

PREACHING
and
PUBLIC SPEAKING
AMONG LATTERDAY SAINTS

A PROTEST AGAINST ABUSES AND A
COURSE OF INSTRUCTIONS
WHEREBY THEY MAY
BE OVERCOME

SECOND EDITION

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Speaking in Church

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When the second edition of Nels Nelson's Preaching and Public Speaking Among the Latterday Saints was published in 1910, it carried the following "Recommendation" from the First Council of Seventy:

"The First Council is advised that the Deseret News Book Store is getting out a second edition of Elder N. L. Nelson's Preaching and Public Speaking; also that the book, after having been thoroughly revised by the author, has been read critically by a committee suggested by the First Presidency, and been duly accepted as worthy the study of all who expect to take part in the ministry of the Latter-day Saints.

"Now, while the first requisite of a Latter-day Saint preacher is a testimony of the Gospel, and the second, a wide range of facts and truths to sustain that testimony, these prime qualifications become effective only to the extent that he can evoke and hold the attention of his audience. In other words, his effectiveness will depend, to a very large extent, upon his method of presentation. In this respect, Elder Nelson's book will be found helpful. We therefore cordially recommend it to the Seventies generally, and especially to those preparing for missions."

The following excerpts, from the Preface and Chapter 1 of the first edition, are also found in almost identical form in the commended 1910 edition.

This book is the outgrowth of ten years observation and reflection. The conviction that such a work is needed came to the author while on a mission to the Southern States, where he 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. The conviction was intensified by his acting as clerk of Sabbath meetings for three years, and having to record the substance of the sermons there delivered. If any one would know how strong is the sense of duty among Latter-day Saints, even in the face of peculiar discouragements, let him note how, in spite of our preaching, they still continue to attend meeting on the Sabbath day.

. . . many Elders do not agree with me in this. The good will of these I desire also to carry with me from the start in this discussion. It is only just therefore that I stop briefly to consider their objections.

Whenever it is urged that due attention be given to the manner of preaching, these at once cry: "Prepared sermons! sectarianism! that's what we left the world to get away from. No, 'Take no thought about what ye shall say'—that is the only kind of preaching God is pleased with." . . .

Observe first how admirably this argument is adapted to justify our indolence and flatter our holiness. The gray-haired Elder in our Sabbath meeting, the young man before the Improvement association, the Seventy before his quorum theological class—all stand up and claim a merit for not being prepared. Their minds, they start in by saying, are utterly vacant. Now, if they would sit down after making this confession, they might count on the pity and perhaps the sympathy of the audience. But alas! it is not so: they go on exhibiting the vacancy.

Sleep, Phantasy, or Mental Torture.—When we strike a barrel and it gives us a hollow sound, the first stroke is a pleasure because it gives some information to us, viz: that the barrel is empty. The second stroke does not even arouse curiosity; and the third, if we are compelled to bend our attention upon it, becomes painful. Try to sense the cumulative pain then of having to listen attentively and expectantly to one hour of such aimless drumming!

Of course, if we pay only the dreamy attention that we give to a waterfall, allowing the mind to busy itself elsewhere, we can sit it through without getting nervous. The agony begins when one bends his mind for ideas, and gets only sounds. In the case of the empty barrel, one never thinks of bending the mind. But it is not so with the empty preacher. In his case we feel called upon to listen; and the pain we feel is evidently caused by the conflict of our sense of duty and our knowledge: the duty we feel of paying strict attention to one who speaks in the name of the Lord, and our conviction by the first stroke of his tongue that his head is empty. When such a speaker announces that he has nothing on his mind to say, we contemplate the fact in connection with the man and the occasion. But when he proceeds to take a whole hour of our time in saying it, one of three things happens: we sleep—blessed escape!—we wander, or we are mentally tortured.

Would that for three consecutive Sundays there were but one channel—the last—for the mind of every Latterday Saint. Would that sleep were impossible, and mind-wandering furnished no escape valve; that every Latterday Saint were compelled to bend his attention for ideas—connected, logical ideas—and feel the excruciation of getting empty sound, or, in lieu thereof, mere scraps and platitudes! How eagerly we should then turn to the Scriptures to see if God has really promised to put thoughts and ideas into vacant heads; to discover if infinite wisdom may really be expected to rest upon the man who virtually says: "Here I am, Lord; I have a mouth and a good pair of lungs, which I will lend you for a brief season; fill me with wisdom that I may edify the people."

Self-Stultification.—But the truth is, we can and do too easily become listless and heedless; and having yawned the hour away without any attempt at bending our attention, we are doubtful whether the fault is with the preacher or with ourselves, that we go home empty and leaden-hearted. The stream of sound, we say to ourselves, went fluently on: what grand ideas may not have escaped us! "Fine sermon we had today," says some one who feels conscience-smitten for having fallen asleep. "Beautiful!" we reply for a similar reason.

Each thus convinces the other that the fault lies, not with the speaker, but with himself; and while I do not take the ground that there is not some truth in this view, since, as is well known, the attention or want of attention of an

audience never fails in aiding or retarding the speaker, the point I insist upon is, that aimless preachers inflict their talks upon us again and again, simply because there are three ways of sitting through them—sleeping, mind-wandering, and mind torture—instead of one way—the last. For if there was only this last way, we should protest to a man against allowing the abuse to continue. . . .

The Non-Progressive Elder and His Sermon.—The Elders that preach before the Latter-day Saints may be divided into four classes: (1) those that read much and think much; (2) those that read little, yet think much; (3) those that read much, yet think little; (4) those that read little and think less. The last class, in this year of grace, is a big one.

I should be tempted here to devote a paragraph of kindly advice to this class, were I not hopeless of its ever reaching them. Solomon wrote many striking proverbs about wisdom, and them that refuse to seek it. But it is very unlikely that they were ever read by the people whose attention he tried to catch. At any rate the wise man felt like "braying them in a mortar," but confessed it very doubtful whether even this would improve them. Let me not seem satirical. These are generally good men—goody-good. The only mistake they make in preaching is in setting their tongues wagging and then going off and leaving them. . . .

Mormon theology embraces such a variety of truths that nothing which affects the temporal or the spiritual welfare of man, can come amiss on Sundays if selected by the Spirit of inspiration. Indeed, anything that arouses attention and stimulates thought—be it Gospel principle or advice about husbanding crops—will be not only listened to but relished by Latter-day Saints, such is our boundless respect for all God's truths.

But it requires thought to arouse thought. What then can be expected from men that never think themselves? What can the Spirit find there to edify the people? Often there is but a very scant store to draw from, even of the ideas of others. Such minds resemble second-hand junk-shops. The sermons drawn therefrom are a wearisome patchwork, made up of thoughts and ideas disconnected; aged but not venerable; worn out by having been said a thousand times before; dressed in a garb of insufferable phrases, old and hackneyed; platitudes with the green mold clinging to them.

And yet such sermons are generally prefaced by a commiseration of sectarian preaching and by thanks to heaven that Elders in this Church are required to take no thought about what they shall say. Is it not the case of the Pharisee and publican over again? Is it not like saying in effect: "O Lord, I thank thee that I who take no thought am a fit vessel for thy inspiration, and that I am not like yonder publican (or sectarian) who doth meanly grub among books and men for thoughts and ideas"? . . .

. . . Suppose [there is] a good man (goodish is a better term), one who prays earnestly the prayer of habit, who pays his tithes, etc., but nevertheless one who, in spite of all these good qualities, is mentally lazy. What will be the quality of his sermon? Whom shall we praise or blame for it?

I answer this question only for myself. I cannot think of a more profitless hour than that spent in listening to an aimless speaker; whose "remarks" are spread out from Dan to Beersheba, and actually touch nothing but the peaks

of thought; whose worn-out generalities one sees with dread afar off, as one by one they come, each caused by the speaker's stumbling upon some familiar word, which like a stone in the road, bobs up in the distance and throws the discourse into a rut.

The weary length of these ruts must be painfully familiar to Latter-day Saints. Occasionally one is beguiled into an idle curiosity as to whether there will be a variation this time. But generally one is doomed to be disappointed; for the man that can inflict platitude after platitude upon a congregation, is not the man of sufficient mind-activity to draw new applications from old truths.

What is my duty, then? May I stay away from meeting? No; I will go, even though I know such a rambling talk is coming. The real blessing of a Sabbath meeting—the strengthening of one's determination and the renewal of one's covenants, which come from thoughtfully and prayerfully partaking of the sacrament—no preacher can take away. This received, I can sit back to an hour's punishment, if need be, and count it among the blessings of adversity.

A Side Talk.—And now one word to those of my brethren who will rise up and say this criticism comes from a disaffected mind and a fault-finding spirit. I am fully aware of the danger I run of being misjudged by thus speaking right out. I know, too, how a man's usefulness is crippled once it is believed he is "on the road to apostacy." Indeed, it is from fear of this misjudgment that ten men think what they will not say, where one man says what he thinks. Let those who doubt this, visit and talk confidentially with the multitude of Latterday Saints who now seldom go to meeting. For myself, let me say, it has given me no pleasure to handle without gloves what I regard as a serious abuse. But the chapters I still have in view on preaching necessitate the establishing of clear-cut views on the points I have discussed. I might have used language so polished in phrase and distant in meaning as to arouse no objection; but this would have left the matter untouched, and burdened the pages of this book with empty words. For the present, then, let my candor and bluntness count for evidence of honesty and sincerity.

Effect of Aimless, Rambling Sermon.—But after all what matters any one's opinion? The question still remains. An aimless, rambling sermon is or is not profitless; it is or is not inspired by God. Perhaps it will help us to decide by watching its effect upon any 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 the portion awake, the majority show the leaden eye and lackadaisical expression, which, were it in the school-room, would be the agony of a teacher accustomed to sparkling attention. There remains then the third class, the punished few, who have been vainly trying to gather and combine something from this aimless scattering. These you can generally tell by the squirming way they have of trying to fit their seats. After meeting, go and have a confidential chat with one of them. You will be edified; or, if you are of the goody-good kind—shocked.

Are all Sermons Inspired?—Be patient, kind reader. I am almost through fault-finding—at least on this particular subject. To what purpose, it may be asked, is the objection against studying how to preach, discussed from so many points of view, and illustrated by such a variety of phases? Chiefly that we as a people may choose intelligently between these two alternatives:

First. 'That every Elder is inspired who first asks for the faith of the Saints and then launches out on a sermon.' Those members of the Church who still persist in clinging to this fiction will sometime have these very curious consequences to reconcile:—

a. No matter how scattering or irrelevant the sermon, being inspired, it is as God would have it; consequently,

b. Those who felt punished in listening, and those who staid away to avoid hearing it, must be accounted on the highway to apostacy, since they find fault with what is inspired.

c. The only ones, then, who are really benefited by the sermon are those who slept and those whose minds wandered; that is to say, those who did not hear it (which is doubtless true).

Now, Mormons who are capable of swallowing the above proposition, will, I have little doubt, also be able to stomach the consequences I have named. They may moreover defend themselves by these most excellent reasons: (1) Such a belief is likely to leave one free from those disquieting aspirations for something nobler and better, which disturb the serenity of those respectable people who are satisfied with good enough. (2) It will tend to keep up the prestige and reputation of antedated preachers and so enable these good men to live and die with exalted opinions of themselves. (3) It is an admirable device for thinning out congregations and thus cutting down the burden of building new houses (during these hard times).

All Sermons Not Inspired.—In spite of these reasons however, I very much fear that most Latterday Saints will be likely to believe,—

Second. 'That the Lord is ever ready to inspire a speaker provided he has complied with the conditions of such inspiration; and consequently, that if he has not thus complied, he speaks from the fulness or emptiness of his own head.' This proposition also leads to some important consequences:—

a. Latterday Saints will occasionally feel at liberty to characterize a sermon with the same force and brevity that they speak of a mismanaged, weed-grown farm, and not fear that their standing may be misjudged on account of doing so. It seems to me a healthy rule to count that charity misplaced which fosters the evil it feeds, be it beggary or bad preaching. There was a time, not long ago, when most of our school rooms were filled by just such inattentive, sleepy gatherings as I have been trying to portray. Would they not have remained so till now, had the teachers been covered by the charity so unwisely thrown round our Elders? Let us not fear a healthy public awakening on this point. Marvels will grow out of it, for—

b. Stereotyped preachers will break through their shells and begin to grow again. Young men will feel that the first qualification of a preacher is to know something, to feel something, and to think something. Elders who refuse to learn the lesson will at least, out of very shame, forbear to inflict upon the congregation the hackneyed phraseology of musty memories. Thus,

c. Preaching will be made a study both as to subject matter and method of delivery, just as teaching has already been; and equally good results may be expected to follow. If the teacher has found the secret of interesting little children, let not the preacher despair of finding the way to interest grown-up children.