‘My Talk Today’: LDS Sacrament Meeting Talks and the Transfer of Knowledge and Culture

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Abstract
This paper explores the role of Sacrament Meeting ‘talks’ in the transmission of religious knowledge and adherent culture to of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Employing frameworks on the social construction of reality and organizational culture, it provides insight into how these speakers transfer knowledge as they construct, through the talk, the reality of what it is to be a religious and cultural Mormon.

Keywords: Mormon, Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Sermon, Organizational Culture

“Mormonism relied entirely on regular members for preaching; it had no clerical class at all. No salaried itinerants or settled ministers stood above the plain men sent out to teach the Gospel” (Bushman, 2005, p. 153). In churches across the United States, Sunday morning services includes a prepared sermon given by ordained officiators trained by the seminaries, divinity schools, or Bible colleges of their denomination. In a chapel of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS or Mormon), however, congregants will hear ‘talks’ given by lay members of the congregation. The speakers may be teenagers or retirees, young men about to serve a mission or teen girls returned from church summer camp, manual laborers or physicians. No matter their age or status, they are called to speak to the congregation. This paper explores the role of the ‘talk’ in Sacrament Meeting, the primary religious meeting for the congregation,
as a key method for the transmission of religious knowledge and culture in LDS congregations. It considers the talk as one solution to an information search problem as people construct what it is to be Mormon.

**A Brief History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints**

Before examining the talk, it may be useful to review the context in which talks are given. Members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints belong to the church organized by Joseph Smith on April 6, 1833 (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1996; Doctrine and Covenants 21:3). Like many during the Second Great Awakening, as a young boy of fourteen, Smith was surrounded by the religious excitement of the day and sought out new interpretations of Protestantism.

Smith believed he had to determine for himself which church was true, contemplating the verse, “If any of you lack wisdom, let him ask of God, that giveth to all men liberally, and upbraideth not; and it shall be given him” (James 1:5, King James Version). Smith soon received a vision of God the Father and His Son, Jesus (Pearl of Great Price 1:13). In the vision, Smith was told that none of the churches were true and that he should not join them (D&C 20:1). In 1823, Smith was visited by the angel Moroni and told where to find the golden plates, the translation of which, years later, would become the Book of Mormon (Pearl of Great Price 1:30-53). Smith then began to build the church.

From a few followers in upstate New York, the church grew quickly, but as quickly as it grew, there was a backlash against it. Some anti-Mormons simply could not accept the LDS version of Christianity, which rejects the Trinity and Original Sin, among other tenets. Others became jealous of a growing Mormon commerce and the tendency of Mormons to deal with each other in business matters. The Mormons were harassed and persecuted, and subject of the only political action in the United States that sought to exterminate a people based on their religion
(Missouri Executive Order 44, 1838). This order, not officially rescinded until 1976, approved raising a force to be used against Mormons in their removal from Missouri. After Joseph Smith was killed in 1844 (D&C 135:1) the Mormons moved westward to Utah. For years, most LDS lived in the western states of Utah, Idaho, Nevada, and Arizona. Beginning in the late 20th century, the Church has experienced rapid growth. Current church membership is over fourteen million people (LDS Newsroom, 2012), with half the members living outside of the United States. While many think of Mormons as white and Western, a more accurate picture today is of a diverse and international church with a constant influx of new members.

**Church Structure**

The local presence of the Church is the ward, which is similar to a parish. Membership in a ward is determined by one’s location. Where there are too few members to support a ward, a branch is formed. Geographic boundaries keep individual LDS churches to a manageable size, enabling congregants to know each other. There are also wards based on status, such as being a young married person or a single young adult. Within the ward, males are called to be home teachers, visiting their assigned families each month to share a lesson, give blessings in the case of sickness, and make sure that members’ needs are met. Women over eighteen belong to Relief Society and are called to do visiting teaching with individual women, give a monthly message, support the sick or new mothers with food, rides to the doctor, and similar duties. Both home and visiting teachers report to a supervisor who reports to the bishop, so that the bishop can keep abreast of the status of ward members and offer assistance where needed.

Wards are headed by the bishop, aided by counselors (together, the bishopric). Every member who is able has a calling. As there is no paid staff, callings spread the work of ward around and help it run smoothly. For example, there are callings to lead the choir, be ward clerk, and teach Sunday classes. In smaller congregations, members can have multiple callings, which
can be quite time consuming. Callings are determined by the bishop and his counselors after prayer. Because of this, one's selection for a particular calling is considered to be informed by God and is rarely refused.

**LDS Religious Training**

From a young age, Mormon children are given speaking opportunities as part of their religious training. Children in *Primary* (ages three to eleven) may only say a few lines to their peers, prompted by the primary teacher’s whispers in their ear. As they get older, children give longer and more complex talks, often referring to the Scriptures (the Old and New Testaments, the Book of Mormon, Doctrine and Covenants, and the Pearl of Great Price). In high school, students attend *Seminary*, religious classes held before school or during the school day (but separate from the public school) in places with a high LDS population. In seminary, students learn more about the Scriptures, including memorizing Scripture verses (‘scripture mastery,’ complete with flash cards and audio clips to aid memorization). When they reach college, students may attend a Church-sponsored university such as Brigham Young University, where religion courses are required (Brigham Young University Religious Education, 2013). Outside of Church schools; students attend *Institute* which offers classes on religion, church history, and preparation for the temple, marriage, and missionary service.

**Missionary Work**

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints is a proselytizing church with almost 60,000 missionaries today (LDS Newsroom, 2012). From its earliest days, Mormon men traveled in the United States and overseas to preach the Gospel. Today, the sight of two young men in white shirts, dark ties and sporting black name tags is common around the world. Males are expected to become missionaries for two years starting at age eighteen. Young women may serve starting at
nineteen (LDS Newsroom, 2012). New missionaries train for several weeks, learning how to interact with investigators (people interested in the Church), teach basic lessons about LDS beliefs, and learn a foreign language if necessary for their assignment. Foreign language skills, such as in Spanish, may be used in the United States as well as overseas. Missionaries spend much of their time speaking in public, creating lessons, and preaching, often in difficult circumstances such as knocking on doors or approaching strangers in public. The missionary experience is considered a priesthood duty - priesthood holders being men with varying authorities to perform ordinances (sacraments) such as baptism and to perform administrative work for the Church (LDS.org). It is also considered a pivotal point in the person’s life, a time of deepening one’s knowledge of the Scriptures and of spiritual growth.

**Sacrament Meeting**

The three hour ‘block’ LDS Sunday service may seem quite daunting to Catholics and mainline Protestants who are used to spending about an hour in church. The block is divided into 1) the Sacrament Meeting, in which the *Sacrament* (known as Communion or Eucharist in other denominations) is the focus; 2) Sunday School – which is further divided into classes for newcomers or investigators into the faith, and other classes for children, teens, and adults; and 3) meetings for young women, young men, priesthood holders, and women over eighteen. After Sacrament Meeting, the congregation breaks up and goes to classrooms in the building.

The order of Sacrament Meeting begins with a greeting, an invocation by a member of the congregation, ward business and announcements, a hymn, blessing of the bread and water and their distribution to the congregation, two or more ‘talks,’ a closing hymn, and closing prayer, given by another member of the congregation. There may be special musical numbers, which may or may not be connected with an observance such as Easter. At the end of the talk,
the speaker will frequently add a ‘testimony’ - a statement that he knows that the Church is true, and end with a variation on “I say this in the name of Jesus Christ,” to which the congregation responds, “Amen.”

**Called to Speak**

But before the talk, there is the ‘call.’ Usually a week before the talk, the designated speaker is contacted by a member of the bishopric. As with most requests to members of the ward from the bishopric, the request to speak is considered to be influenced by the Holy Spirit and should not be refused lightly. That said, getting the call can be the subject of humor as speakers begin their talk commenting on their ‘luck’ at being at home when the bishop called. The designated speaker is provided with a time frame of approximately twenty-five minutes or less. Naturally, speakers have varying abilities. Some will write out their entire talk and read it line by line. Others read from notes, and a few are able to speak without notes, though they may read from their Scriptures if quoting from them. Some whisper and rush through their talk while others position the microphone like a professional and speak with authority. Talks are generally well-received and praised for their content, if not for their eloquence.

**Frequently Selected Topics**

Members may be provided with topics that include family life - children, marriage and how to treat one’s spouse; reflections on the Atonement of Christ; duties and blessings of the priesthood; or encourage members to act in accordance with Christ’s example. For children and youth, topics may include getting along with siblings, handling the temptations of alcohol or drugs that might that might confront high school students, or religious topics from the Scriptures. Twice a year, Church leadership gives inspiring talks on a variety of topics during the ‘General Conference’ and it is common for all speakers to quote from them, as re-telling the talks reinforces their
recollection by the members. The following six topics are frequently used for talks in Sacrament Meeting.

**Missionary Work**

The Church has said that every member is a missionary (McKay, 1961) and that members should be as involved in missionary work as they are able. This urge to bring others to the blessings of the Gospel is understandable from a people who believe they belong to the only true church. Member missionary work includes bringing neighbors to church activities, answering coworkers’ questions about the Church, or providing meals for the missionaries serving in their area. Therefore, talks providing instruction and motivation for bringing missionary work into everyday life are common.

Also mission-related are the ‘farewell’ talks by young men and women as they say goodbye to the congregation before going off to the Missionary Training Center. When the missionary returns, there is another talk, regaling the congregation with stories of baptisms, trials of missionary life, and gratitude for family and the religious training that allowed the missionary to persevere during difficult times in the mission field. Older persons, often decades removed from their missionary experience, will pepper their talks with vignettes from their time as a missionary and how, years later, they continue to be affected by the experience of sharing the Gospel and bringing people into the Church.

**Tithing**

Mormons are expected to give ten percent of their income to the Church (D&C 64:23). While tithing may be a commandment associated with expected blessings, donating ten percent of one’s income is not any easier for most Mormons than it might be for anyone else. The temptation not to pay tithing ‘just this once’ often leads to not paying tithing at all, and then
to inactivity or leaving the Church all together. Therefore, talks encourage tithe paying, with stories about the blessings received from paying tithes – such as getting the money back in some way after having made a sacrifice to pay tithing. These stories may be personal in nature (‘I was a poor graduate student, but paid tithing and was blessed with a scholarship I hadn’t even applied for) or may repeat General Conference talks given by Church leaders.

**Temple Work**

The temple is the place where certain ordinances are performed, including sealings, or the marriage ritual. To enter the temple, a Latter-day Saint must have a ‘temple recommend’ which is earned by being ‘temple worthy.’ This means the member follows the dietary rules and restrictions against drinking and smoking, being current in financial dealings such as child support, paying tithing, attending Sacrament Meeting regularly, and supporting the leaders of the Church. Members are interviewed by their local church leaders in order to receive the recommend. A primary goal of members is to be worthy enough to obtain a temple recommend and perform ordinances in the temple, for him or herself and on behalf of the dead. Talks encourage members to live according to the covenants they have made and to make sacrifices to be able to attend the temple. Quotes from Church leaders about the blessings of temple work may be included in the talk as may be stories about the sacrifices made by members in less developed countries who may be able to attend the temple only once in a lifetime. These examples encourage the listener to become or remain temple worthy and show members that no sacrifice is too great if it allows one to go to the temple.

**Life Challenges**

As often as humorous stories are told in the chapel, heart-touching stories of loss, disappointment, untimely deaths, or financially trying times are also told, as are stories about how the speaker came to appreciate the good example of departed parents and grandparents are
also common. The speaker, male or female, may cry while giving such a talk, as may individuals in the congregation who were affected by the emotional tenor of the talk. Indeed, it is not unusual for the speaker to reach for the nearby box of tissues, while saying, “I told myself I wasn’t going to cry.” While sad stories are expected to bring tears, a speaker commenting on her love for her family and the benefits of family life may also cry and need a moment to gather herself before continuing.

**Family**

A tenet of Mormonism is that families can be together forever. Couples who are sealed in the temple are married for time and eternity. They will be with their children who are born in the covenant (born to a sealed couple) as well as with their ancestors and descendants. Temple work (such as baptism) may be performed for deceased relatives who were not Mormon, giving the departed spirit an opportunity to accept church membership, thereby connecting the family. The belief that families are bound forever influences beliefs about how family members should treat each other in this life. There is an emphasis the home as a peaceful refuge where children are to respect and love their parents as parents are to respect and love their children. The Church encourages families to have *family home evening* on Monday night, with no church activities held, allowing families to spend that time together. Talks about creating a happy home life may mention with humor the difficulty of achieving that ideal family home evening with fussy toddlers or teens who would rather be elsewhere (Perry, 2003) but that continued efforts to hold family home evenings will pay off with a happier home life and children who will remain in the Church.

**Church History**

Finally, another common topic focuses on the history of the Saints – the life and martyrdom of Joseph Smith, the many forced departures from Mormon settlements, and the trek
from Nauvoo to the West. Of special import is the suffering faced by early converts too poor to afford a proper covered wagon team and crossed the plains on foot with a handcart (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1996). With no shelter and having started too late to avoid the winter storms, these pioneers endured great suffering, including the death of approximately 210 men, women, and children (Hafen & Hafen, 1992). This history of trials and persecutions, coupled with the arduous journey to what became Salt Lake City, holds a major place in the LDS collective psyche. In Utah, Pioneer Day (July 24) is a commemoration of this history, second in importance only to the Fourth of July. Around the world, new members of the Church are told to consider themselves as pioneers; recognizing the sacrifices they have made to be Mormon, such as being ostracized by family and friends when they joined the Church. Church leaders have said, “In many countries the Church is still in its beginnings, and the organizational circumstances are sometimes far from perfect. However, the members may have a perfect testimony of the truth in their hearts. As the members stay in their countries and build the Church, despite economic challenges and hardships, future generations will be grateful to those courageous modern-day pioneers” (Uchtdorf, 2008) and “Each of us has these special accounts in our family histories of the sacrifices that were made for us to be blessed with a knowledge of the gospel. In some families, you may be the first member to join. You become its pioneer family” (Perry, 2009). Members are exhorted to learn pioneer stories and to remember that as the pioneers sacrificed, members should also be willing to sacrifice in order to keep their covenants (Oaks, 2012).

Talks about maintaining a connection with the past may also focus on Church history as experienced through visits to historical places, such as the Hill Cumorah, in Palmyra, New York (where the gold plates were found) or Nauvoo, Illinois (the last Mormon community before the
flight west to Utah and the site of the rebuilt Nauvoo Temple). As with other jobs in the Church, docents, pageant actors, tour guides and other work at historical sites is performed by volunteers. In Sacrament Meeting, speakers relate their volunteer experiences both to encourage members to visit the site, but also to encourage them to be blessed by volunteering at the sites during their vacation or retirement. Members learn that historical places are important because of the events that occurred at them, but also because the places are consecrated ground which serve, as Madsen states, to “build up the faith of its members and establish them as a holy people.” (as cited in Olsen, 2013).

**Discussion**

It appears that the Sacrament Meeting talk is an important channel for the transmission of knowledge among the LDS. It is important because it helps to create the reality of what it is to be Mormon. That reality is informed by an historical knowledge transferred through the generations to become the reality of the current generation. For example, it helps to remember that a red light means ‘stop’ instead of having to learn what it means each time you come to a corner with a stop light. We now know the red light means stop because sometime in the past, it was given that meaning, and people have relayed that meaning to successive generations. “An institutional world has a history…that antedates the individual’s birth and is not accessible to his biographical recollection. It was there before he was born, and will be there after his death” (Berger & Luckmann, 1966, p. 60). We internalize this knowledge, but we also share it with the people around us, the people in our society - and we share this knowledge through language. Language is the way we learn about reality, about the society we live in. “In this way, language is capable of becoming the objective repository of vast accumulations of meaning and experience, which it can then preserve in time and transmit to following generations” (Berger &
Luckmann, 1966, p. 37). Successive generations need to be told, through language, what is the meaning of words and behaviors. “It, therefore, becomes necessary to interpret this meaning to them in various legitimating formulas. They will have to be consistent and comprehensive in terms of the institutional order, if they are to carry conviction to the new generation. The same story, so to speak, must be told to all the children” (Berger & Luckmann, 1966, p. 62).

In the Sacrament Meeting, language, as embodied in talks, provides the story.

**Institutionalism**

Berger and Luckmann suggest that institutionalization is the reason why behaviors become ‘hardened’ in the organization. “A system of action was said to be institutionalized to the extent that actors in an ongoing relation oriented their actions to a common set of normative standards and value patterns. As such a normative system becomes internalized, Parsons states that, “conformity with it becomes a need-disposition in the actor’s own personality structure” (Scott, Institutions and Organizations, 2001, p.15).

It is difficult for organizations to act outside of the institution(s) exerting forces against it. Becker asserts that “institutions represent a Best Way to do things” (Becker, 1995, 302). Once a best way (or best practice) is found, the likelihood is strong that the organization will continue to use it until forced not to do so, even if the practice has lost its usefulness. The way things get done becomes hardened into a package of behaviors, making it difficult to act outside of the package. How one is supposed to act within the family, towards one’s fellow man, even when alone in terms of daily Scripture reading, for example, becomes the ‘way things get done’ for an active Mormon and acting outside of these behaviors causes an individual discomfort and may risk removal by the group, via excommunication.
Members of the congregation come to know who they are as Mormons by internalizing the controls and constraints of the organization/society. This near total transformation of the self – alternation - involves having a social base (the community of the Church) and a dependency to some level on guides (speakers) who tell new comers the characteristics of the new society. While alternation is most frequently observed in religious conversion, I maintain that due to human imperfection, the tendency to take the easier road of acting without constraint, rather than constantly conforming one’s behavior to a strict code, alternation must occur with longtime members of the religious community as well. “The partners in significant conversation change. And in conversation with the new significant others subjective reality is transformed It is maintained by continuous conversation with them, or within the community they represent” (Berger & Luckmann, 1966. p. 159). I suggest that this ‘continuous conversation’ is necessary for Mormons because of its proselytizing nature and the continuous influx of new members. Obviously new members must be taught the knowledge of the new reality they have entered, but longtime members, or who living in areas with little chance to interact with other members, will also benefit from talks with repeated topics.

**Information Search and Organizational Culture**

Institutionalization provides an explanation for the controls and constraints on member behavior, but to learn more about why people do what they do, it is useful to take a closer look at the organization. An organization can be defined as a group of people working together to reach common goals. The Church can be described as a rational organization, oriented toward specific goals and with formalized structures; having defined job titles, work rules, and hierarchies. Outsiders can determine who is doing what, how they are doing it, and with or to whom (Scott, 1998). As a growing, global organization, it has a continuing influx of new entrants (converts)
who come from a multiplicity of religious, racial, and national backgrounds. And although they have agreed, through baptism, to be a member of the organization, they are uncertain about all of the ways in which they must conform their behavior. People seek to reduce uncertainty by searching for and acquiring information (Stinchcombe, 1990). One way of providing information is from a central authority at the top down to individuals. Hayek (1945) suggests that the most effective way to reduce uncertainty is to decentralize its dissemination. For Mormons, information about religion and culture is provided centrally from Church headquarters via broadcast media, the internet, books, study aids, etc. It is also provided in a decentralized manner via Sacrament Meeting talks every Sunday. The talk becomes an information dispensing tool, decreasing the effort members (new and long term) need to search for information about Mormonism and their expected behavior in it.

One way of examining uncertainty reduction is to see how it is affected by organizational culture. When people are organized, they develop shared assumptions as they work through problems confronting the organization. Those already in the organization share what they’ve learned with new entrants and consider their methods of operating the best way to address problems – so much so that a person who does not act in accordance with those assumptions will be told to change their behavior (Schein, 1992). I suggest that the talk is an optimal method for dispersing information and cultural expectations because members of the congregation can 1) see who has authority to transmit Church-related information (the speaker – chosen by the bishopric as influenced by the Spirit, reducing or even eliminating the need for the member to seek this info); 2) trust what the speaker has to say (the speaker was selected because the bishopric believed he or she had the ability to speak knowledgably about the guiding
principles of the Church; and 3) trust the speaker on a personal level because the speaker is a lay
person like themselves, subject to the same problems and challenges.

By not having a paid clergy or priestly class, by treating all members, even children, as capable of knowing and understanding LDS beliefs for themselves, and then sharing that understanding with others, the organization shows that it trusts its members with delivering the Church’s message and transmitting its culture. For example, newcomers whose past traditions did not include daily prayer or Scripture reading, come to learn that this is an expected behavior. What is interesting, however, is that many speakers will talk about their difficulties in adhering to those behavioral expectations, as opposed to perfection in their practice. The newcomer, then, realizes that it is accepted in this culture to stumble in these efforts, but when they stumble, they need to get up and try again.

Schein’s view is useful as an overview; however, Martin presents a more complex notion of organizational culture, suggesting that certain elements are manifestations of culture in an organization (Martin, 2002). Briefly, they are:

Ritual – This repeated and socially planned activity that takes place in front of an audience. The talk itself is a ritual, carried out each week, with a set form, and integrates the participants into the belief system of the Church/organization and renews participants’ relationships with each other by providing a shared experience (Martin, 2002).

Stories and scripts – As indicated previously, there are reoccurring topics for the talk. Stories about one’s missionary experience frequently include tales of finding, after a long unproductive day, the one person who would talk to them about the gospel or seeing someone on the street and ‘just knowing’ that person would be open to learning about the Church. Members are reminded repeatedly that a worthy Mormon pays tithes, even in the midst of economic difficulty. A worthy
Mormon takes his home teaching responsibilities seriously. A worthy Mormon obeys the dietary restrictions and the prohibitions against smoking and drinking alcohol. These stories are told repeatedly, so that over the years members learn what it is to be a Saint by listening to the experiences and actions of others. By these stories and scripts, newcomers learn hear the same stories that lifelong members hear. In this way, the investigator or new convert becomes able to tell these same stories when it is his turn to speak. For the newly converted, talks about visiting and volunteering at LDS historical sites transfers organizational memory (this is who we are – a people who have suffered hardships and survived to become a global presence) as well as informs them of organizational cultural expectations (this is what we do – obtain blessings by visiting sacred sites and doing volunteer service).

*Jargon* – This is the language spoken by insiders, which can be emotionally laden. For example, the accepted way for LDS to refer to each other is as ‘brother’ and ‘sister’ and the speaker uses these familial terms repeatedly to draw himself into the congregation and the draw the congregation to him.

*Humor* – Unlike the use of humor in business organizations, which can make fun of outsiders or insiders who are ‘different’ from the majority, permitting members to “express that which they otherwise might be forbidden to say,” (Martin, 2002, p. 82) humor in the Sacrament Meeting talks is often self-deprecating, rather than making fun of others. For example, humor is relayed in mission stories, in which young men, out in the world for the first time are apt to experience many problems. Laughter can be elicited by references to green jello and funeral potatoes (foods stereotypically found at Mormon events). Even the President of the Church will provide a cautionary tale by humorous stories about his childhood.
Physical arrangements, décor, and dress – An LDS chapel is plain with no crosses or religious pictures. There are, however, pictures of Jesus, and scenes from the Bible or Book of Mormon in classrooms and in the hallway. The pictures are basically the same from ward to ward and members can purchase smaller versions to hang at home. Mormons wear ‘Sunday best’ to church, with men generally in suits and ties and women in skirts and dresses. A woman in pants or a man in jeans will not be asked to leave, but as they continue to attend Sacrament Meeting, the organizational culture as evidenced by dress will eventually pressure the newcomer into dressing up, so that they do not stand out from others in the congregation.

The talk reduces the need for newcomers and longtime adherents to search for information regarding accepted behaviors in the organization and provides an efficient way to transfer religious information and cultural constraints to members.

Conclusion

Using the volunteer labor of those called to serve, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints can transfer sophisticated religious knowledge to its members without a paid clergy or priestly class. Unpaid, however, is not the same as unskilled. It is clear that the Church does not entrust neophytes with the dissemination of important religious and cultural information, but uses members who are well-educated in the Scriptures, taught how to present a lesson, are seen by others in the close community as living according to Mormon precepts, and have a history of public speaking to transfer religious information. The formalized structure of the talks and their topics are both institutionalized in themselves and institutionalize the congregation. And finally, the talks reduce efforts associated with information search, by providing each week in Sacrament Meeting, the information needed on how to live a Mormon life.
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