

# Brigham Young on the Social Order

Ronald W. Walker

“Suppose we had the power to take the poor and the ignorant, the low and the degraded who are trodden under foot by the great and the powerful among earth’s inhabitants, and bring them together and purify them and fill them with knowledge and understanding and make a nation of them worthy of admiration, what would you say to this?”

—Brigham Young<sup>1</sup>

In our mind’s eye we can see Brigham Young stepping to the pulpit. His presence is dominating. Old women rouse themselves in expectation. Men stop coughing. Even children cease their squalls. Typically the first words he speaks are almost inaudible, but warming to a subject he soon achieves fluency and control. His manner is effective but impromptu, “spoken rather than preached,” rambling instead of concise.<sup>2</sup> It is a scene reproduced hundreds, perhaps thousands, of times during his thirty years in the West.

He often preaches about the proper social order. What role should women and men have in an ideal society? What should be the function of work, education, and recreation? His views are not simply Christian homily. Born in upstate New York in 1801, Brigham Young is a child of America’s “golden age of community experiments”<sup>3</sup> and a convert to Joseph Smith’s earthly, here-and-now revelations.<sup>4</sup> As a result, he hopes to transform his rough but ambitious people into an exemplary community where cooperation, dedication, unity, and pioneer-building are sacramental rituals. Of course we must not mistake the pulpit ideal for the real. Utah conditions do not always conform to his exhortations. Nor is he always consistent in his preaching: time and circumstance sometimes alter his emphasis. Nevertheless, his statements convey a softer view of Utah society than is often attributed, and, more importantly, they are also biographically revealing, suggesting a thoughtful man of quick and hardy wit, whose much alleged “heavy

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hand” is tempered by practical and caring forbearance. And if his feet are firmly planted in the American agrarian frontier, his vision reaches upward. Religion impels him. When this dimension mixes with his social thinking, the result is one of America’s most successful religious utopians. Perhaps no other utopian operated on such a grand or effective scale.

He often approached the topic with studied casualness. His October 1872 sermon, one of the best expositions of his ideas, mingles governing principles for his “order of Enoch” with lively fancy:

I would build houses expressly for their convenience in cooking, washing and every department of their domestic arrangements. Instead of having every woman getting up in the morning and fussing around a cookstove or over the fire . . . she would have nothing to do but to go to her work. Let me have my arrangement here, a hall in which I can seat five hundred persons to eat; and I have my cooking apparatus—ranges and ovens—all prepared. And suppose we had . . . our cooking room attached to this hall; and there is a person at the further end of the table and he should telegraph that he wanted a warm beefsteak; and this is conveyed to him by a little railway, perhaps under the table, and he or she may take her beefsteak. “What do you want to take with it?” “A cup of tea, a cup of coffee, a cup of milk, piece of toast,” or something or other, no matter what they call for, it is conveyed to them and they take it. And when they have all eaten, the dishes are piled together, slipped under the table, and run back to the ones who wash them. We could have a few Chinamen to do that if we did not want to do it ourselves. (15:221)

Brigham Young wished for more than relief from domestic labor. His system allowed vocational specialization, even for nineteenth-century women. Certainly their utility extended beyond the need “to sweep houses, wash dishes, make beds, and raise babies” (13:61). After breakfast, they might “go to work making their bonnets, hats, and clothing, or in the factories” (15:221). While he thought manual labor for women unfitting (16:16), the professions were open to them. They could “stand behind the [business] counter, study law or physic, or become good book-keepers and be able to do their business in any counting house, and all this to enlarge their sphere of usefulness for the benefit of society at large” (13:61).

Men in turn should do sinewy labor: “Some for the kanyon, perhaps, or for the plow or harvest, no difference what, each and every class is organized, and all labor and perform their part” (15:221–22). However, he placed some vocations beyond the pale. Bone surgeons might perform a service, he thought, but frontier physicians generally accomplished more harm than good—and



at considerable expense (13:142; 14:109; 15:225–26). Lacking licensing standards and such primary knowledge as germ theory and antiseptics, the Utah medical profession was not above censure.

Lawyers were a greater bane: “I feel about them as Peter of Russia is said to have felt when he was in England. He saw and heard the lawyers pleading at a great trial there, and he was asked his opinion concerning them. He replied that he had two lawyers in his empire, and when he got home he intended to hang one of them” (15:224). Brigham Young believed lawyers were bent on strife and that the adversary system of law made “white black, and black white” (14:85). To be sure, he granted that lawyers had their place, but declared, “I cannot find it” (15:224).

Merchants scored no higher: “I never could, the poorest day I ever saw in my life, descend so low as to stand behind a counter. Taking that class of men as a whole, I think they are of extremely small calibre” (9:189–90). The problem was severalfold. Commercial profits drained from Zion precious capital resources (12:372–73) and often placed wealth at the disposal of enemies (11:298). Moreover, merchants were acquisitive. If “they had a chance to buy a widow’s cow for ten cents on the dollar of her real value in cash, [they] would make the purchase and then thank the Lord that he had so blessed them” (17:361–62). If such were to secure a heavenly reward, Brigham believed, “it would be by the skin of their teeth” (15:20).

The fundamental reason for excluding doctors, lawyers, and merchants from ideal society was that they were not producers of real wealth. Like Adam Smith and Karl Marx, Brigham Young held that labor was the basic element of production, and for him this meant using “bone, sinew, nerve, and muscle” to transform natural resources into usable products (1:254). In contrast, those who lived “by their wits” earned his scorn. Such a man “never did a thing to produce a morsel of bread. He never took the pains to raise a goose, duck, lamb, or sheep. . . . No, he never did anything useful; but still he eats, drinks, and wears, and lives in luxury. In the name of common sense what use is such a man on this earth?” (14:82–83).

These feelings led Brigham Young to construct a theology of agrarian work. He conceded the desirability of assembling to “pray, and preach, and exhort, so that we may obtain the power of God.” But such a religion, he archly observed, would not “raise our bread, nor perfect the Saints in wisdom” (11:325). What counted was works (3:154). Rather than simply preaching faith, repentance, baptism, and the laying on of hands, his text was often “building of a literal kingdom of God” (10:171). “Learn . . . how to yoke



together a pair of oxen," he taught his followers, "how to manage and drive them across the plains, how to get timber from the kanyons, how to make brick, and how to hew stone and bring them into shape and position to please the eye and create comfort and happiness for the Saints. These are some of the mysteries of the kingdom" (10:25).

His was a nuts-and-bolts Zion. Some might believe that the Lord could send an angel "with a loaf of bread under one arm and a leg of bacon under the other," but that was not Brigham's faith (11:105). Providence would interpose only in human extremity, "when I cannot feed myself through the means God has placed in my power" (1:108). His social order would be built by perspiration. "Do we realize," he asked, "that if we enjoy a Zion in time or in eternity, we must make it for ourselves? That all who have a Zion in the eternities of the gods organized, framed, consolidated, and perfected it themselves, and consequently are entitled to enjoy it[?]" (9:282).

The principle of work had important corollaries. It could be used to maintain order: "My policy is to keep every man, woman, and child busily employed, that they may have no idle time for hatching mischief in the night, and for making plans to accomplish their own ruin" (2:144). Likewise, it helped to dispense charity. Young believed that "to give to the idler is as wicked as anything else" (16:19). He maintained an ambitious public works program, at times assisting as many as two thousand men (10:206). The magnitude of the effort eventually overreached necessary projects and forced the construction of marginal and imaginative ones such as an adobe wall around Salt Lake City. "I build walls," he explained, "dig ditches, make bridges, and do a great amount and variety of labour that is of but little consequence only to provide ways and means for sustaining and preserving the destitute" (8:11).

He recommended that physical labor be balanced with mental activity: "Some think too much and should labor more, others labor too much, and should think more, and thus maintain an equilibrium . . . then you will enjoy health and vigor" (3:248). In an ideal society, members upon completing a day's labor might "repair to our [lecture] room, and have our historians, and our different teachers to teach classes of old and young" (15:222). At stake was the maximizing of human potential. He recalled when in the English "Potteries" passing a disfigured seventy-four-year old man (his head, Brigham exaggerated, was "within sixteen or eighteen inches off the ground") who had spent his life as a cup turner. "How do we know, but what, if he had had the privilege, he would have made a statesman or a fine physician, an excellent mechanic or a



good judge? . . . This shows the necessity of the mind . . . indulging in every exercise it can enjoy in order to attain to a full development of its powers” (13:61).

He spoke with the feeling of a man who himself had been denied formal education. “Learn! learn! learn! continue to learn, to study by observation and from good books!” (19:64–65). He recommended that children begin with the rudiments of their mother tongue and continue to include such “useful” pursuits as “history, arithmetic, reading, writing, and painting” (8:9; 15:222). Theology, or gospel study, scored the highest in his priorities (6:317; 7:202), but he repeatedly proclaimed a commitment to “all the arts and sciences, and every branch of mechanism known and understood by man” (13:263). Such learning would not only “fit us for increased usefulness,” but also enable us “to improve our minds” (14:83).

He acknowledged that the Saints stood in need of intellectual improvement. Many were ignorant and mean in manner, and Utah in fact could boast of only “a few learned men and a few good scholars among the women” (14:192). To remedy these deficiencies, he advocated several enterprises. The territory’s young men might form lyceums, societies, and evening schools to study the arts and sciences. Instead of “riding over the prairies hunting and wasting . . . [their] time,” they could organize themselves to study statutes and constitutions (12:406–7). And he strongly supported Utah’s private elementary and secondary schools, which he believed brought his people the highest per capita literacy in the world (8:40). But there were bounds to his advocacy. He rejected both public schools and Salt Lake City’s superior Protestant denominational schools as uncontrollable intrusions within Zion.

Brigham Young also believed that education had its perils. He recalled hearing as a young man the silly question of the wife of his minister: “Do you suppose that we shall [be] under the necessity of eating with our hired help when we get into heaven?” (14:100). False learning brought pride and social distinctions. “What better is the man that can dress himself nicely and labor in a school house six hours a day,” he asked, “than the man who works ten or twelve hours a day hewing rock? Is he any better?” (16:19). And he warned against self-importance. “We all wish to know something that our neighbors do not know. With scientific men you will often find the same trait of character; ‘My studies and my researches are beyond those of my neighbors; I know more than they know; I treasure this up to myself, and I am looked upon as a superior being, and that delights me’ ” (17:52).



Education was not the only antidote he suggested to soften the rigors of pioneer life. He found recreation equally necessary, in part because of a personal need: "My mind labors like a man logging, all the time, and this is the reason why I am fond of . . . pastimes—they give me a privilege to throw every thing off, and shake myself, that my body may exercise, and my mind rest" (1:30; also 6:147). He also wished to cultivate the upcoming generation. When parents forbade novel reading, theater attendance, or other amusements in the name of religion, the result was often counterproductive. Upon maturing, their children became "more fit for companions to devils, than to be the children of such religious parents" (2:94).

Convinced that "a gathering and social spirit seems to be the order of heaven" (7:267), he tried to create one for Zion. In contrast with "the tight-laced religious professors of the present generation [who] have a horror at the sound of a fiddle," he encouraged dance and song. Musical harmony gave him "exquisite joy" and prompted the dictum: "There is no music in hell, for all good music belongs to heaven" (9:244). He complained that Utah celebrated but four annual holidays (New Year's, Pioneer Day, Independence Day, and Christmas) and wished for more (12:238–39). He recommended that families enjoy outings together (2:283), and for community entertainment he constructed Salt Lake City's Social Hall and later its famed theater. The latter he hoped would avoid bloodcurdling melodrama for more soothing and constructive fare (9:243–45). As a result of these and other labors, he was satisfied that Mormon "recreations" compared favorably with any in the Christian world (13:147).

To such cultural values as work, education, and recreation, Brigham Young added another. He was concerned with environment. His ideal community would have proper hygiene and planning. No cows, pigs, outhouses, or other nuisances would be tolerated in the residential area: "Gravel our streets, pave our walks, water them, keep them clean and nicely swept, and everything neat, nice and sweet." He recommended two-story homes to ensure proper upstairs sleeping ventilation and hoped that residences might be clustered within walking distance of both work and community halls. But he refused to abrogate personal choice or private property: "Build your houses just the size you want them, whether a hundred feet, fifty feet or five. . . . If there is any one person who has better taste in building than others, and can get up more tasteful houses, make your plans and we will put them up, and have the greatest variety we can imagine" (15:221–22).

For Brigham Young, any attempt to deal with human beings had to begin with a recognition of their diversity. People were not



similarly “gifted and capacitated” (6:93). Nor were their interests and fancies the same: “One sister would get up a certain fashioned bonnet, and another one another fashion”; or “one would trim it in a certain way, and another in another way” (11:305). Why not? “Let us take a course to understand men [and women] as they are, and not endeavour to make them precisely as we are, for this you cannot do” (9:124). Such tolerance might yield important by-products. “If houses and dresses and other things were alike,” talent and expression, he believed, would stultify. Yet, with variety Zion might “show to the world an example worthy of imitation” (11:305).

He believed that individuality also obtained in economic activity. While some Mormons favored a voluntary equalization of members’ wealth, he rejected such ideas out of hand. With humankind’s diverse talents for spending and acquiring, the program was unworkable. “How long would they remain equal?” he asked. “The cry would soon be—‘I have no bread, no house, no team, no farm; I have nothing’ ” (12:56). “Why a year from to-day we should need another division” (18:354). Ideally, he agreed that there should be rough equality of wealth (13:93; 17:53). But the poor should be lifted without lowering the prosperous. Again, he focused on human variety: “Let those who possess the ability and wisdom direct the labors of those who are not so endowed, until they too . . . acquire the same degree of ability” (18:354).

Here, then, was the crux of much of Brigham Young’s social thinking and the rationale for his own wealth. In a strongly autobiographical passage, he spoke of the obligation of an enlightened man of circumstance:

Gather around you the poor and honest of mankind and bestow your charity on them, not by giving them in the way that charity is almost universally understood, but supply them labor that will pay an interest on the outlay of means and, at the same time, afford food, raiment and shelter to the laborer; in this way the man of means becomes a benefactor to his race. Let him instruct those who know not how to cultivate the soil, who know not how to plant gardens and orchards and vineyards, in all these useful and profitable employments. Let him teach them the use of animals and how to profit by their labors and products. After he has taught them how to raise the wool and the flax, let him teach them how to make clothing of various kinds. Now they have their bread, meat, clothing, vegetables, fruit and dwellings which they have produced by their labor under the direction of the rich, good men whose capital and wisdom have elevated those poor persons from a state of destitution and want to a state of comfort and comparative independence. (10:193)

Of course, the idea of the wealthy assisting the poor was a nineteenth-century maxim. But Brigham’s pronouncements

conveyed little of the cant found elsewhere. Money grubbing was anathema to him. At times he denounced “unrighteous monopolies,” struck out at capitalists who “lock up all the means . . . so that the people can not get a dollar,” and attacked monied castes that created distinctions without reference to “Goodness, virtue or truth” (10:3; 16:77). He especially abominated the money-mindedness of some of his own people: “It has caused my spirit to weep and mourn to observe their greediness, their cheating and lying, their scheming in every possible way to wring a picayune out of this man, or that woman” (3:118). The problem lay not in wealth, but in its misuse: “The Lord has no objection to his people being wealthy, but he has a great objection to people hoarding up their wealth, and not devoting it, expressly for the advancement of his cause and kingdom on the earth” (11:294). He detailed the matter most precisely:

If the Lord has given me means and I spend it needlessly, in rings for my fingers, and jewelry for adornment I deprive the Priesthood of that which they ought to have to gather the poor, to preach the Gospel, to build temples and to feed the hungry in our midst. . . . Every yard of ribbon that I buy that is needless, every flounce, and every gewgaw that is purchased for my family needlessly, robs the Church of God. (14:18)

Nothing aroused his scorn so quickly as the “ding-dong” of fashion (13:4). He inveighed particularly against the extravagance of the prevailing feminine styles:

The present custom of many is such that I would as soon see a squaw go through the streets with a very little on, as to see clothing piled up until it reaches, perhaps, the top of the hedge or fence its wearer is passing. . . . In my feelings they are positively ridiculous, they are so useless and unbecoming. Do you recollect a fashion there was a few years ago, that has now nearly ceased, when a woman could not walk through the streets without holding her clothes two feet in front of her if her arm was long enough? . . . Now it is on the other side, and I do not know but they will get two humps on their backs, they have one now, and if they get to be dromedaries it will be no wonder. (15:161)

He questioned if some women’s dresses did not in fact conceal a six-horse team, with “a dozen dogs under the wagon” (15:132). To match their nonsense, men ought “to have one half of their hats covered with feathers and the other half with a cockade, and frills up and down the sleeves of their coats and the legs of their pantaloons” (12:37). He urged Zion to free itself from such excesses by creating an indigenous fashion, emphasizing simplicity and diversity (12:202; 14:17).



Behind Brigham Young's discussion of Christian stewardship, wealth, and fashion lay his quest for a godly community, a city on a hill. As every apprentice historian of Utah learns quickly, the Mormon leader was concerned with religious commonwealth. He taught his followers that his social order devolved from the biblical Enoch, whose society in turn was a shadow of the celestial (12:210). "We are trying to be the image of those who live in heaven," he insisted. "We are trying to pattern after them, to look like them, to walk and talk like them, to deal like them, and build up the kingdom of heaven as they have done" (9:170). Such a goal would be secured, he believed, only by the celestially-minded. The Saints, however, were by no means ready for the task: "What hinders this people from being as holy as the Church of Enoch? It is because you will not cultivate the disposition to be so" (1:202). The challenge lay inward. Man "is so prone to wander and give himself up to the grovelling things of the world . . . that it is literally a breaking up the fallow ground of his heart to prepare him to see the holy city. . . . Herein lies our labor" (13:151). From the transformation of a single heart, Zion would go forth, systematically extending holiness to families, neighborhoods, and finally to the world (10:173).

He hoped this religious dedication would bring several important results. First, it might produce a godly people. As their greatest and most important labor, the Saints should love God (12:229) and keep the sayings of Jesus (1:134). In this pursuit he constantly urged them on: "There is not an individual here but what has power . . . to drink whisky or let it alone, to swear or not swear, to lie or not lie . . . slander and backbite a brother or a sister or not. This power is our own individual property" (9:220).

Second, piety could reorient people from selves to society: "Just as long as every man works for himself we are not the Lord's" (15:166). Sacrifice loomed large in his view: "If we have not yet learned that poverty, sickness, pain, want, disappointment, losses, crosses, or even death, should not move us one hair's breadth from the service of God, or separate us from the principles of eternal life, it is a lesson we have to learn" (1:336).

Third, he hoped the people's faith would at last bring them to accept their stewardship before God. Here Brigham Young returned to one of his most recurring themes:

I have much property in my possession, and we use the terms, "my farm, my house, my cattle, my horses, my carriage," &c., but the fact is we do not truly own anything; we never did and never will, until many long ages after this. . . .



Every man and woman has got to feel that not one farthing of anything in their possession is rightfully theirs, in the strict sense of ownership. When we learn this lesson, where will my interest and my effort? I do not own anything—it is my Father’s. . . . His providence has thrown them into my care; He has appointed me a steward over them, and I am His servant, His steward, His hired man, one with whom He has placed certain property in charge for the time being that is, pertaining to the things of this world. (4:28–29)

Finally, there was a goal of unity, which he also defined in religious terms. Like God’s angels, men and women might be “of one heart and of one mind,” seeing, understanding, and knowing alike, through “faithfulness and obedience to the requirements of their Father and God” (11:15). For the rank and file Saint, this specifically meant foregoing political partisanship and accepting his leadership. Again, the heavenly pattern pertained: “Do you think [in heaven] they get up different ones whom they will run for their king, governor, or president? Do you think there is an opposition ticket there?” (16:76–77). He thought political parties promoted “distrust and jealousy, which led to discord and strife” and often had the additional result of electing officeholders “who would let the nation sink for a can of oysters and a lewd woman” (7:14–15; 17:51).

These values in themselves were not unusual, even in Jacksonian America. What set them apart was Brigham Young’s theocratic view. He believed that prophets such as himself were empowered to dictate “even the ribbons the women wear” (4:271; 11:298). Those who thought otherwise were “ignorant” and “from the enemy” (11:298; 18:246). He claimed to possess “the power of God” and asserted the heavenly knowledge to direct the Saints’ conduct “just as well as I know the road home” (9:289; 18:70). He had immense self-confidence, claiming that but one in forty (and here he no doubt was modest) could manage his followers so well. They had “to be watched like an infant running around the house, that knows no better than to take the carving knife or fork and fall upon it and put out its eyes” (12:56–57).

These statements were, at least in spirit, in conflict with his ideas of human diversity. But Brigham Young was no Savonarola. He minimized outward performance, including some of the rituals that have come to characterize modern-day Mormonism. Particularly in his later years, he urged the Saints (and himself) to live the “Word of Wisdom” health code, rejecting pleas to make the abstinence from alcohol, tobacco, tea, and coffee a test of fellowship (9:35). Instead, with counsel having very much a modern ring, he urged the Saints to replace their pastries, beef, and particularly



pork with a simple diet of fish, vegetables, fruits, hard bread, and pure mountain water (12:37, 122, 192–93; 13:153–54; 19:68). He was equally forbearing about tithe-paying. His strongly worded sermons on behalf of the practice were balanced by his willingness to let individual conscience govern. “I shall seek in vain for a man in this Church who has paid his tithing strictly,” he declared (16:112). “Do you believe it? I know it” (14:87–88; also 12:36).

Nor was his a narrow and hidebound Sabbatarianism. While he recognized and preached the scriptural injunction to meet together on the Sabbath to confess faults and partake of the communion (15:222), his stress was not on Sunday asceticism and observance, which he believed was the accretion of unnecessary tradition. “You do not see me here every Sabbath,” he once spoke revealingly at the Saints’ community-wide service,

Perhaps some of you wonder why. . . . If I had my own choice, and could have my own dictation with regard to physical and mental labour, I would set apart, for the express benefit of man, at least one-seventh part of the time for rest. . . . Perhaps assembling here on the Sabbath is a rest to many, though it is not very much of a rest. To those who have been labouring all the week to the utmost extent of their strength, it may be somewhat of a rest to sit on these hard benches; but when I come here I have a constant labour on my mind. . . . If I had my own mind, I would devote the time for meetings like this within the measure of the six days, and on the seventh, rest from all my labours, for the express purpose of renewing the mental and physical powers of man. (8:57–58; also 3:324; 10:187)

While he underplayed some aspects of present-day Mormonism, Brigham and his people nevertheless displayed enormous religious energy. Their zeal was expended in Zion-building: preaching, baptizing, emigrating, settling, procreating, refining themselves—all in preparation for Brigham Young’s ideal society, the consuming passion that unified his thinking and acts. Scores of his sermons detailed the step-by-step building of this society. Missionaries began the process by carrying to the world “the keys of life and death,” which included the promise of an immediately better life in America (8:52). Brigham believed the gospel net should be expansive: “No matter who may apply to you for baptism, even if you have good reason to believe they are unworthy, if they require it forbid them not” (14:78).

To the natural eye, some of these sheaves had little apparent beauty. The gospel message usually failed to touch the rich, noble, and educated (12:257; 14:192). During his English mission Brigham had stayed the night with converts, and sometimes wondered, when turning down his bed sheets, where the original sheet was amid all the patching. He had seen other British converts



cover themselves with blankets while they washed their only clothes prior to the Sabbath (12:256–57). “We have mostly come from the plough and furrow, from the mechanic shops and the loom, from the spinning-jenny, the kitchen, and wash-room. This people have not been educated in the devilry and craft of the learned classes of mankind, and consequently possessed honesty enough to embrace the truth” (6:70–71).

Many failed to persevere. Brigham Young estimated less than a fourth of those who were baptized actually made their way to Utah (11:101), and many who came soon cast off their faith. The latter group gave Brigham apoplexy. He saw them as a waste of precious Church resources. He complained with characteristic vigor that they would not apostatize in the old country or in New York, where many emigrants temporarily settled. “They will labor there year after year, and struggle and toil until they can get to the gathering place . . . then they can apostatize, forsake the faith, and turn away from the holy commandments of the Lord Jesus.” For a time he considered placing all prospective emigrants under a covenant to be faithful but finally gave up the idea: “This is not our business [to determine who may come to Zion]. Our duty is to preach the Gospel and to receive all that wish to have the ordinances administered to them, and leave the result in the hands of God. This is his work, not ours” (14:79; also 13:30–31).

Those whose faith endured became grist for Brigham’s social mill, to be taught “the things which pertain to this world and to this life” (10:27). Zion would lift and reform them:

We take . . . [the poor] and we calculate to make them rich; we have taken the foolish and we calculate to make them wise; we take the weak and we calculate to make them strong. We calculate to build up this people until they know as much as any other people on the face of the earth, in mechanics, in the arts and sciences, and in every true principle of philosophy. (13:148; 14:103–4)

As always, Brigham Young defined this labor to be religious, preparatory for higher things. His people performed manual labor “to receive the full benefit of the spiritual” (9:239). “If you do not learn to live here . . . how can you understand the things pertaining to the life to come?” (12:261).

Despite his sometime pulpit harshness, there grew between Brigham and his people a respectful if not affectionate bond. According to Heber C. Kimball, his counselor, ten or twenty women might daily approach him for domestic advice (5:276). He returned their regard: “There is not a father who feels more tenderly towards his offspring, and loves them better than I love this people” (1:49). “My course,” he claimed, “is not to scold, but to persuade



and entreat the people to do their duty, holding before them the reward of faithfulness" (12:128). The father-figure image was apt, for Brigham's manner and speech was paternal. We "have to learn by the childish principle," he told his people, "a little today and a little more tomorrow" (16:41). The mastery of the "First Reader," he reminded, required more than a day (12:259). He wished to teach them more but thought he already had spoken beyond their preparation and worthiness (7:238). There was a tantalizing mystery about his reticence: "If I were to tell you one half of the things that I know in many particulars, it would astonish the half hearted who . . . do not understand the workings of the providences of God among the children of men" (18:359).

He had a hard sense of reality about his Saints. They might be "the best people in the world" (9:154–55) and had already improved at an unprecedented rate ("Enoch and his people . . . did not make greater progress"). Still, he was highly impatient (7:331). Many refused to listen to his advice: "It goes in at one ear and out at the other—it is like the weaver's shuttle passing through the web" (16:161). Others were like boys with sleds trudging slowly up a hill then rushing swiftly down. They were "apt to be slow to learn righteousness and quick to run in the ways of sin" (12:124). And he admitted that on Zion's fringe there were dregs aplenty. No community, he complained, had a higher proportion of thieves, for his missionaries had gathered along with the devout some of "the meanest men that ever disgraced God's footstool" (15:226).

Given this estimate, it is not surprising that Brigham was hesitant about praying for the destruction of the wicked. "Be careful," he advised, "for if they were all to be overthrown at once, how many would there be left that are called Saints?" (9:3). The question, he acknowledged, was embarrassing: "Do you think one half of . . . [the Saints] will enter in at the straight gate, pass by the angels and the Gods, and receive a celestial exaltation? I pray they may, even if I do not believe so" (4:195–96). Other moments found him still more dour, estimating "very few" would actually enter heaven's highest glory (18:213). Such conditions called for slow and tedious work. Zion's task would require many years and the labor of perhaps "hundreds and thousands" of prophet leaders (9:142).

Part of the problem lay with the "potent . . . almost almighty" force of custom (19:91–92), which unconsciously and often deleteriously conditioned morality. Once implanted, folkways became an almost insurmountable barrier to social progress: "Our traditions are so firmly fixed in our feelings that it is almost impossible to rise above, over-ride, or get rid of them. They cling



to us like the affections of tender friends" (13:261). They made men "automatons on the stage of life, following the maxim, 'As the old cock crows, so crows the young'" (3:276). He urged his people to declare war against "foolish traditions, pride and vain imaginations" (10:202) and suggested better ways in their place: "If we live long enough together, we shall have a tradition of our own." Then we will "learn the law of right . . . [and] be able at all times to know right from wrong" (3:324).

To circumvent false custom, Brigham Young turned to the upcoming generation: "I am not going to gather the lions of the forest from the sectarian world . . . but the mothers in Israel are going to rear them" (4:132). Unlike some of his own generation, whom he characterized as "old grannies" devoid of "a hundredth millionth part of an ounce of common sense," Zion's youth were untrammelled "with erroneous traditions and teachings," and to them he hastened to transfer power:

It is a common adage, "Old men for counsel, and young men for war." . . . I would say, with comparatively few exceptions, "young men for counsel, and young men for war." For knowledge and understanding I would rather, as a general thing, select young men from eighteen years of age—the sons of men who have been in this Church from the beginning, than to select their fathers. (7:335–36; also 12:394)

Keenly sensitive to his difficult social task, Brigham Young proclaimed himself "willing to wink" at his followers' ignorance and excused "a great many naughty things." "It is not by words, particularly, nor by actions, that men will be judged," he explained, but by "the sentiments and intentions of the heart" (6:307; 8:10; also 7:279). He urged this genial view upon Zion's second- and third-rank leaders: "How it floods my heart with sorrow to see so many Elders of Israel who wish everybody to come to their standard and be measured by their measure. Every man must be just so long, to fit their iron bedstead, or be cut off to the right length" (8:9). He fellowshiped many whom he thought rival denominations would unchurch. These, he proclaimed, "pass along unscathed . . . with the hope that they will reform and learn to live their religion more faithfully" (3:212, 12:163). He pursued a similar "hands-off" policy with members unable to accept the full range of Mormon doctrine, suggesting that they live morally for the present in the hope of receiving a believing heart and mind in the life to come (8:14).

Brigham Young's Zion was by no means a freewheeling pluralistic society on the twentieth-century model. But neither was it a religious tyranny. Brigham claimed that his community enjoyed "perfect liberty" (1:362–63) and promised that his ideal society,



when fully established, would continue to guarantee “every person in his rights” (6:342). He was especially adamant about preserving religious liberty: “I never would ask a man to be a Saint if he did not want to be; and I do not think I would persecute him if he worshiped a white dog, the sun, moon, or a graven image” (14:97; also 12:113–14; 14:94–95). He was unruffled when Protestant camp meetings came to evangelize Utah: “I am going to permit every one of my children to go and hear what they have to say” (14:157, 196–97).

Frequently he grumbled at first about an intrusion into his society then came to tolerate it. “I would have it distinctly understood that we deport ourselves in a friendly and neighborly manner toward our [non-LDS] friends,” he said of the non-Mormon merchants for whom he bore strong private animosity. They “may have the privilege of eating and drinking and enjoying themselves as well as we, if they get . . . [their means] honestly” (11:276–78, 80). He even tried to come to personal terms with the disorder of Salt Lake City’s Main Street, which he caustically called “Whisky Street.” Despite its “robbery, theft, drunkenness, lying, deceiving, gambling, whoring, and murder,” the only instrument he lifted against it was moral suasion. “Every variety [of good and evil],” he explained to his followers, “is necessary to prove whether we will preserve our integrity before God.” To demonstrate his own, he refused to walk through the vice area to the end of his life (7:242; 14:225–26).

Brigham Young might put the best face on things, but the coming of Gentile culture spelled the end of his social vision. Secularism, urbanization, and the market economy left little room for a labor-driven, agrarian, cooperative theocracy. But for his own people, during their moment of pioneering, his hopes had important results. For them, emigration, settlement, and daily living in their towns were as much sacramental acts as their baptism or confirmation, and they pursued these temporalities with great energy and success. Indeed, if judged by its ability to transform lives and by the scale of its operation, the Mormon Zion far excelled its communitarian rivals.<sup>5</sup>

Brigham Young believed his service and counsel had been good. “I do not know that I could do better than I have done since I have been in this kingdom,” he once characteristically remarked. “If I were to live my life over again, I should be afraid to try” (11:44).

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>*Journal of Discourses*, 26 vols. (London: Latter-day Saints' Book Depot, 1854–86), 12:259. Hereafter cited parenthetically. Due to a printing error, pagination of vol. 12 is not sequential.

<sup>2</sup>The mise-en-scène is that of the nineteenth-century traveler Richard Burton, *The City of the Saints and Across the Rocky Mountains to California*, ed. Fawn M. Brodie (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1963), 287–88.

<sup>3</sup>Ernest Troeltsch, *The Social Teachings of the Christian Churches*, quoted in Arthur Bestor, *Backwoods Utopias: The Sectarian Origins and the Owenite Phase of Communitarian Socialism in America: 1663–1829*, 2d ed., enl. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1970), 4–7.

<sup>4</sup>“Of the one hundred and twelve revelations announced by Joseph Smith, eighty-eight dealt partly or entirely with matters that were economic in nature” (Leonard J. Arrington, *Great Basin Kingdom: An Economic History of the Latter-day Saints, 1830–1900* [Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1966], 5–6).

<sup>5</sup>Mark Holloway, *Heavens on Earth: Utopian Communities in America 1680–1880*, 2d ed. (New York: Dover Publications, 1966), 18–19, estimates that the nineteenth century had one hundred utopian schemes enrolling over one hundred thousand people. Brigham's Utah exceeded all these schemes in toto.