

Researching Mormonism: General Conference as Artifactual Gold Mine

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FROM ITS BEGINNINGS IN THE SPRING OF 1830, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints has grown to more than 9 million members and now adds a million new converts worldwide every three years. On Sunday, 25 February 1996, a milestone was reached when the number of Mormons living in other countries exceeded the number living in the United States.¹ In fact, only about 17 percent of members currently reside in Utah.² Clearly, the days of Mormonism as a Utah or American church have passed, and recent growth has been so impressive that non-Mormon sociologist Rodney Stark projects church membership to reach 265 million by 2080 and believes that Mormonism is on its way to becoming the next major world religion.³

In view of these rising numbers, official LDS rhetoric has been increasingly recognized (both praised and blamed) as an important factor in a number of state, regional, national, and world issues such as liquor by the drink and pari-mutuel betting in Utah (both defeated), the proposed basing of the MX missile system in Utah⁴ (defeated), the Equal

1. Jay M. Todd, "More Members Now Outside U.S. Than in U. S.," *Ensign* 26 (Mar. 1996): 76-77.

2. Tim B. Heaton, "Vital Statistics," in *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, ed. Daniel H. Ludlow, 5 vols. (New York: Macmillan, 1992), 4:1518-37.

3. Rodney Stark, "The Rise of a New World Faith," *Review of Religious Research* 26 (1984): 409-12. See also Armand L. Mauss, ed., "Mormons and Mormonism in the Twenty-first Century: Prospects and Issues," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 29 (Spring 1996), for a special issue on the growth of the church.

4. Steven A. Hildreth, "The First Presidency Statement on the MX in Perspective," *Brigham Young University Studies* 22 (Spring 1982): 215-25.

Rights Amendment⁵ (defeated), and various disaster relief efforts (millions of dollars raised and disbursed), among others.

Perhaps noting the dynamics of such "political" debates, a number of researchers have studied Mormonism from sociological, legal, cultural, and economic perspectives, to name a few.⁶ One prominent non-Mormon historian has even characterized Mormonism as a new world religious tradition.⁷ Church founder Joseph Smith is being reassessed by some non-Mormons as, for example, "an authentic religious genius"⁸ or as a thinker to be taken seriously since he convincingly addressed knotty problems that other Christian theologians had wrestled with for centuries.⁹ Such positive acknowledgments depart from condemnations of the past which dismissed Smith as a manipulative charlatan.

Given such developments, the church and its leaders will, no doubt, be the objects of growing interest from the scholarly world. However, a full understanding of the rhetorical collectivity¹⁰ of Mormonism, including the motivations and goals of its leadership, is unattainable without a knowledge of the primary oratory of its leaders from 1830 to the present. Indeed, any scholar studying Mormonism, no matter his or her discipline or religious orientation, needs to familiarize him- or herself with the general conference rhetoric of its general authorities. General conference may be the most profound, authoritative, and historically persisting source of Mormon leader rhetoric extant and available to LDS and non-LDS researchers alike.

5. See, for example, Janice Schuetz, "Secular and Sectarian Conflict: A Case Study of Mormons for ERA," *Women's Studies in Communication* 5 (1982): 41-55; David M. Jabusch, "Mormon Anti-ERA Rhetoric: An Exercise in Piety," paper presented at the meeting of the Speech Communication Association, Anaheim, California, 1985; Richard J. Jensen and John C. Hammerback, "Feminists of Faith: Sonia Johnson and the Mormons for ERA," *Communication Studies* 36 (1985): 123-37; Tarla Rai Peterson, "Argument Premises Used to Validate Organizational Change: Mormon Representations of Plural Marriage," *Journal of Applied Communication Research* 18 (1990): 168-84; O. Kendall White, Jr., "Mormonism and the Equal Rights Amendment," *Journal of Church and State* 31 (Spring 1989): 249-67.

6. See, for example, Harold Bloom, "The Religion-making Imagination of Joseph Smith," *Yale Review* 80 (Apr. 1992): 26-43; Edwin Brown Firmage and Richard Collin Mangrum, *Zion in the Courts: A Legal History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1830-1900* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988); Martin E. Marty, *Religion and Republic: The American Circumstance* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1987); John Heinerman and Anson Shupe, *The Mormon Corporate Empire* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1985); Gordon Shepherd and Gary Shepherd, *A Kingdom Transformed: Themes in the Development of Mormonism* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1984).

7. Jan Shipps, *Mormonism: The Story of a New Religious Tradition* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1985).

8. Bloom, "The Image-making Imagination of Joseph Smith," 26.

9. As quoted in O. Haroldsen, "Good and Evil Spoken Of," *Ensign* 25 (Aug. 1995): 9-11.

10. Jill J. McMillan, "In Search of an Organizational Persona: A Rationale for Studying Organizations Rhetorically," in Lee O. Thayer, ed., *Communications in Organizations* (Norwood, NJ: Ablex, 1987), 21-45.

DEVELOPMENT OF GENERAL CONFERENCE

The initial gathering on 6 April 1830 in Fayette, New York, was held to incorporate the newest manifestation of Christianity. Then, following a Sunday, 11 April, meeting where Joseph Smith's scribe, Oliver Cowdery, "preached the first public discourse by any of our number,"¹¹ the first identifiable general conference of the Latter-day Saints convened on 1 June 1830 in the Peter Whitmer, Sr., home in Fayette.¹² Twenty-seven adherents attended along with another 30-40 other interested parties. Joseph Smith read the fourteenth chapter of Ezekiel and then offered a prayer. In addition, a hymn was sung, the sacrament of the Lord's Supper was administered, several converts were confirmed members of the new faith, and a number of the men were issued official licenses to identify them as missionaries or as other church officers. Although little of that first conference was preserved relative to the oratory expounded, the minutes do contain these details:

Much exhortation was given, and the Holy Ghost was poured out upon us in a miraculous manner—many of our number prophesied, whilst others had the heavens opened to their view, and were so overcome that we had to lay them on beds, or other convenient places. ... the goodness and condescension of a merciful God, unto such as obey the everlasting gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ, combined to create within us sensations of rapturous gratitude, and inspire us with fresh zeal and energy, in the cause of truth.¹³

From this first meeting, conferences were held during the next few years whenever Joseph Smith deemed it necessary to transact business, deal with problems, or when new revelations needed to be announced and ratified by the church. This latter function helped to establish the concept of common consent in the church that continues to this day as seen by the yearly vote of members to sustain the general officers of the church or when the church votes to ratify or "canonize" a revelation received by the president before it is accorded official status as scripture.

The second conference was called to order on 26 September 1830, again at the Whitmer home, where the sacrament was administered, a number of communicants had hands placed upon their heads to be confirmed members and ordained to the priesthood, and where other business was conducted. Membership had increased to sixty-two over the intervening three

11. Joseph Smith, Jr., et al., *History of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, ed. B. H. Roberts, 6 vols. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1978), 1:81; hereafter HC.

12. John Taylor, ed., *The Times and Seasons* (Nauvoo, IL: Taylor and Woodruff, 1843), 4:22.

13. *Ibid.*, 23.

months,¹⁴ and it was reported that Isaiah 5 was read by Joseph Smith with additional remarks by the twenty-four-year-old prophet.

In the early years, probably following the Methodist practice, a chairman or moderator was elected to preside over the conference who was not necessarily the president of the church.¹⁵ In this case, Joseph Smith was, indeed, elected. However, in the few short months since the organization of the church, Oliver Cowdery, David Whitmer, and others had voiced their discontent with some aspects of Smith's leadership and Hiram Page had claimed to have received revelations for the church through a "seer" stone. In her biography of Joseph Smith, Donna Hill offers these details of this pivotal conference:

The membership at once revealed its discontents, and the conference became a stormy affair. Oliver rose to protest against Joseph's claim to receive commandments for the whole church. Joseph countered by denouncing Hiram Page's revelations which he said contradicted the New Testament and the latest word of God received by him, their prophet.

Hiram and his adherents were adamant, however, and the danger of a schism in the church became apparent. No matter the cost, Joseph felt that the church must hold together. Deciding to risk all, he demanded a vote of confidence from the congregation.

Put to the test, the members, including Hiram Page himself, renounced Hiram's stone and revelations, and sustained Joseph as their prophet.¹⁶

Despite such contentions buffeting the infant church, Smith's developing rhetorical skills contributed to his success in keeping the flock together as he happily noted in his journal that the "utmost harmony prevailed, and all things were settled satisfactorily to all present."¹⁷

Nor would this be the last challenge to the prophet and his authority as the very next conference (2 January 1831) seemed to have been called to counter more dissent, this time to a revelation which directed the church to move to Ohio. Despite the debate, it was clear that "the Church became officially constituted with a dynamic and biblically consistent eschatology"¹⁸ and the Saints did, in fact, move to Ohio. By the fourth conference, held in Kirtland, Ohio, in early June 1831 and attended by some 2,000 persons, comments on oratorical style began to appear. For exam-

14. Donald Q. Cannon and Lyndon W. Cook, eds., *Far West Record: Minutes of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1830-1844* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1983), 3.

15. Jay R. Lowe, "A Study of the General Conferences of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1830-1901," Ph.D. diss., Brigham Young University, 1972, 23.

16. Donna Hill, *Joseph Smith: The First Mormon* (Garden City, NJ: Doubleday & Co., 1977), 117, 118.

17. HC, 1:118.

18. Lowe, "A Study of the General Conferences," 38.

ple, Jared Carter reported that although Joseph Smith "was not naturally a talented speaker, ... [he] spoke as I have never heard man speak for God before."¹⁹ Parley P. Pratt confirmed this perception when recalling that "much instruction was given by President Smith, who spake in great power, as he was moved by the Holy Ghost."²⁰ This observation is in harmony with one scholar's assessment of early Mormon preaching when she reported that "Some Mormons, believing as they did in divine inspiration at the moment of delivery of a sermon, felt no need to supplement the efforts of the Holy Spirit."²¹ In other words, most early church leaders eschewed advance preparation and spoke as they believed the Spirit directed in an obvious extemporaneous fashion. At any rate, the most singular event of this first Ohio conference was Joseph Smith's announcement that several brethren were to be ordained to the high priesthood.²²

The fifth general conference, 4 August 1831, was held in Kaw Township, twelve miles west of Independence, Missouri, with only thirty-one people in attendance.²³ Lands had been purchased and Sidney Rigdon, a confidant of and assistant to Joseph Smith, had consecrated the land for the eventual removal of the church to Missouri. It was noted that Joseph Smith had dedicated the temple site in Independence, but little else was recorded. Still, another historian called the progress of the church phenomenal during this period and credited the conferences as "a most important organizational device through which this progress had been attained."²⁴ He also characterized this period of conference holding as predictably intermittent:

During this period of Church history, and for some time to come, there seems to have been no consistent pattern for holding conferences. They were often quite irregular with respect to time, place, content, and form. The Church was undergoing rapid change as a result of numerical and geographical growth. The conference was the chief device for making the necessary adjustments and coping with numerous emergencies as well as implementing the new programs and principles of the Church. This is the probable explanation for there being more conferences (approximately thirteen) of a more or less

19. *Ibid.*, 41.

20. Parley P. Pratt, *Autobiography of Parley P. Pratt* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1994), 53.

21. Barbara J. M. Higdon, "The Role of Preaching in the Early Latter Day Saint Church, 1830-1846," Ph.D. diss., University of Missouri, 1961, 73.

22. Bruce N. Westergren, ed., *From Historian to Dissident: The Book of John Whitmer* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1995), 69.

23. Cannon and Cook, *Far West Record*, 10.

24. Lowe, "A Study of the General Conferences," 56.

general nature during the period 1831 through 1833, than in any other comparable period in the history of the Church.²⁵

Although I count more than twenty conferences during this period, these formative conferences, as irregularly held as they may have been, were nevertheless crucial to the development of a sense of unity and harmony among converts especially in light of the difficult transportation and communication era in which they found themselves. Many such early conferences "were more of the nature of work and project conferences."²⁶

A notable conference during this period was held in Hiram, Ohio, in November 1831 which dealt with the publication of the revelations Smith had so far received. Smith wrote that, during this conference, his "time was occupied closely in reviewing the commandments and sitting in conference, for nearly two weeks; for from the first to the twelfth of November we held four special conferences."²⁷ The conference voted to publish 10,000 copies of the Book of Commandments, although the actual first printing was closer to 3,000 copies. This type of activity was not unusual during these early conferences since these meetings were held to motivate the Saints to support a variety of initiatives ranging from the establishment of "Zion"²⁸ to fending off challenges to Smith's authority, and from encouraging support for the prophet's inspired revision of the Bible to taking oaths of allegiance. In fact, "the preaching of sermons was often incidental or ancillary to the conduct of church business and administrative tasks at early Mormon conferences."²⁹

The early conferences also served a judicial function since disputes between members were settled and moral transgressions were addressed by church leaders which further served to establish general conference as an important unifying and organizing element in nineteenth-century Mormonism. An early practice was the "silencing" of a priesthood leader due to transgression. For example, the following notation is found in the Far West Record for a conference held on 12 September 1831 in Kirtland, Ohio: "Upon sufficient or satisfactory testimony to this Conference, it was voted that our brethren George Miller, a Priest in the church of Shalersville, John Woodard an Elder in the Church of Orange, and Benjamin Bragg a Priest in the Church of Warrensville, be silenced from ministering

25. *Ibid.*, 57, 58.

26. *Ibid.*, 100.

27. HC, 1:235.

28. A. D. Sorensen, "Zion," in *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, 4:1624-26; Firmage and Mangrum, *Zion in the Courts*, esp. ix-xvi.

29. Shepherd and Shepherd, *A Kingdom Transformed*, 15.

in their respective offices."³⁰ This form of discipline effectively restrained these men from preaching or otherwise acting in an office to which they had been appointed or "set apart."

Following the 1847 migration of the Mormons to the Great Salt Lake Valley,³¹ the judicial function was eventually transferred from general conference to separate church courts where "the priesthood retained exclusive jurisdiction over secular as well as religious cases throughout the 1890's."³² Scholars of Mormon jurisprudence and legal sociologists would do well to study the history and workings of general conference to comprehend fully the development and impact of church courts.

A conference held on 25 January 1832 at Amherst, Ohio, was significant because Joseph Smith was ordained president of the high priesthood. Then, three months later, on 26 April 1832, a conference in Independence allowed the Missouri Saints to sustain Smith also as president of the high priesthood³³ which "ordination carries with it the office of president over the entire church."³⁴ The revelation in the Doctrine and Covenants addressing this facet of church government reads: "And again, the duty of the President of the office of the High Priesthood is to preside over the whole church, and to be like unto Moses—behold, here is wisdom; yea, to be a seer, a revelator, a translator, and a prophet, having all the gifts of God which he bestows upon the head of the church" (107:91-92). Previously Smith had been recognized only as First Elder of the church, but here he assumed the mantle of president.

Up to this time, primary leadership authority had been shared with Oliver Cowdery, Second Elder and assistant church president. In addition, Sidney Rigdon, a former Campbellite minister and early convert known for his dynamic and persuasive oratory, was one of the top leaders and a close confidant of the prophet as well. Therefore, this conference was instrumental in cementing Smith's position as the ultimate authority in the church. Though a form of shared governance is prac-

30. Cannon and Cook, *Far West Record*, 12.

31. Before the coming of the railroad to Utah in 1869, this migration included at least 60,000 Latter-day Saints making the trek by wagon, handcart, and foot. About 10 percent of this number died en route and were buried along what is now the Mormon Pioneer Trail. For a brief description of the migration, see Leonard J. Arrington, *Brigham Young: An American Moses* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press), 283-86.

32. Firmage and Mangrum, *Zion in the Courts*, xiv.

33. Cannon and Cook, *Far West Record*, 44.

34. William E. Berrett, *The Latter-day Saints: A Contemporary History of the Church of Jesus Christ* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1985), 124.

ticed at the highest echelons of the church today, there is no doubt that the prophet has the final word on any issue before the church.³⁵ This concept was still forming prior to the 25 January 1832 general conference.

Although the 6 April 1833 conference held on the ferry on the Big Blue River in Missouri had been convened to celebrate the birthday of the church, it was otherwise uneventful. Subsequently, a number of assorted conferences transpired during the 1834-37 period. Only single general conferences were held in 1834, 1835, and 1836, but the 3 May 1834 conference was notable in that the name of the church was changed from "Church of Christ" to "The Church of the Latter-day Saints." The 17 August 1835 "general assembly" was distinguished by the official acceptance of the Book of Doctrine and Covenants,³⁶ although, interestingly, Joseph Smith at the time was away on church business in Michigan.

The 3 September 1837 conference was called to deal with dissension and apostasy caused by the failure of the chief Mormon financial institution. Some members who had invested in the bank were disillusioned with Smith when the bank he supported failed. Though the prophet often cautioned members to differentiate the spiritual from the secular, some could not accept the fact that their prophet was fallible in business. On 7 November 1837 another conference was held, this time in Far West, Missouri, to prepare the Saints for the transfer of church headquarters from Ohio to Missouri. Apparently Smith had felt it prudent to leave Kirtland in consequence of the anger directed at him by some unhappy investors.

The 6 April 1838 meeting is seen by some as marking the beginning of the "whole modern conference system of the Church."³⁷ This seems an accurate assessment since more preaching and less business marked this conference, with Smith speaking at least four times, along with other leaders. This development appears to have signaled the start of the

35. Though there have been reminders of late in general conference that all members of the First Presidency and the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles are sustained as "prophets, seers and revelators" and that no major policies are enacted unless there is unanimity among the "Brethren," there can be little doubt that when the president of the church feels inspired that the church ought to move in a particular direction, the church moves in that direction. Many members are familiar with the maneuvering over succession to the office of president which followed Smith's assassination in 1844. Succession and reorganization issues are treated in a number of sources, but sufficient explanations are contained in James B. Allen and Glen M. Leonard, *The Story of the Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1992), 213-15, 265, 383, 387, 410; Linda King Newell and Valeen Tippetts Avery, *Mormon Enigma; Emma Hale Smith* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994), 175; D. Michael Quinn, *The Mormon Hierarchy: Origins of Power* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1994), 245-63; and Ronald K. Esplin, "Joseph, Brigham and the Twelve: A Succession of Continuity," *Brigham Young University Studies* 21 (Summer 1981): 301-41.

36. Lowe, "A Study of the General Conferences," 119.

37. *Ibid.*, 131.

mostly educational function of general conference.³⁸ That is, aside from the annual sustaining of general church officers by the rank and file and the reading of brief statistical reports, conference speakers seek to instruct, inspire, motivate, and strengthen members through their addresses from the pulpit.

The October 1839 conference, held at Commerce (later Nauvoo), Illinois, may be considered the first semiannual general conference in the regular order of conferences as they have become established in the LDS church today. Since an earlier conference had been held in May in Quincy, Illinois, to celebrate the escape of Joseph Smith from prison in Missouri, 1839 was the first year that both recognizable annual and semiannual general conferences were held.³⁹ Parenthetically, Smith had received a revelation on 26 April 1838 that the name of the church should be The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (D&C 115:4).

Many conferences were held in the 1840s including several in Great Britain where Brigham Young, Wilford Woodruff, and other church apostles were baptizing thousands, including ministers and their entire congregations. Other conferences were held in Kirtland and in Boston, as well. Although there is some question as to which of these conferences may be considered "official" general conferences, historian Jay Lowe explains:

The conferences were mostly referred to as special conferences and the designation "special" seemed quite appropriate in comparing them with those of 1838-1841; the so-called institutionalization period. They were not primarily instructional but were held for the special purposes of conducting trials, meeting other exigencies such as the adventism excitement, and expediting church business relative to missionary work, the gathering, the construction of the Nauvoo House and temple, etc.⁴⁰

Another scholar identifies the 1838-44 period as the time when "the concept of a regular general conference for the Church was set firmly in place and the precedents were established for the annual and semiannual conferences in April and October."⁴¹ Gary and Gordon Shepherd are more specific in fixing a date: "It is not until 1840 that it becomes possible to systematically identify annual and semiannual conferences which are regularly scheduled and convened every six months."⁴² As noted above, I believe that 1839 marks the beginning of the semiannual system.

Kenneth Godfrey identifies the April 1844 conference as distinctive

38. *Ibid.*

39. *Ibid.*, 137, 138.

40. *Ibid.*, 194.

41. M. Dallas Burnett, "General Conference," in *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, 1:307-308.

42. Shepherd and Shepherd, *A Kingdom Transformed*, 15.

because "conferences became a time for instruction rather than business, Joseph Smith was nominated as a candidate for the presidency of the United States and it was the last conference over which he presided."⁴³ This conference was also notable for the prophet's King Follett discourse wherein he "spoke concerning some twenty-seven doctrinal subjects, including the character of God, the origin and destiny of man, the unpardonable sin, the resurrection of children."⁴⁴ This sermon⁴⁵ would crown his prophetic career.

With the repeal of the Nauvoo Charter, the city was left without a police force, so "by the April 1845 general conference, the Saints had begun to employ a 'whistling and whittling' brigade to unnerve outsiders and discourage non-Mormons from coming to Nauvoo."⁴⁶ Owing to the unsettled state of affairs brought on by the church's forced emigration from Nauvoo, no conference was held in 1846, but a December 1847 conference in the Valley of the Great Salt Lake was significant because Brigham Young was sustained as president of the church by the general membership after having been ordained president on 5 December in Kanesville, Iowa, by the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles.⁴⁷ The Twelve had administered church affairs since Smith's death over three years earlier, but an 1850 conference saw the church president sustained for the first time as the "prophet, seer and revelator."

By the 1850s the conference schedule was firmly stabilized on a semi-annual basis and, as historians have noted, conference time "became a time of reunion and socializing. The conference became one of the great symbols of Mormon unity as well as a cohesive force in building a sense of community."⁴⁸ Nearly three decades of conferences are briefly summarized in the *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*: "The conferences from 1848 to 1877 considered pressing needs such as emigration from the east and foreign countries, colonization, and missionary work. Assignments to colonize and calls to serve missions were frequently announced from the

43. Kenneth W. Godfrey, "150 Years of General Conference," *Ensign* 11 (Feb. 1981): 68.

44. Donald Q. Cannon, "The King Follett Discourse: Joseph Smith's Greatest Sermon in Historical Perspective," *Brigham Young University Studies* 18 (1978): 179.

45. See also Clarissa I. Whitney, "A Critical Analysis of the Forensic and Religious Speaking of Joseph Smith," M.A. thesis, California State College at Fullerton, 1967, 70-100, for an insightful rhetorical analysis of the King Follett discourse; and Van Hale, "The Doctrinal Impact of the King Follett Discourse," *Brigham Young University Studies* 18 (1978): 209-23, for a detailed examination of the doctrinal implications of the address.

46. Marshall Hamilton, "From Assassination to Expulsion: Two Years of Distrust, Hostility, and Violence," *Brigham Young University Studies* 32 (Winter 1992): 229-37.

47. Gail Geo. Holmes, "A Prophet Who Followed, Fulfilled, and Magnified: Brigham Young in Iowa and Nebraska," in Susan Easton Black and Larry C. Porter, eds., *Lion of the Lord: Essays on the Life and Service of Brigham Young* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co.), 145, 146.

48. Allen and Leonard, *The Story of the Latter-day Saints*, 286.

conference pulpit without prior notice.”⁴⁹ That these public “calls from the pulpit” were accepted without question is a telling measure of the devotion church leaders of that era enjoyed from the membership.

Even though it would not be completed until 1875, the Tabernacle in Salt Lake City was first used for a general conference in 1867 which lasted four days instead of the usual three, due to a vote of the conference to extend the proceedings.⁵⁰ General conference continued in this vein until the polygamy issue forced a traumatic interregnum, especially for Mormonism’s presiding officers. Edwin Firmage and Garth Mangrum describe government actions during this period intended to force Mormon compliance with federal mandates:

The vengeance of a state repudiated in every measure of governance by a recalcitrant people insured that no stone would remain unturned in the process of demanding compliance. Incarcerating practicing polygamists was not enough. The Poland Act of 1874 disqualified Mormon jurors and restricted the jurisdiction of Mormon-controlled probate courts. The Edmunds Act of 1882 disfranchised many Mormons. Federal judges refused to naturalize Mormon immigrants. The Edmunds-Tucker Act of 1887 dissolved the church corporation.⁵¹

In consequence, many general authorities went into exile where they were pursued by federal marshals for their arrest on “unlawful co-habitation” charges. Thus on the run, many leaders found their ability to address general conference severely limited and only undertaken at great risk to their freedom. James Allen and Glen Leonard describe the stand-off’s effect on general conference:

The crusade disrupted many normal activities including the custom of holding general conference in Salt Lake City. Between 1884 and 1887 Church leaders considered it prudent to hold these meetings in Logan, Provo, and Coalville in order, if possible, to relieve those who attended from pressures of possible arrest. Federal officers, nevertheless, continued to show up at conference sites in hope of apprehending fugitives, though they usually left empty-handed. The conferences were sparsely attended by Church officials for most were in hiding. Apostle Franklin D. Richards, immune from prosecution by special arrangement with the government, presided over some of them. Guidance to the conferences came in the form of general epistles, signed by President Taylor and his first counselor, George Q. Cannon. Joseph F. Smith was in Hawaii as a missionary. To the Saints, continuing to hold cori-

49. Burnett, “General Conference,” 308.

50. Godfrey, “150 Years of General Conference,” 69.

51. Firmage and Mangrum, *Zion in the Courts*, 10.

ference even without their leaders bolstered their faith and eloquently testified of their continued opposition to any surrender to the government.⁵²

Elder Moses Thatcher of the Twelve, speaking in the April 1884 general conference, voiced widely held frustrations among members as the polygamy prosecutions began:

I was born in this country. I can trace my lineage to the revolutionary fathers. I love the institutions of my country. I love and venerate the Constitution. But I am not so ignorant, I am not so blind that I cannot see that anything which you or I may do may be contrary to law, and may be called unconstitutional; but I hold that the Constitution was made broad enough, high enough and deep enough to enable us to practice our religion and be free before God and man.⁵³

The standoff with the federal government ended in 1890 when President Wilford Woodruff issued the Manifesto, marking what many scholars point to "as the effective point of division between the past and the present"⁵⁴ in the history of Mormonism. The Manifesto was a major accommodation to more powerful secular forces and paved the way for Utah statehood in 1896.

Subsequent events of note in general conference history include the holding of a session of the April 1893 conference in the Salt Lake temple so that President Wilford Woodruff could dedicate the magnificent structure; 1907 conference goes voting to donate two hundred tons of flour to famine-plagued China; and 1919 conference attendees hearing an address by President Heber J. Grant in support of the League of Nations.⁵⁵

Besides federal intervention affecting the usual practice of holding general conference, the advent of World War II also had a dramatic effect:

In America, many activities were cut back. Travel was difficult as automobiles were no longer readily available, and gasoline and tires were strictly rationed. One response was to suspend all auxiliary institutes and stake leadership meetings for the duration of the war. Beginning in 1942, general conferences were closed to the general membership and confined to approximately 500 priesthood leaders.⁵⁶

Despite the occasional interruptions and modifications dictated by a nation at war, and other uncontrollable events such as an influenza epidemic that caused cancellation in October 1957, general conference has

52. Allen and Leonard, *The Story of the Latter-day Saints*, 407.

53. *Journal of Discourses*, 26 vols. (Liverpool, Eng.: LDS Bookseller's Depot, 1854-86), 25:115, hereafter JD.

54. Shippy, *Mormonism*, 114.

55. Godfrey, "150 Years of General Conference," 71.

56. Allen and Leonard, *The Story of the Latter-day Saints*, 539.

persevered as an important institutional and cultural custom on a twice yearly basis.

As late as 1938 the church's twenty-six general authorities still sat on padded red benches in the Tabernacle instead of the familiar red arm chairs of today, and every one of them spoke at conference,⁵⁷ often with no advance preparation. Before the advent of electronic broadcasting imposed strict time limits on speakers, church leaders commonly spoke at length with sessions continuing until the last speaker had spoken his peace. Barbara Higdon describes the process that characterized the oratorical efforts of general conference speakers in the early years and which carried on into the twentieth century:

Rejecting both the Puritan tradition of painstakingly studied sermons delivered either in a form fixed by memorization or from detailed notes and the widely accepted Protestant practice of presenting homilies carefully prepared beforehand but not rigidly planned in final form, the Mormons adhered to the tradition of George Whitefield and his descendants who spoke without forethought, giving the spirit of God credit for their fluency. The emphasis on general intellectual cultivation, however, suggests that the Mormons did not conceive of the preacher's mind as a tabula rasa on which the Holy Ghost inscribed a sermon. Rather, the Doctrine and Covenants clearly stated that a man should help himself through wide study. The Spirit would then assist him in selecting the pieces of knowledge to be used in a given address. In this procedure the prophetic statements provided a means by which the speaker could make use of his subconscious resources.⁵⁸

Coverage expanded in 1924 when conferences were first broadcast over radio with even greater reach attained in 1949 when conference sessions began to be televised. Also in 1924 a microphone was first used to amplify speakers' voices for the benefit of the audience. In 1947 President George Albert Smith told the conference that he, a few weeks previously, had delivered a sermon by short wave radio to a gathering of 203 LDS servicemen in Japan and predicted that "it will not be long until, from this pulpit and other places that will be provided, the servants of the Lord will be able to deliver messages to isolated groups who are so far away they cannot be reached. In that way and other ways, the gospel of Jesus Christ our Lord ... will be heard in all parts of the world, and many of you who are here will live to see that day."⁵⁹ The accuracy of this prediction is evident in the following information on current general conference coverage.

57. Heidi S. Swinton, *In the Company of Prophets* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co.), x.

58. Higdon, "The Role of Preaching in the Early Latter Day Saint Church," 26.

59. *Conference Report of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, October 1946* (Salt Lake City: Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1946), 6; hereafter CR.

The April 1959 conference saw the last public accounting of annual church expenditures. The first color telecast transpired in 1967, and conference was first heard live in Europe in 1965 when Elder Ezra Taft Benson arranged for a radio station in Frankfurt to carry the proceedings.⁶⁰ In 1962 conferences were simultaneously translated into several languages other than English, and by 1996 conference was available in thirty-four languages. In 1977 general conference was reduced from three to two days in length with sessions on Saturday and Sunday only. Today conference is transmitted, via satellite, to more than 1,200 cable systems and to more than 3,000 church buildings where listeners in virtually any part of the country and many offshore locations can watch the Salt Lake City-based sessions as they transpire.

The physical setting for general conference for over a century has, of course, been the familiar Mormon Tabernacle with its famous choir and organ on Temple Square in the heart of Salt Lake City. However, in the April 1996 conference President Gordon B. Hinckley announced that a much larger building was in the planning stages which would be used for conference and for other church and selected community events. In addition to the 6,000 conference attendees seated in the Tabernacle, other buildings on the square receive conference via television while the audio portion is piped throughout the grounds for the benefit of members unable to sit inside. LDS church-owned, and NBC affiliate, KSL-TV in Salt Lake City broadcasts general conference live. General authorities are seated on the stand in order of rank with the First Presidency and Quorum of the Twelve Apostles occupying the top tier, the two quorums of Seventy in the middle, and the Presiding Bishopric close to the main floor. Members of the presidencies of the auxiliary organizations presided over by women are also seated on the stand on a level with the Presiding Bishopric, while various guests such as government officials and other dignitaries are provided reserved seating in the first few rows of the Tabernacle. As Jan Shipps has observed, the overall effect is remarkable:

Gathered there quite literally in the center of the Mormon world, Latter-day Saints participate in a direct and primary experience of community which, while corporate, is in a way often as powerful, meaningful, and profound as the spiritual experiences sometimes accompanying the performance of the secret sacred temple rites, which center on individuals in the context of family and not on the congregation.⁶¹

60. Sheri L. Dew, *Ezra Taft Benson: A Biography* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1987), 380.

61. Shipps, *Mormonism*, 136.

Thus the unifying, socializing, and instructional functions of general conference continue to be as important as ever in the Mormon culture.

Following general conference, further reach is accomplished when addresses are published in the official monthly magazine, the *Ensign*, and the official *Conference Reports* which are sent to all stake presidents and bishops. Brief reports are also published in the weekly *Church News* which is sent to thousands of subscribers worldwide. Finally, video tapes of conference are sent to those areas of the world not yet equipped to receive satellite transmissions, thereby allowing virtually any Latter-day Saint to participate in the conference experience and to feel some degree of connection with the leadership of the church.

After a halting, struggling, but determined start, general conference has now attained a worldwide reach with hundreds of thousands of listeners/viewers. With such impressive numbers available, general conference is more than ever the premier forum through which Mormon prophets and other general officers share their most profound thoughts with the flock and, theoretically, the world at large. Scholars who do not recognize the importance of this process to the maintenance and progress of Mormonism and fail to mine the proceedings for significant insights are missing a grand opportunity to comprehend more fully the essence of Mormonism.

SIGNIFICANCE OF GENERAL CONFERENCE ADDRESSES

Scholars are united in their assessment of general conference as the most significant source of authoritative Mormon leader rhetoric since the organization of the LDS church. For example, Jan Shipps offers this perceptive view of conference:

While conference addresses are not put forth as revelation, an informal "ex Cathedra" infallibility inheres in them, almost as if by being delivered in the presence of the church in conference assembled, these addresses are somehow distillations of the concentrated power of revelation and inspiration present at that time and in that place. Without being accorded status as Mormon doctrine, the words said in conference carry more weight and impact than words said elsewhere. When such words are uttered by the church president—who as presiding officer over the church has the right to divine inspiration in matters concerning its members, and who as its "prophet, seer and revelator" may receive revelation for the whole of the church—Latter-day Saints regard those words, quite simply and without question, as true.⁶²

62. *Ibid.*, 137, 138.

The practical efficacy of this insight is confirmed by a Mormon historian who is convinced that "It was through the instrumentality of conference that church leaders were able to effect the central planning and direction of the manifold temporal and spiritual interests of their followers."⁶³ Sociologists Gary and Gordon Shepherd lend credence to both claims by concluding, following their exhaustive quantitative analysis of general conference topics, that

[b]ecause of Mormons' paramount belief in modern revelation, we conclude that leader rhetoric has played a particularly meaningful part in the institutional history of the Mormon Church. It is also our opinion that the published proceedings of the general conferences, which have been regularly convened since 1830, are the documentary source that provides the most comprehensive and meaningful record of Mormon rhetoric over the entire course of Mormon history.⁶⁴

Furthermore, Charles Tate, commenting on the value of conference addresses in their subsequent published form, asserts: "Those publications are significant resources for the study of the theology, progress, and development of the Church."⁶⁵ For another scholar, "General conference of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints continues today as a vital doctrinal and social institution. It touches the lives of hundreds of thousands of Latter-day Saints worldwide."⁶⁶

And how do LDS presidents themselves approach or perceive general conference? In the October 1870 conference Brigham Young suggested some topics he would like to hear the general authorities address:

As our brethren of the Twelve will address us during the Conference, I feel like giving them a few texts to preach upon if they choose to do so. I should have no objection to hear them discourse upon union of action, or concentration of faith and action, or, as some call it, co-operation. That is one item. I would also like to hear them give instructions with regard to our traditions; instruction on this subject is necessary all the time. We must overcome them and adopt the rules laid down in revelation for the guidance of man's life here on the earth.⁶⁷

From Young's prescriptive direction for conference topics, confirming Higdon's description of early Latter-day Saint preaching style, we move to the thoughts of President David O. McKay in the 1950s who listed six

63. Leonard J. Arrington, *Great Basin Kingdom: An Economic History of the Latter-day Saints, 1830-1900* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1958), 32.

64. Shepherd and Shepherd, *A Kingdom Transformed*, 3.

65. Charles D. Tate, Jr., "Conference Reports," in *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, 1:305.

66. Burnett, "General Conference," 308.

67. JD 13:262.

specific purposes for holding general conferences:

Among the purposes of these general conferences are, in summary, as follows: (1) To inform the membership of general conditions—whether the Church is progressing or retro-gressing, economically, ecclesiastically, or spiritually. (2) To commend true merit. (3) To express gratitude for divine guidance. (4) To give instruction “in principles, in doctrine, in the law of the gospel.” (5) To proclaim the restoration, with divine authority to administer in all the ordinances of the gospel of Jesus Christ, and to declare, quoting the Apostle Peter, that “there is none other name given among men” than Jesus Christ, “whereby we must be saved.” (Acts 4:12) (6) To admonish and inspire to continue to greater activity.⁶⁸

Recently, President Gordon B. Hinckley commented on conference in a similar fashion:

My brethren and sisters, it is wonderful that we have the opportunity of meeting together each six months in these great world conferences. We gather from over the earth to bear our testimonies one to another, to hear instruction, to mingle as brethren and sisters. We partake of that sociality which is so pleasant and so important a part of the culture of this great organization.

For more than a century these gatherings have originated in this historic Tabernacle. From this pulpit has gone forth the word of the Lord. Through the years the speakers have come on the stage and then moved on. The personalities are different. But the spirit is the same. It is that spirit referred to when the Lord said, “He that preacheth and he that receiveth, understand one another, and both are edified and rejoice together” (D&C 50:22).⁶⁹

Surely much may be learned about Mormonism as these various functions are revealed by LDS prophets and their associates every six months.

General conference oratory is the paramount source of authoritative and continuously available Mormon leader rhetoric and any scholar researching almost any aspect of Mormonism ought to be familiar with this primary corpus of Mormon thought.⁷⁰ For example, even in my brief chron-

68. CR, 1954.

69. CR, Oct. 1995.

70. Although there is some variation in the historical accounts, it appears that the proceedings of LDS general conferences were first published in self-contained booklet form in April 1880, the church’s jubilee year, and then again in October 1897. Since 1897 the conference reports have been consistently published in booklet form. In addition to the booklets called *Conference Reports*, conference addresses were published, beginning in 1942, in the official monthly LDS magazine, the *Improvement Era*. Since replacing the *Improvement Era* in 1971, the *Ensign* magazine has devoted two issues each year to publishing these addresses. In addition, official *Conference Reports* booklets are mailed to stake presidents and bishops/branch presidents and others every six months. The magazines and *Conference Reports* are

icling of general conference here, something should have been learned about the following topics: early trials of the infant church, licensing practices, who preached the first LDS sermon, miraculous happenings, the growth and size of the church, the development of the concept of general conference, the judicial/disciplinary function of general conference, internal conflicts, early practices and protocols, speakers, topics and oratorical styles, revelations and doctrinal development, seniority and rank protocols, organizational development, use of mass media, early financial endeavors, political interests of church leaders, humanitarian relief efforts, external factors influencing the church, etc. With this in mind, I believe that the student of Mormonism lacking familiarity with general conference history and the addresses themselves cannot expect to be seen as a credible reporter of things Mormon no matter which facet of Mormonism he or she chooses to examine.

sometimes found for sale in church owned bookstores and thrift stores, as well as in private bookstores specializing in old LDS books. Some LDS institute of religion libraries also have collections of these valuable resources. All of the general conference addresses are now available on compact disks in the *1995 LDS Collector's Library* distributed by Infobases, Inc. For the addresses of Joseph Smith, see *History of the Church*, and for Brigham Young's conference addresses, see *Journal of Discourses*. Finally, a valuable "bridging the gap" endeavor covering some years in the 1880s and 1890s is Brian H. Stuy, ed., *Collected Discourses* (N.p.: B.H.S. Publishing), 5+ vols. The published accuracy of some of the earlier addresses is treated elsewhere, but see, for example, Dean C. Jessee, "Priceless Words and Fallible Memories: Joseph Smith as Seen in the Effort to Preserve His Discourses," *Brigham Young University Studies* 31 (Spring 1991): 19-40, for an excellent treatment of the situation relative to the accuracy of Joseph Smith's addresses.