The missionary thrust required addressing those not of the
faith, arousing their interest, and convincing them, if possible. Visitors to Mormon meetings—in branches wherever they had been established, but especially in Kirtland, Nauvoo, and later Salt Lake City—often sought to satisfy their curiosity by attending meetings and listening to the Latter-day Saint expounders. Travelers, whose brief visits among the Saints apparently entitled them to speak as experts, often had a field day. Perhaps the marvel is that sometimes they found something to praise.

In 1842, for example, the Reverend George Moore, a Harvard-trained Unitarian minister, visited Nauvoo and attended a meeting. “I don’t know that I ever before saw such a congregation of stolid faces,” he wrote in his diary. His description continued:

When I entered, one of their number was speaking about the Elder and younger Son in the parable of the Prodigal Son. He made wretched work as a Speaker—he hesitated—and what he said amounted to nothing at all—he did not seem to know himself what he was talking about. But he soon gave way to another—a man of about 50 years of age—who spoke for nearly an hour at the top of his voice. There was but little connexion in what he said. He would run from one subject to another—just as an old Sailor will tell a long yarn, in which the great essential is to keep talking.  

In 1855, Jules Remy tried to be complimentary. Brigham Young, he said, had “a certain kind of natural eloquence which is very pleasing to his people.” Orson and Parley P. Pratt were praised for “easy elocution, their agreeable delivery, purity of language, knowledge of the laws of composition, consecutive-ness of ideas, logical deduction from the principles they lay down,” and, withal, “real rhetorical excellence.” But most Mormon sermons Remy heard were composed, as mentioned earlier, of “strange ramblings.”

At about the time of the Mormon Reformation, Horace Greeley (fig. 3) listened to addresses by Orson Pratt and John Taylor. Greeley did not expect to hear a polished delivery, but he did care that the speaker had something worthwhile to say. “Let him only be sure to

talk good sense, and I will excuse some bad grammar,” he wrote. But he had his limits, and the rambling talks that moved from one thing to another violated his sense of order and propriety:

When a preacher is to address a congregation of one to three thousand persons, like that which assembles twice each Sunday in the Salt Lake City tabernacle, I insist that a due regard for the economy of time requires that he should prepare himself, by study and reflection, if not by writing, to speak directly to the point. This mortal life is too short and precious to be wasted in listening to rambling, loose-jointed harangues, or even to those which severally consume an hour in the utterance, when they might be boiled down and clarified until they were brought within the compass of half an hour each. A thousand half hours, Reverend Sir!—have you ever pondered their value? Suppose your time to be worth ten times that of an average hearer; still, to take an extra half hour from a thousand hearers in order to save yourself ten or fifteen hours’ labor in the due and careful preparation of a sermon, is a scandalous waste, which I see not how to justify. Be entreated to repent and amend!52

In 1860, British traveler and orientalist Richard F. Burton, not entirely unsympathetic to the Mormon faith, attended a meeting in the Salt Lake City Eighth Ward. Bishop Abraham O. Smoot “began with ‘Brethring,’” Burton said, “and proceeded at first in a low and methody [stereotypical Methodist] tone of voice . . . to praise the saints, and to pitch into the apostates.” Paying attention to manner of delivery as well as subject matter, Burton was severe. Smoot’s delivery he pronounced “by no means fluent, even when he warmed,” and his speech was somewhat nasal, for “he made undue use of the regular Wesleyan organ—the nose.” To Burton’s sensitive English ears, grammatical errors were numerous. Yet the actual content of Smoot’s sermon was not disparaged. “He appeared to speak excellent sense in execrable English. He recalled past persecutions, without over-asperity, and promised future prosperity without over-prophecy.”53

The concluding speaker of the meeting was Brigham Young, whose preaching style Burton analyzed in great detail:

The discourse began slowly, word crept titubantly [staggeringly] after word, and the opening phrases were hardly audible; but as the orator warmed, his voice rose high and sonorous, and a fluency so remarkable succeeded falter and hesitation, that—although the phenomenon is not rare in strong speakers—the latter seemed almost to have been a work of art. The manner was pleasing and animated, and the matter fluent, impromptu, and well turned, spoken rather than preached: if it had a fault it was rather rambling and unconnected. Of course colloquialisms of all kinds were introduced, such as “he become,” “for you and I,” and so forth. The gestures were easy and rounded, not without a certain grace, though evidently untaught.54
The Ideal and Practice of Sermons in Early Mormonism

When making a point, Brigham would often raise and shake the forefinger, a gesture Burton thought most of the world would regard as "threatening and bullying." And he considered Brigham's address "long."

Other visitors were also far from complimentary. In 1861, Hiram S. Rumfield heard Bishop Leonard Harrington speak in the Tabernacle: "He commenced in a tone so low and mumbling that his first utterances, however interesting they may have been to those who were near enough to hear him, were certainly lost to the majority of the congregation; myself included." The congregation was so noisy, the coughing so frequent, that only gradually did the visitor gather that the theme of the sermon was "the necessity of implicit obedience to teachings of the Church." In 1871, W. F. Rae wrote, "both of which were harangues about things in general; the only special doctrines enunciated and enforced by repetition, not by argument, being that the Mormons were God's chosen people, and that Polygamy was a divine institution."

In 1877, James F. Rusling attended a meeting in the Tabernacle. He wrote: "The speaking, as a whole, scarcely rose above mediocrity except perhaps Mr. [George Q.] Cannon's. It was noisy and common-place, without logic or symmetry, and would have provoked most eastern audiences to ridicule, rather than led to conviction. . . . All seemed quite illiterate, their rhetoric limping badly, and their pronouns and verbs marrying very miscellaneously." In 1884, Emily Faithfull generalized disapprovingly:

The sermons in the Sunday evening ward meetings of the Mormons chiefly consisted in advice as to the raising of cattle, the destruction of vermin, the cleaning of water-ditches, and other worldly concerns; and indeed some of the sermons in earlier times were couched in language so coarse and revolting, that ladies have told me they hardly knew how to endure it. Rabelais himself could not have surpassed it!

She may not have attended many sacrament meetings on which to base her judgments, but we can hear the clucking tongue.

However, not all Mormon sermons were cut from the same cloth. In 1888, Alexandra Gripenberg, intending to be complimentary, described a sermon as "similar in content to the sermons of Unitarian ministers: it did not contain much dogmatic theology in the usual sense but only sound and humane morality." The Mormon preachers would not have liked the idea that they were simply repeating the middle-class moral injunctions that could be heard from pulpits throughout the land, but it was true enough that a practical emphasis—what should be done in the here and now—was common.
Observer Phil Robinson had a favorable impression of the practicality of Mormon sermons:

These addresses are curiously practical. They are temporal rather than spiritual, and concern themselves with history, official acts, personal reminiscences, and agricultural matter rather than points of mere doctrine. But as a fact, temporal and spiritual considerations are too closely blended in Mormonism to be disassociated. Thus references to the Edmunds Bill take their place naturally among exhortations to “live their religion,” and to “build up the kingdom” in spite of “persecution.” Boycotting Gentile tradesmen is similarly inculcated as showing a pious fidelity to the interests of the Church. These are the two chief topics of all addresses, but a passing reference to a superior class of waggon, or a hope that every one will make a point of voting in some coming election, is not considered out of place, while personal matters, the health of the speaker or his experiences in travel, are often thus publicly commented upon.  

Robinson was generous in his conclusion: “The result is, that the people go away with some tangible facts in their heads, and subjects for ordinary conversation on their tongues, and not, as from other kinds of religious meetings, with only generalities about their souls and the Ten Commandments.”

N. L. Nelson’s Effort to Improve Sermons

Some Latter-day Saints recognized that improvement in Mormon sermonizing was needed. As early as 1841, the following letter to the editor from “a worthy female correspondant [sic]” was published in Times and Seasons:

There is a commandment which says, “Be ye therefore wise as serpents, and harmless as doves.” It was generally believed by the ancients, that the serpent possessed the power of fascinating in order to secure his prey. There is a fascinating power in eloquence, which I have often thought is more like the fascinating power attributed to the serpent, than anything else on earth. A minister of the gospel should possess that power, in order to obey that commandment literally and fully; and his success will generally be in proportion to the degree in which he possesses it: for there is nothing that can so effectually secure the attention, and gain the hearts of the people, as truth clothed with eloquent language.

In the second half of the century, study groups and ward or community mutual improvement societies, even before the formal organization of auxiliaries by the Church, typically included talks and debates, and, in addition to whatever guidance they received in the schools, individuals could take instruction in elocution. Advice on preaching was given in editorials, articles, and even some sermons. 
At the end of the century, N. L. Nelson (fig. 4), who taught rhetoric and elocution at Brigham Young Academy (not yet called University) in Provo, Utah, published *Preaching and Public Speaking: A Manual for the Use of Preachers of the Gospel and Public Speakers in General.* 66 As a missionary in the Southern States Mission, he had had “frequent occasion to deplore the fearful waste of time, money, energy, and opportunity to save souls,—to say nothing of the mental anguish,—which is involved before the raw missionary, with no other guide than blundering experiment, is changed into the fairly capable preacher.” 67 Rejecting the fond assumption that youths called as missionaries were suddenly transformed into articulate preachers, Nelson described the typical missionary as “defeated time after time,” even “utterly routed,” before humbling himself, studying the scriptures, and finally becoming an effective “preacher of righteousness.” 68

With regard to speakers in sacrament meetings, Nelson was merciless. As a clerk in his ward, he had the experience of taking minutes in Sunday meetings and often found the sermons “desultory” and incoherent. “I cannot think of a more profitless hour than that spent in listening to an aimless speaker,” he said. Nelson would continue to attend meetings in order to renew his covenants in the sacrament, but after receiving “this blessing . . ., I can sit back to an hour’s punishment, if need be, and count it among the blessings of adversity.” 69

To parry the charge that he had “a fault-finding spirit,” Nelson claimed to be voicing the feelings of many others who would not speak out and of “the multitude of Latter-day Saints who now seldom go to meeting.” Any who might doubt his strictures should simply observe the effect of sermons on the congregation: “Among the portion that sleep, some of whom are on the stand, may be counted here and there leading members of the ward.” Of those awake, the majority show a “leaden eye” and a “lackadaisical expression.” Realizing that his comments might appear harsh, he defended them
as a necessary diagnosis if improvements were to be effected. "It seems to me a healthy rule," he wrote, "to count that charity misplaced which fosters the evil it feeds, be it beggary or bad preaching." ²⁰

Nelson's book, revised from a series of articles first published in the Contributor, is in part a Mormon version of the standard rhetoric textbook of the period. But it does not stop with rhetoric. Since "one cannot give what he has not got," Nelson provides much advice on intellectual and personality development. In "Subject-Matter for Sermons," he puts forth a thoughtful analysis of the "Importance of Point of View." In "The Art of Thinking," he explores such topics as "The Value of Thinking as Compared with Thought-gathering" and "How to Set the Wheels of Thought Moving."

Recognizing that there are different kinds of sermons and different audiences, Nelson insists that certain underlying principles remain. The sermon should have unity—with a beginning, a middle, and an end—and should say something. It should also be interesting. Using standard rhetorical terms, Nelson discusses description, exposition, exegesis, argumentation, discussion, and persuasion. For him rhetoric was not inherently evil but a discipline that could be applied for either good or ill, and he did not want the preachers of righteousness to be handicapped by ignorance of it. He offers recommendations on the choice of words and the construction of sentences and on breathing, voice development, and gestures.

Yet Nelson by no means repudiates the traditional Mormon understanding of preaching by the Spirit. He simply insists on the need for a broad and deep preparation—a storing of the mind, from which the humble speaker, under inspiration, could draw a sermon that would be at once interesting and inspiring, feeding both the mind and the heart:

Let us then continue to believe that we are to take no thought about what we shall say, that we are to rely implicitly upon the Lord's giving in the hour thereof what is mete for every man. But let this trust never be an apology or a justification for minds in which nothing has bloomed and ripened since the days we were on missions. Let it mean what God designed it to mean, that we are not to prepare sermons by rote. ²¹

Although outspoken in his criticism of lay speakers in the Church, Nelson did not wish to impugn the General Authorities. At the end of his book, he includes a sermon by President Wilford Woodruff delivered at a stake conference in Ogden on October 19, 1896. "Any one can see that it is not a studied effort," Nelson points out, "just as everyone must feel that it was dictated by the Spirit of God. The fact that the sermon admits of logical analysis down to the last detail, should settle the question, once for all, that the Holy Ghost is a spirit of order, and that consequently our sermons will be logical and progressive in the exact ratio that our minds yield to this
Spirit.” Nelson praises the sermon for the simplicity of its diction, its clarity and directness, and its avoidance of “attempts at oratorical effect.”

Inserting headings that were not in the original, Nelson finds an Introduction, a First General Division, a Second General Division, and a General Conclusion, with specific instances and experiences supporting each heading. Significantly, the Woodruff sermon was entitled “Obtain the Spirit of God.” Nelson did not wish to leave the impression that by studying his textbook or using certain techniques one could dispense with spiritual influence: “My purpose has been, not to teach how we may get along without the Spirit, but how, by accustoming our minds to order and system, we shall offer the least resistance to its guidance.”

There is no satisfactory way of measuring the effect of Nelson’s book. Students in his rhetoric and elocution classes at Brigham Young Academy probably learned something from it, and the book was read by an unknown number of others. We are entitled to doubt that any general transformation was wrought. Individual speakers who followed his lead and prepared themselves as Nelson recommended may have given sharp, well-organized sermons, but if the “Nelsonians” were brash, as Nelson himself came close to appearing, they were probably criticized in turn for their conceited attitude. To the extent that a certain class of youth became better-educated and pursued programs of self-improvement, especially if they also developed a sensitivity to spiritual impulses, perhaps Nelson’s efforts improved the caliber of preaching in the Church.

The Receptivity of the Congregation

From the 1830s, it has been recognized that, along with the “liberty” enjoyed by the speaker, the tolerance and receptivity of the congregation is vital in making a sermon successful. For the Holy Spirit to perform its work fully, both speaker and auditors must be in tune. William E. McLellin cites many occasions of being unable to get through to his audience when they resisted the Spirit. “I believe I effected but little in consequence of the coldness and backwardness among them,” he said of one congregation in 1834. Speaking to them the next day, he noted, “My spirit seemed somewhat bound in consequence of the dissensions among the brethren.”

George Q. Cannon reinforced this concept in 1894, explaining the congregation’s role and adding provisos that show his own criteria for successful sermons. “It is most delightful,” he said, “to be in meetings where the Spirit of God reigns, controlling the speaker and softening the hearts of the hearers. I do not take any pleasure in meetings where this is not present.”
Essentially repeating his reflections of 1880 quoted earlier, he gave this counsel to the Latter-day Saints:

It should be our aim, when we come to conference, not to be satisfied unless we feel the baptism of the Holy Ghost and the power thereof resting down upon us. We should come with our hearts prepared for that, seeking for it in faith, our desires ascending unto our Father in heaven in the most fervent manner to soften our hearts and to give unto us His Holy Spirit. We should ask Him also to give it unto those who address us, that they may speak the words of life and salvation, that each of us may go from the meetings feeling that the Lord has been with us, and has given us bread to feed our souls and to strengthen us in the midst of our trials, our afflictions and our perplexities.  

For Latter-day Saints who learned to listen by the Spirit and to empathize with the lay speaker whose place behind the pulpit they had occupied or might soon occupy, sacrament meetings could be spiritually fulfilling even when the sermons given failed to meet the world's view of successful rhetoric.

The Spirit can enhance the understanding of the audience even if a speaker is lacking in the Spirit, concentrating more on worldly subjects. “When a subject is treated upon with all the calculation, method, tact, and cunning of men, with the effusions of worldly eloquence, before a congregation endowed with the power of the Holy Ghost, and filled with the light of eternity,” said Brigham Young,

they can understand the subject, trace its bearings, place all its parts where they belong, and dispose of it according to the unalterable laws of truth. This makes all subjects interesting and instructive to them. But the case is quite different with those whose minds are not opened and instructed by the power of God. Sermonizing, dividing, and subdividing subjects, and building up a fine superstructure, a fanciful and aerial building, calculated to fascinate the mind, coupled with the choicest eloquence of the world, will produce no good to them.

Thus, Latter-day Saints should not be passive hearers but rather should seek the guidance of the Spirit as they strive to grow in knowledge and understanding not only of the gospel but of practical and secular things as well.

Conclusion

Though sometimes ungrammatical, earthy, and seemingly disorganized, nineteenth-century Mormon sermons were unique in their reliance on the Spirit to guide both speaker and listener. Under the Spirit's influence, Mormon sermons had great power. Latter-day Saints were encouraged to
listen as did Ezra T. Benson, who in 1855 claimed never to have heard a Mormon sermon he did not “rejoice in”:

It never made any difference who addressed the people; no matter who was called upon to speak, however eloquent his discourse might be, however pointed his remarks might be, no matter however simple, or how many times I might have heard the same subject treated upon, it was always edifying to me, for I ever found something new, and although I might have heard the same things, perhaps a great many times, but my memory being so short and treacherous, I had forgotten some things, but as soon as I heard them again I could then recollect them; my mind would be refreshed, and I would remember that I had heard the same things before.77

President Cannon (fig. 5) reminded the Saints that it is a privilege to receive “instruction and counsel, and reproof and warning” under the influence of the Spirit of God:

We have had a great deal of excellent instruction today, and no doubt that which has been said has prompted many reflections, which will be very profitable to us if we have the Spirit of God to bring them to our remembrance after we leave here. I do not know any people upon the face of the earth who have so many privileges in this respect as the Latter-day Saints. The Gospel is preached in great simplicity, accompanied by power; and there is no subject connected with our present or our future existence that does not receive attention from the Elders who speak to us. . . . There has been a continuous flood of instruction and counsel, and reproof and warning when needed. We have walked in the light, and not in the dark, and have known the mind and will of God concerning us.78

Even though few nineteenth-century Mormon sermons met the world’s criteria for a pleasing sermon, they were capable, as George Q. Cannon said, of providing “bread to feed our souls.”
Davis Bitton (dbitton@mstar2.net) is Emeritus Professor of History at the University of Utah. He received a B.A. from Brigham Young University. His M.A. and Ph.D. degrees were earned at Princeton University.


3. Political sermons, though delivered by preachers, contained political as well as religious references and were subsequently published as pamphlets. For the colonial and federalist periods, there is a handy collection of these sermons, with an introduction, in Ellis Sandoz, ed., Political Sermons of the American Founding Era, 1730–1805 (Indianapolis: Liberty Press, 1991).


5. Examples are conveniently gathered in American Sermons: The Pilgrims to Martin Luther King Jr. (New York: The Library of America, 1999).

6. “Enthusiasm” is used here in the narrow, technical sense to describe the varieties and dangers of simply claiming inspiration for one’s words and actions when in a state of emotional fervor.


9. Harbison, The Christian Scholar, 68; italics in original. Concerns over preaching by “ignorant and unlettered men” were expressed by others, including, for example, Lyman Beecher in 1814, whose criticism was viewed as an attack on the Methodists. Hatch, Democratization of American Christianity, 18–19.


13. For Brigham Young, Elen D. Watson has performed a valuable service in his compilation Brigham Young Addresses: A Chronological Compilation of Known Addresses of the Prophet Brigham Young, 6 vols. (Salt Lake City: By the compiler, 1979–84). A useful compilation of sermons following the termination of Journal of Discourses in 1886 is Brian H. Stuy, comp., Collected Discourses, 5 vols. (n.p.: By the compiler, 1987–92).


16. At the beginning, and for many years, only males served formally as missionaries and did all of the preaching in Church conferences and even in sacrament meetings. On the other hand, women bore testimonies, sometimes functioned unofficially as missionaries, met among themselves in meetings of instruction and spiritual outpouring, and from 1842 had their own organization, the Relief Society, with opportunities for presiding in meetings and preaching the gospel. There is no convenient way to know how many women preached in sacrament meetings as time progressed, but many did so. Many others “preached” in the Sunday School, Primary, and Young Women organizations begun in the latter half of the century. By the 1890s, some women were called to serve as full-time missionaries. Calvin S. Kunz, “A History of Female Missionary Activity in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1830–1898” (master’s thesis, Brigham Young University, 1976); Diane L. Mangum, “The First Sister Missionaries,” Ensign 10 (July 1980): 62–65.

17. I did not find this precise usage in the Oxford English Dictionary, although the following may be extended to include it: “Free opportunity, range, or scope to do or of doing something; hence, leave, permission”; italics in original.


26. Shipp and Welch, Journals of William E. McLellin, 47.
27. Benjamin F. Johnson, My Life’s Review (Independence, Mo.: Zion’s, 1947), 73.

37. See the list compiled by M. Teresa Baer in Shipp and Welch, Journals of William E. McLellin, 403–4.
45. Brigham Young, in Journal of Discourses, 5:99, August 2, 1857. A small anti-Mormon newspaper published the following letter from E. D. in 1859:

You have doubtless read many of the discourses from which you have quoted, and felt somewhat amused at their intrepidity; but if you could only have been present, to behold the orators, writhing under the influence of the most violent emotions; to hear those heated sentences ringing in your ears, with all those embellishments of music which Br. Carrington so wantonly clips out, the effect upon your mind must certainly have been greatly heightened. (E. D. to Kirk Anderson, Esq., in Kirk Anderson’s Valley Tan, March 1, 1859, 2)
The Ideal and Practice of Sermons in Early Mormonism

46. Shipps and Welch, *Journals of William E. McLellin*, 64.
47. Joseph Smith, quoted by George A. Smith in *Journal of Discourses*, 3:23, August 12, 1855.
55. Criticism went both ways. Sermons by other Christians were not immune from criticism by Mormons, and mockery of preaching by the illiterate could even be found in Mormon publications. In 1863 the *Deseret News* reprinted a sermon allegedly delivered by a preacher in Mississippi:

My brethren and sistern: I air a ignorant man, follered the plow all my life, and never rubbed agin nary college. As I said afore, I’m ignorant; and I thank God for it. . . . Well, I’m agin all high larnt fellers what preaches grammar and Greek for a thousand dollars a year. They preaches for the money and they gits it, and that’s all they’ll git. They’ve got so high larnt they contradicts Scripter what plainly tells us that the sun rises and sets. They say it don’t, but that the yearth whirls round like clay to the seal. What ud come of the water in the wells ef it did? Woden’t it all spill out and leave ’em dry, and what’d we be? I may say to them as the serpant said unto David, “Much larning hath made thee mad.”

When I preaches, I never takes a tex till I git inter the pulpit; then I preaches a plain sarmint what even women can understand. I never premeditates, but what is given to me in that same hour, that I sez. (Rev. J. M. Aughey, *Iron Furnace*, quoting an “unlettered preacher,” reprinted in *Deseret News*, April 29, 1863, 350)

If the Mormon editor saw any discomfiting similarities to preaching he heard in his own meetings, he did not say so.

In 1862 a lengthy discussion of Protestant, especially Anglican, sermons appeared in the London *Spectator*. Critical of the assumption that the clergy had a cachet of superior knowledge or eloquence, the author sought to de-emphasize the sermon. In fact, he said, the sermon should be optional both in the sense that the preacher would deliver one only “when he had something that seemed to him of weight” and in the sense that the parishioner “would only attend when he had reason to expect something worth attention.” “Why,” asked the author, “are we to listen patiently to all these fanciful *ex cathedra* explanations from men whose reasons for supporting a political candidate for Parliament we should scarcely weigh at all, and whom we might decline to hear upon the ethics of family life?” Apparently seeing no possible application to preaching by Mormons, the *Deseret News* editor reprinted the article and endorsed the criticism...


57. W. F. Rae, Westward by Rail: The New Route to the East (New York: Appleton, 1871), 123–24. The visit was in 1869.

58. James F. Rusling, Across America: or The Great West and the Pacific Coast (New York: Sheldon, 1874), 46. The visit was in 1867.

59. Emily Faithfull, Three Visits to America (Edinburgh: David Douglas, 1884), 172.


61. Phil Robinson, Sinners and Saints: A Tour across the States and round Them (Boston: Roberts Bros., 1883), 158.

62. Robinson, Sinners and Saints, 158.

63. Letter to Editor, Times and Seasons 2 (April 15, 1841): 383; italics in original.


70. Nelson, Preaching and Public Speaking, iv.


74. Shipps and Welch, Journals of William E. McLellin, 140.

75. George Q. Cannon, in Collected Discourses, 4:12, January 14, 1894.

76. Brigham Young, in Journal of Discourses, 1:90, June 13, 1852; italics in original.
