

“To Moderate and Unify”

The Role That Latter-day Saint Citizen-Rhetors Can Play in Healing American Political Discourse

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In the April 1997 general conference of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, then-Elder Henry B. Eyring stated, “When the words of prophets seem repetitive, that should rivet our attention.” Repetition, he asserted, means the Lord’s servants are “warning the people, telling them the way to safety.”¹ In both the October 2020 and the April 2021 general conferences, President Dallin H. Oaks stressed the importance of the rule of law and the best ways to participate as citizens in political processes. Although he focused on the United States, President Oaks reassured his global audience that the principles he taught applied in all nations. On both occasions, he spoke of “this troubled time”² we live in, a “time of anger and hatred in political relationships and policies.”³ In both sermons, he noted the vital importance of being governed by law, working peacefully within the framework of constitutions (in the United States and elsewhere), and following applicable laws to change whatever we see amiss in society. Both times, he referred to scriptures that teach Latter-day Saints to “follow the laws of men, . . . to live peacefully under civil authority,” all while “we follow the laws of God toward our eternal destination.”⁴ Each time, he noted the evils of slavery and racism, and he denounced mob violence.

1. Henry B. Eyring, “Finding Safety in Counsel,” *Ensign* 27, no. 5 (May 1997): 24–25.

2. Dallin H. Oaks, “Defending Our Divinely Inspired Constitution,” *Liahona* 45, no. 5 (May 2021): 105.

3. Dallin H. Oaks, “Love Your Enemies,” *Ensign* 50, no. 11 (November 2020): 26.

4. Oaks, “Love Your Enemies,” 27.

Like many others, I was riveted by both sermons and heard each one as both warning listeners and offering directions for safety. The first talk, “Love Your Enemies,” came after a summer of Black Lives Matter protests across the United States, some of which included violent lawbreaking,⁵ and just before the U.S. election of 2020. The second talk, “Defending Our Divinely Inspired Constitution,” came three months after a mob violently stormed the United States Capitol, attempting to interfere with the constitutionally mandated process of confirming the election of the next president of the United States. According to an affidavit later filed by an FBI agent, some members of this mob were also bent on murdering the vice president of the United States and the Speaker of the House of Representatives.⁶ President Oaks delivered these sermons in a time of great political polarization in the United States and in a time when uncivil, caustic, even toxic political speech has seemingly become the norm. Along with many people I know, I have felt close to despair about finding a way to heal the rifts, civilize and elevate our political discourse, and recapture the unity that seemed to prevail in the United States in times past. In these two sermons, delivered six months apart, President Oaks avows “we must do better” to eliminate racism,⁷ and he notes “threats that undermine the inspired principles” of the Constitution,⁸ comments that indicate he must also feel concerns about our current political state. Knowing that President Oaks must surely have prayed for and received divine inspiration to prepare these two sermons, I believe we can safely conclude that the Lord is directing us through one of his prophets, seers, and revelators.

Corroboration for my response to Oaks’s sermons came as I listened to four scholars speak in a June 2021 panel at a Brigham Young University Law School symposium called the Religious Freedom Annual Review.⁹

5. In some people’s minds, all or nearly all of the Black Lives Matter protests included lawbreaking. However, professional analysis showed that 94 percent of all 2020 demonstrations (10,330 demonstrations at 2,730 locations in all fifty states) “involved no violent or destructive activity.” NGO Armed Conflict and Location Event Data Project and Bridging Divides Project, “U.S. Crisis Monitor Releases Full Data for 2020,” ACLED, February 5, 2021, <https://acleddata.com/2021/02/05/us-crisis-monitor-releases-full-data-for-2020/>.

6. Aila Slisco, “Proud Boys Intended to Kill Mike Pence and Nancy Pelosi, FBI Witness Says,” *Newsweek*, January 15, 2021, <https://www.newsweek.com/proud-boys-intended-kill-mike-pence-nancy-pelosi-fbi-witness-says-1562062>.

7. Oaks, “Love Your Enemies,” 29.

8. Oaks, “Defending the Divinely Inspired Constitution,” 107.

9. Christine M. Durham, W. Cole Durham Jr., Thomas B. Griffith, Paul E. Kerry, and Jane Wise, “Discussion on President Oaks’ Talk ‘Defending Our Divinely Inspired Constitution,’” Religious Freedom Annual Review, June 15–16, 2021, video recording,

The panel discussion focused on Oaks’s second sermon, “Defending Our Divinely Inspired Constitution.” The panelists commented on how unusual it was for him to use his allotted time on Easter Sunday to speak about political matters rather than about Christ’s Resurrection. They saw this as evidence of the “urgent” nature of what Oaks was communicating and of the “perilous times” we live in. Because Latter-day Saints believe that the Constitution is divinely inspired, Oaks said, they have “a unique responsibility to uphold and defend the United States Constitution and principles of constitutionalism wherever we live.”¹⁰ One panelist, Judge Thomas B. Griffith, singled out part of that unique responsibility by quoting this charge that Oaks gave his listeners: “On contested issues, we should seek to moderate and unify.”¹¹ Griffith added that he believes Latter-day Saints should adopt “a style of our own” in political discourse, instead of mimicking the words and actions of those around us.¹² He heard Oaks calling us “to approach these issues with a spirit of amity and mutual deference,” showing our fellow citizens “the things that people must be willing to give up for the sake of unity.”¹³

The moderation that Oaks calls for would undoubtedly entail compromise; *moderation* means avoiding extremes by seeking to restrain, mitigate, and temper. Likewise, the unity Oaks calls for would entail amity, or friendship, for who can be unified with those they can’t tolerate or even detest? Each of the BYU symposium panelists spoke of the spirit of amity and compromise that prevailed among the delegates at the 1787 convention that produced the United States Constitution. Without the willingness of those delegates to compromise, to give up cherished personal opinions, and to sacrifice peculiar interests of the states they represented, the Constitution would not have been created. As president of the convention, George Washington wrote a letter transmitting the new Constitution to the Congress of the Confederation of American States. In it, he stated that the delegates had crafted a document that would unite the individual states into one nation:

1:08:29, <https://www.iclrs.org/religious-freedom-annual-review/religious-freedom-annual-review-2021-religions-role-in-overcoming-divides-and-strengthening-american-democracy/>.

10. Oaks, “Defending Our Divinely Inspired Constitution,” 107.

11. Oaks, “Defending Our Divinely Inspired Constitution,” 107.

12. Griffith, in Durham and others, “Discussion on President Oaks’ Talk,” 43:23–44:21.

13. Griffith, in Durham and others, “Discussion on President Oaks’ Talk,” 32:40–37:00; see also 1:02:06–1:04:58.

We kept steadily in our view, that which appears to us the greatest interest of every true American, the consolidation of our Union, in which is involved our prosperity, felicity, safety, perhaps our national existence. This important consideration, seriously and deeply impressed on our minds, led each state in the Convention to be less rigid on points of inferior magnitude, than might have been otherwise expected; and thus the Constitution, which we now present, is the result of *a spirit of amity, and of that mutual deference and concession* which the peculiarity of our political situation rendered indispensable.¹⁴

Just as the “spirit of amity” and “mutual deference and concession” were indispensable to the writing of the Constitution in the first place, they are indispensable to upholding, preserving, protecting, and defending the now 234-year-old Constitution and the democratic-republican form of government which is founded upon that document. If the people of the United States, and particularly Latter-day Saints living in the United States, want to see the Constitution remain fixed as the fundamental document from which the powers of the U.S. government are derived, then we must heed the warnings and the charges President Oaks gave.

But how exactly do we put into practice President Oaks’s charge that, when it comes to “contested issues, we should seek to moderate and unify”? Many issues these days are contested, and many Americans have strong feelings about the best way to act on such matters as race relations, guns, immigration, health care, abortion, climate change, voting rights, and so on. We may have no desire to moderate our views and unify with those who don’t see issues the way we do. In this essay, I will draw on the twenty-five-hundred-year-old discipline of rhetoric as well as contemporary research in social science to suggest some ways we can communicate more effectively with those whom we may view as political adversaries. My aim is to show that as we engage more thoughtfully in political rhetoric, we can show love for both our neighbor and our country, and promote the welfare of both by being willing to moderate and unify.

In any rhetorical situation, three things must be present: a rhetor, an audience, and a message encoded in a language shared by rhetor and audience. I will first discuss what I mean by the term “citizen-rhetor” used in my title and why it is important for each of us to aspire to become a

14. George Washington, “Letter Transmitting the Constitution,” September 17, 1787, Varsity Tutors, <https://www.varsitytutors.com/earlyamerica/milestone-events/transmitting-the-constitution>, emphasis added.

more effective citizen-rhetor, one who speaks from a personal ethos that inspires trust and willingness to cooperate on political matters. Then I will focus on how we might address various audiences by appealing to positive emotions and attitudes as a way of influencing and motivating those whose political ideologies differ from our own. Finally, I will discuss how we can craft messages that are as truthful as possible when we seek to persuade others, so that our disagreements can be about reliable, objective facts, not about misinformation, disinformation, conspiracy theories, or outright lies.

What Is a Citizen-Rhetor?

A citizen-rhetor is a member of a democracy who can speak effectively to others to help them understand issues clearly and, if possible, persuade them to take needed action to make government more effective. The idea of ordinary citizens governing themselves comes from the world's first democracy, the city-state of Athens, when from about 500 to 300 BC, philosophers such as Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, and creators of other admirable cultural developments established a legacy that still influences Western civilization today. The Athenians of that day had found by bitter experience that allowing a single, often despotic, ruler or a small elite group of leaders to determine all courses of action for the body politic too often led to tyranny or class warfare. They wanted a form of government that would “engage everyone's good will on behalf of the state,” thus preventing internal divisions that could be exploited by enemies. They realized that distributing governing power broadly would help to prevent “the rise of tyrants and to ensure that money or aristocratic birth never conferred high privilege on anyone.”¹⁵ By making the rule of law supreme instead of an individual or a small group, they hoped to create maximum harmony and freedom for all. The Athenians believed this goal would be met by allowing citizens from all walks of life—from artisans to farmers to playwrights—to participate equally in making laws about property, taxes, inheritance, crime, warfare, the rights and duties of citizens, and so on.

To be sure, the label “citizen” in ancient Athens applied only to males born in Athens and over eighteen years of age. Women, slaves, and emigrants from other Greek city-states were excluded from participating, though all were still subject to the laws. Because Athens was small (about

15. Paul Woodruff, *First Democracy: The Challenge of an Ancient Idea* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 30–31.

two hundred thousand to three hundred thousand people), and the number of citizens even smaller (perhaps thirty thousand in the second century of its democratic rule), it was a true democracy in which every citizen could participate directly in making laws.¹⁶ The *ecclesia*, or citizen legislature, met on a hill above the marketplace, where thousands of men could assemble at one time; a high outcropping of limestone formed a wall where speakers stood so that their words could reverberate off the stone barrier and be widely heard. Predictably, not all citizens showed up for the assembly, so six thousand citizens constituted a quorum for voting. Proposed legislation was debated and voted on in the *ecclesia*.¹⁷ If approved by a majority, it became the law. Any citizen could speak for or against a proposed law, but not all took the opportunity to speak, so those who could speak persuasively helped build majorities by swaying the votes of others.

When people govern themselves by majority rule, it is inevitable they will need rhetoric—speech intended to inform and persuade others to join the speaker in refining a proposal and advancing it toward a favorable vote. Unsurprisingly, then, Athens was also the place where the formal study of rhetoric arose. This study was quickly theorized, and many teachers offered to help citizens learn to persuade others. Some of Athens's greatest texts for learning rhetoric are still used today.¹⁸ The word *rhetoric* means “speech” and the related word *rhetor* means “speaker.” The word *rhetoric* in our day often has the whiff of deception or needlessly flowery language about it—and, to be sure, at some points in its history, rhetoric did devolve into mere show and flattery. But its finest manifestations in its twenty-five-hundred-year history reveal it to be an ethical art situated at the center of human affairs, highly valued for its utility and its power to stir the mind and heart. So important was it that

16. Woodruff, *First Democracy*, 32.

17. Woodruff, *First Democracy*, 46. Proposed laws originated in a five-hundred-person council called the *boule*, which was composed of fifty men from each of the ten “tribes” of Athens. All were chosen by lot for one-year terms, with no one allowed to serve more than twice in his life. Once a proposal had been refined and was ready for a vote, it was submitted to the *ecclesia*.

18. For example, Aristotle's treatise *On Rhetoric* is still a rich resource for scholars today. The Athenians needed to use rhetoric not only in the legislature but also in the courts. There were no attorneys, and anyone might have to defend himself against a criminal or civil charge or prosecute a fellow citizen. Juries were often as big as five hundred people, so skill in arguing the facts and the law was obviously important. Citizens might also have to give speeches on holidays, at festivals and funerals, and on other ceremonial occasions.

rhetoric was at the center of liberal education in Western civilization from the Golden Age of Athens through the nineteenth century.

Even after Athens lost its independence to Macedonia, its local government continued to function democratically for another 236 years.¹⁹ The Romans who conquered Athens in 146 BC found much to admire and adopt from this first experiment with democracy, including the art of rhetoric. Though Rome didn't form a democratic government, it did create a republic that lasted nearly five hundred years, in which representatives of the people used rhetoric to conduct the affairs of government. The founders of the United States looked to the Roman republic as a model for how to form a representative government that would enshrine the rule of law. Moreover, all of the American founders who had received the traditional education of their day were students of rhetoric, a fact well-attested by the eloquent documents of the American founding. They were citizen-rhetors.

Why this detour into the history of rhetoric? We live in a time of partisan political rhetoric that in my lifetime has become uglier, more contentious and contemptuous, more tribal, more divisive, and, as a result, much less conducive to promoting the aims of government as outlined in the United States Constitution. Demonizing opponents and winning at almost any cost seem to have become the goals, rather than finding ways to work together to “establish Justice, insure domestic Tranquility, provide for the common defence, promote the general Welfare, and secure the Blessings of Liberty,” as the Preamble to the Constitution states.²⁰ Just as their representatives have become more partisan, too many citizens today have siloed themselves in echo chambers of partisan media outlets that serve mainly to confirm their audience's biases. Far too many have become constant consumers of unregulated social media feeds that spread conspiracy theories, misinformation, and disinformation. What can help us reverse this alarming trend?

I propose that, like the ancient Athenians, we Latter-day Saints start to view ourselves as citizen-rhetors, practitioners of an art of rhetoric that will produce the amity and concession we need “to moderate and unify,” as Oaks counseled. While it is true that very few of us will hold elected office, all citizens with voting rights can be involved in the processes that select and elect candidates. Everyone can talk face-to-face

19. Woodruff, *First Democracy*, 57–59.

20. “The Constitution of the United States,” Archives, <https://www.archives.gov/founding-docs/constitution>.

with family members, friends, neighbors, and coworkers to try to influence and moderate both political discourse and political action. Everyone can address our elected leaders and our fellow citizens through letters to the editor, opinion editorials, phone calls, email, social media posts, and so on. Moreover, we can expect better of our leaders and representatives if we will hold them accountable for their political rhetoric and actions. To do this, we will need to be knowledgeable and conscientious rhetors ourselves. I believe Latter-day Saint citizen-rhetors can practice an effective rhetorical style of our own, as we present ourselves and our ideas to others. Perhaps we can set an example, influencing the nature of political discourse on a national level by helping others see that moderation and unity are a better path.

Establishing a Credible Ethos

What should a citizen-rhetor know and do today? Both classical and contemporary theories of rhetoric pay much attention to what is usually called the *ethos*, or character, of the rhetor. Aristotle was the first to describe how ideal rhetors must, using only words, present themselves as persons of virtue, practical wisdom, and good will toward the audience.²¹ All subsequent theorists have agreed that the ideal rhetor acts consciously and strategically to choose words, organize them, and deliver them in such a way as to present an issue effectively for the instruction and contemplation of an audience, who then decide how to act. Ethical rhetors value the agency of the audience and never aim to deceive, manipulate, or coerce listeners or readers. By their choices of appropriately decorous language and timely, well-founded arguments that appeal to both logic and emotion, rhetors project their ethos. In turn, audiences who perceive that a rhetor is honest, trustworthy, intelligent, and well-informed are generally disposed to listen and to consider the rhetor's arguments.

For centuries, the goal of the rhetor has been to win over the audience through persuasion, whether the audience is simply undecided about or outright opposed to the rhetor's position. But an early twentieth-century rhetorician, Kenneth Burke, reframed the goal of rhetoric. What rhetors should aim for, says Burke, is not to persuade an audience but to bring both the audience and the rhetor into a state he called *identification*. Rather than taking an antagonistic stance, one that views the audience as

21. Aristotle, *On Rhetoric: A Theory of Civic Discourse*, 2nd ed., trans. George A. Kennedy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 112, 2.1.1378a.

an adversary to be conquered by the overwhelming strength of an argument, the rhetor takes an inviting stance, one that sees the audience as *consubstantial* (of the same substance) with the rhetor, possessing shared interests, values, and attitudes. The aim of identification is to overcome difference and division by emphasizing what Burke called “the ‘margin of overlap’ between the rhetor’s and the audience’s experiences.”²² Burke believed that when a rhetor invites an audience to identify with him, or when a rhetor shows how she identifies with the audience, feelings of alienation and estrangement are reduced. To Latter-day Saints, Burke’s ideas should resonate with our belief that all of us share an identity and common substance as children of God, as brothers and sisters. Regarding each other as antagonists to be subdued, even silenced, by rhetorical prowess contradicts the Christian teachings we have received and bars the way to unity. Latter-day Saints are taught to influence others through persuasion characterized by “long-suffering, by gentleness and meekness, and by love unfeigned” (D&C 121:41).

Arthur Brooks’s recent book *Love Your Enemies* doesn’t use “identification” to name the salve he prescribes to heal our currently divided body politic, but like Burke, Brooks describes how we must find ways to engage fellow citizens in discourse that will diminish our differences and highlight the common ground we share. Brooks says the source of our national division is the “culture of contempt” we have allowed to develop. Contempt is an ambient mixture of anger and disgust that he claims has sprouted largely from the “outrage industrial complex,” a metaphor for ideologically driven media outlets that, in effect, constantly work to stoke the contempt of one side for the other.²³ The barrage of contemptuous messages that many people consume daily, not only on social media but also from “elected officials, academics, entertainers, and some of the news media,” are, Brooks says, the “ideological equivalent of meth.” Research shows that we can literally become addicted to compulsively consuming these messages. This obsessive need to hear and read messages that keep us enraged has the effect of turning partisans on one political side sharply against partisans on the other side.²⁴ Brooks asserts that the only way to break the cycle of addiction to contempt is to love those we consider our enemies.

22. Robert L. Heath, “Identification,” *Encyclopedia of Rhetoric*, ed. Thomas O. Sloane (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 377.

23. Arthur C. Brooks, *Love Your Enemies: How Decent People Can Save America from the Culture of Contempt* (New York: Broadside Books, 2019), 29.

24. Brooks, *Love Your Enemies*, 28–29.

That is, of course, the prescription that Jesus gave in the Sermon on the Mount and the admonition that President Oaks stressed in his October 2020 sermon. While we expect such counsel from religious leaders, it might sound a bit strange coming from a social scientist. Yet Brooks enumerates practical ways to actually bridge the chasms in our political culture, ways that have been proven to work by the social scientific research that he cites. Interestingly, he says that loving others doesn't mean we can't disagree with them.²⁵ It doesn't even mean that we can't sometimes feel or express anger—because anger is not the same as contempt. It simply means we must disagree respectfully. First, Brooks says, we must treat opponents with respect and “warm-heartedness.”²⁶ These allow a rhetor to establish a human connection with others. Taking the time to do this—to ask people sincerely about their lives, their families, their jobs, their beliefs—is essential to stop viewing the “other” as someone who is evil, stupid, not worthy of talking to, or not entitled to participate in society. We must stop defining ourselves by the people and the groups we hate or mistrust.²⁷

Next, we must learn to welcome diversity, even radical diversity, by ceasing to focus on the historical and demographic, especially racial, differences that tend to sort us into groups. Instead, we must focus on the “shared moral ‘why’ of our lives as brothers and sisters.”²⁸ To explain this, Brooks draws on Robert Putnam's notion of “bridging identity,” which means ignoring another's as well as *one's own* demographic, educational, political, or religious identity in order to look for the “why” that you share.²⁹ For example, you might be a White, male, college-educated Republican member of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and find yourself working on a committee with a Black, female, high-school-educated Democratic member of the African Methodist Episcopal Church. If each of you can set aside these demographic differences, you might find that you share a passion for human dignity and helping the poor escape poverty. With that shared “why,” you have a way to begin negotiating concrete strategies for some sort of political change.

Brooks also prescribes actually expressing gratitude for one's opponents. Here's why: “If you join me in being grateful that we don't live in a one-party state, then by definition you must be grateful for people who

25. Brooks, *Love Your Enemies*, 37.

26. Brooks, *Love Your Enemies*, 39–43.

27. Brooks, *Love Your Enemies*, 120.

28. Brooks, *Love Your Enemies*, 117.

29. Brooks, *Love Your Enemies*, 119.

disagree with you. They are the ones who make pluralism and democracy possible. You should be grateful and express that gratitude for people who are on the other side in the competition of ideas.”³⁰ Competition, Brooks reminds us, is healthy in sports, business, and politics. Watching sporting events would be boring if one player or team consistently dominated; both players and spectators want a contest of worthy opponents.³¹ Products in the marketplace would be of poor quality if different manufacturers weren’t motivated by competition to improve; economic competition generally leads to better products and lower prices.³² Disallowing opposing speech, narrowing the range of acceptable speech, and attempting to shout others down with invective, thus silencing the free competition of ideas, are all detrimental to the health of a democracy.³³ So when someone disagrees with you about a political matter, express gratitude for their viewpoint. It is likely to surprise and disarm them; it will make them more ready to enter into a dialogue where you can eventually find Burke’s “margin of overlap” between your positions.³⁴

But if the competition of ideas is to be productive, Brooks reminds us, it must be based on “mutually agreed-upon (and enforced) rules and principles” that “grant legitimacy to the competitive process” and “keep us from descending into chaos.”³⁵ Such rules for discourse and debate once seemed to be implicitly understood and followed most of the time in American politics; now they may need to be rewritten and expressly promulgated, adopted, and followed by all those who engage in political rhetoric, whether they are candidates or voters. When all sides recognize the rules that govern competition and agree to comply with them, then competition forms a symbiotic relationship with cooperation. All sides know they can trust others to play fair and to abide by the rules. The paradoxical result is that “competition, properly understood and practiced, *unites* people.”³⁶

The value of Brooks’s suggestions is illustrated by a study conducted in 2019 called “America in One Room” (A1R). Cosponsored by Helena (a nonpartisan problem-solving institution), the People Productions, and the Center for Deliberative Democracy at Stanford University, the experiment brought together 523 registered voters, a scientifically representative

30. Brooks, *Love Your Enemies*, 62.

31. Brooks, *Love Your Enemies*, 155.

32. Brooks, *Love Your Enemies*, 159–62.

33. Brooks, *Love Your Enemies*, 169–73.

34. Heath, “Identification.”

35. Brooks, *Love Your Enemies*, 158.

36. Brooks, *Love Your Enemies*, 159, emphasis added.

sample of Americans, recruited by the National Organization for Research at the University of Chicago. The 523 participants met in Dallas for a four-day dialogue about politics and policy related to immigration, health care, the economy, the environment, and foreign policy. The A1R participants' attitudes and opinions about these matters were measured with surveys at the start of the four-day conference and again at its end. Over the duration of their stay, they read a fifty-five-page book prepared by policy experts from both major parties, which offered arguments for and against each policy proposal to be discussed; they heard speeches from party members; and they participated in small-group discussions moderated by neutral facilitators. At the end of the four days, surveys showed that members of both parties had moderated their starting positions, sometimes significantly. The shifts were summed up this way: "The most polarizing proposals, whether from the left or the right, generally lost support, and a number of more centrist proposals moved to the foreground. Crucially, proposals further to the right typically lost support from Republicans and proposals further to the left typically lost support from Democrats."³⁷ Not only did the participants moderate their positions on specific policy proposals, but they also learned to appreciate their fellow Americans from across the aisle. "Democrats' views of Republicans improved by nearly 12 points on average. For Republicans, the jump was even larger, almost 16 points." The participants also left the experiment with a better opinion of democracy and of its chances for success through better dialogue.³⁸ The greater unity through moderation that President Oaks called for is clearly a goal that can be reached when people of different persuasions interact in a civil, patient way, following rules that ensure listening and cooperation.

Influencing an Audience

In addition to projecting a trustworthy, credible ethos, a citizen-rhetor must also carefully study the audience he or she is addressing. The nature of the audience will constrain almost every choice the rhetor makes when constructing a message. For example, if you are speaking to children, you must choose words and examples they can understand. If

37. James Fishkin and Larry Diamond, "This Experiment Has Some Great News for Our Democracy," *New York Times*, October 2, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/10/02/opinion/america-one-room-experiment.html>.

38. Sarah Frostenson, Maddie Sach, and Laura Bronner, "What Would Happen If American Voters All Got Together and Talked Politics?" *FiveThirtyEight*, October 9, 2019, <https://fivethirtyeight.com/features/what-would-happen-if-american-voters-all-got-together-and-talked-politics/>.

you are speaking to people from another culture, you must know about their culture so that you can draw examples from it or translate your own cultural ideas and values into concepts they understand. A rhetor also needs to think about what genres of discourse are likely to succeed with particular audiences. Identifying the right rhetorical strategies makes it more likely we will find the margin of overlap.

One genre that has been empirically validated as an effective strategy to create identification with an audience is narrative. Brooks cites research from Princeton University, where scientists used magnetic resonance imaging to study brain activity in both tellers of and listeners to a story. Prior to the start of the story, speakers’ and listeners’ brain waves were highly divergent. However, once the storyteller began relating the narrative, the brain waves of the listeners immediately locked into a common pattern with those of the storyteller. Brooks quotes Uri Hasson, a neuroscientist at Princeton: “The more listeners understand what the speaker is saying, the more closely their brain responses mirror the speaker’s brain responses.” Scientists call this “neural entrainment” or “brain-to-brain coupling.”³⁹

A recent example of narrative’s power in political discourse comes from the struggle of voters in Belarus to remove President Alexander Lukashenko from office. Lukashenko has been a dictator since his election in 1994. His government holds elections, which he always wins by suspiciously huge margins. In early 2020, Sergei Tsikhanovsky, a prodemocracy activist who successfully used video blogging on YouTube to share his dissident views, announced his intention to challenge Lukashenko in the upcoming election. Two days later, he was jailed. His wife, Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, decided to run in her husband’s place for the presidency. Up to then, she had been a mother and English teacher, so her application for the office was apparently not considered a threat. But her campaign quickly drew massive support from across the spectrum of Belarus’s divided political opposition. Her simple message was that she was running because of her love for her husband, whom she wanted to free, and because she wanted to enact democratic reforms. So popular and stirring was her message, it is thought she probably won the election. No one believed the “official” result showing she got only 10 percent of the vote.⁴⁰ As in previous elections,

39. Brooks, *Love Your Enemies*, 132.

40. Kostya Manenkov and Daria Litvinova, “Belarus Poll Workers Describe Fraud in Aug. 9 Election,” *Washington Post*, September 1, 2020, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/europe/belarus-poll-workers-describe-fraud-in-aug-9-election/2020/09/01/b8920390-ec20-11ea-bd08-1b10132b458f_story.html.

Lukashenko declared himself the winner with over 80 percent, prompting six months of mass demonstrations in the country. The Belarusian population is less than 10 million, but “up to 1.5 million people would come out in a single day, among them pensioners, villagers, factory workers, and even, in a few places, members of the police and the security services, some of whom removed insignia from their uniforms or threw them in the garbage.”⁴¹ Many of the protestors were beaten and jailed, but it didn’t stop the demonstrations.

Lukashenko forced Tsikhanouskaya out of the country immediately after the election, so she fled to Lithuania, where she attempted to marshal Western democracies to aid Belarusians in their struggle for democracy. At first, she thought she could simply call on the leaders of Germany and France to do something to help. When that didn’t work, she tried to talk to them “in sophisticated political language.” It was only when she began using “the plain English that she had learned in school, in order to convey plain things,” that she succeeded. As she said herself, “I started to tell stories that would touch their hearts. I tried to make them feel just a little of the pain that Belarusians feel.” Anne Applebaum notes, “To [Tsikhanouskaya’s] surprise, Tsikhanouskaya became, for the second time, a runaway success. She charmed [Angela] Merkel and [Emmanuel] Macron, and the diplomats of multiple countries,” and trade between Belarus and Europe diminished to “a trickle.” In July 2021, she met with President Joe Biden, who increased U.S. sanctions on Belarus. Although sanctions impose a hardship on Belarusians, Tsikhanouskaya inspires them to make sacrifices. Lukashenko is still in power, but his authoritarianism is now nakedly on display to the entire world. In contrast, Applebaum states, Tsikhanouskaya “has on her side the combined narrative power of what we used to call the free world. She has the language of human rights, democracy, and justice.”⁴² As the narrative of Belarus’s struggle joins the larger narrative of the struggle for human rights of other nations, those who love freedom and justice anywhere in the world will want to see those established in Belarus.

Latter-day Saints are familiar with the power of narrative, as it is evident in the parables that Jesus used to teach important principles of forgiveness and love, such as the parable of the good Samaritan or the prodigal son. We identify with the generous good Samaritan—or possibly with the wounded man left for dead on the highway. We are moved

41. Anne Applebaum, “The Bad Guys Are Winning,” *Atlantic* 328, no. 5 (December 2021): 44–45.

42. Applebaum, “Bad Guys Are Winning,” 46.

as we resolve not to be cruel like the Levite and priest who passed by the wounded man. We identify with the prodigal son or with his father, who wept when his son returned—or with both of them at once. Like the prodigal son, we feel a desire to change and seek forgiveness. We may even recognize ourselves in the prodigal’s self-righteous brother, who was jealous of his father’s solicitude for the wayward brother, and resolve to rejoice more freely in the lost one who finds his way home. I submit that the effectiveness of narrative rhetoric lies in the way it teaches a deeply impactful lesson without pointedly moralizing. It relies on the innate empathy of listeners to be motivated to change themselves. It is a different style of rhetoric than is taught in classical or contemporary textbooks, but a different style—a style of our own—seems to be what is called for right now in our political discourse.

One great power of narrative is that it engages the emotions. In western civilization, the emotions have long been considered suspect; people often claim they want to act on reason alone and not to be influenced by their emotions. But humans can no more expect to be free of emotions than they can expect to be free of hunger. Appealing to the emotions of the audience has been a part of the theory and practice of rhetoric since Aristotle. Ethical rhetors understand the power of the emotions, but because they value the agency of any audience, they rule out appealing to emotions in a way that is deceptive, manipulative, or coercive. Such are the tools of the sophist and demagogue. While rhetoricians still don’t have a complete and reliable theory of how emotions function in rhetoric, current work by neuroscientists offers hope that someday we will have a better understanding. One emotion that neurobiologists are currently studying is perhaps the most important one we humans feel: love. As it turns out, this emotion is strongly connected with the use of narrative.

Scientists studying love have discovered that it has a biological basis in oxytocin, a hormone sometimes called the “love molecule.” Oxytocin is partly responsible for the pleasurable bonding feelings experienced when couples fall in love, when mothers give birth, and when fathers hold their newborns.⁴³ Because oxytocin stays in the blood for about three and a half minutes, its level can be measured with a simple blood test. Its relationship to narratives has been demonstrated by Paul Zak of Claremont Graduate University, who found that narratives “actually change brain chemistry and allow us to achieve greater unity with each other” as oxytocin is released.⁴⁴ Zak conducted an experiment in which

43. Brooks, *Love Your Enemies*, 134.

44. Brooks, *Love Your Enemies*, 135.

subjects saw a video of a father (not an actor) watching his two-year-old son play and describing how the boy would soon experience a recurrence of cancer. The father explains that when the cancer comes back, the child will die. Immediately after seeing the video, subjects registered high levels of oxytocin in their blood, which correlated with high levels of empathy. Empathy was measured by the donations subjects were asked to give a childhood cancer charity from the compensation they received for participating in the study. Zak repeated the experiment later, measuring not only oxytocin levels but imaging subjects' brains as well. The most active brain regions were the ones high in oxytocin receptors.⁴⁵ In other words, the story the participants heard directly produced the outcome of empathy by causing a release of oxytocin.

This research about brain-to-brain coupling and the release of oxytocin, both of which result when hearing narratives, suggests that citizen-rhetors can connect with people on the other side of an ideological divide by telling each other compelling stories. And it is not only stories that will bridge the divide but also any task that requires cooperation. Other scientists have discovered that as people complete tasks in pairs or groups, such as putting a puzzle together, their brain oscillations increasingly align as the tasks require more cooperation. This alignment predicted higher feelings of “affinity, empathy and social connection” in the participants.⁴⁶ The success of the A1R experiment described above was likely due to the cooperation the experiment required from all participants as they discussed political topics and sought to find common ground. As noted, the A1R participants also increased in their affinity for people of the opposite political persuasion, most likely because they experienced a release of oxytocin as they worked together.

Research like this offers hope: If people who espouse different political ideologies will listen to each other's stories and cooperate on solving important problems, they may be able to overcome political division by creating greater feelings of unity, even love, among them. Sadly, this hope is considerably dampened when we consider that, in the United States today, there is a rigid division between proponents of political ideologies that seems as deep and unyielding as at other perilous times, such as the Vietnam War or the Civil War. When the parties are about equally represented in Congress, as they are in 2022, the result is too often governmental

45. Brooks, *Love Your Enemies*, 136–37.

46. Conor Feehly, “Brains Might Sync as People Interact—and That Could Upend Consciousness Research,” *Discover Magazine*, July 26, 2021, <https://www.discovermagazine.com/mind/brains-might-sync-as-people-interact-and-that-could-upend-consciousness>.

gridlock. Frustrations and anger rise as the majority party attempts to accomplish its aims in governing, and the minority party maneuvers to block any action. The partisans on either side seldom find legislation they want to cooperate on, and the contentious rhetoric they use seems aimed at evoking anger and hatred toward those they deem their political enemies. Instead of working toward love and unity through cooperating with fellow representatives, many partisans seem instead determined to short-circuit any effort that might foster cooperation. This should be troubling to Latter-day Saints since we know that the “father of contention” is Satan, “and he stirreth up the hearts of men to contend with anger, one with another.” Christ says his doctrine is not to “stir up the hearts of men with anger, one against another; but this is my doctrine, that such things should be done away” (3 Ne. 11:29–30).

What can we do? To start, we can remember that our goal is to find Burke’s “margin of overlap,” to find ways to identify with each other so that we can moderate and unify. As citizen-rhetors, we could set an example at the local level by loving our political adversaries, trying to find ways to cooperate and compromise on issues that affect us all, such as education, housing, zoning, transportation, utilities, and so on. We could befriend and talk to those whose ideological positions are different from our own. We could engage in patient and loving discussion with them about the differences we have. We might not succeed in changing people’s minds to the extent that they renounce their party and join ours, but we could find ways to cooperate and compromise for the common good. Perhaps we could also agree that electing representatives at the state and national level who pledge to moderate their positions and unify with members of the opposition will be better for our state and nation. Then we could throw our support behind candidates who run on a platform of moderation and unity.

The ancient Athenians realized that harmony was an indispensable underpinning of democracy. One effective metaphor they used for democratic harmony was a woven fabric,⁴⁷ in which some threads go one way and some the other, some threads are one color, and some another, but the individual threads all work together to create a strong fabric that includes all.⁴⁸ The green threads don’t try to change all the other threads to green because the various colors are what give variety and interest to the pattern. The vertical threads don’t try to change the direction of the

47. Two other metaphors the Athenians used for political harmony were a bundle of sticks and music. See Woodruff, *First Democracy*, 84–88.

48. See Woodruff, *First Democracy*, 85–88.

horizontal ones because that will weaken the fabric. The metaphor of the woven fabric teaches us that, as Charles Woodruff says, “living in political harmony means three things: adhering to the rule of law, working together for common goals, and accepting differences.”⁴⁹ Everyone in the body politic should agree that we can only protect the common good by making the rule of law reign supreme, so while we accept differences, we also must be willing to moderate them. If the ideal of being governed by law is compromised, the fabric unravels.

Crafting a True Message

The fabric also unravels when rhetors attempt to lie to and deceive their audiences. For centuries, the art of rhetoric was accused of trafficking in beliefs, opinions, and probabilities rather than in demonstrable, absolute truths. Plato was the first to make this charge, declaring rhetoric the art of flattering and appeasing the appetites of an audience rather than telling the cold, hard truth.⁵⁰ Plato’s pupil Aristotle had to agree that rhetoric may not always be about the truth simply because it is impossible always to know the truth, particularly in political issues, which tend to focus on how to create a better future.⁵¹ Since the future is still unknown, political arguments will be probabilistic to a certain extent. Even so, such arguments can be based on the best evidence and reasoning available. They can also be subjected to scrutiny by means of debate, logic, precedent, comparisons to known empirical data, analysis by experts, and so on. Whether we are the producers or the consumers of political rhetoric, we need to be careful that the messages we disseminate or listen to are as factual, accurate, and fair as possible. In addition to being the author of contention and anger, Satan is “the father of lies” (2 Ne. 9:9). Half-truths, falsehoods, misinformation, disinformation, and conspiracy theories will undermine the attempt to create national unity just as surely as toxic emotions will.

But studying political messages has become more difficult in the age of the internet. In the past, partisanship was evident in all kinds of political rhetoric, but norms of civility and truth-telling were generally followed. Moreover, the publicizing of news was considerably slower in

49. Woodruff, *First Democracy*, 90.

50. See Plato, *Gorgias*, trans. Robin Waterfield (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 13–24, 29–33.

51. Aristotle, *On Rhetoric*, see especially pp. 33–36, 1.1.1355a–b, and 47–49, 1.3.1358b–1359a. Aristotle sees judicial rhetoric as concerned with the past and epideictic rhetoric as concerned with the present. Epideictic rhetoric praises or blames personal or cultural values, ideas, laws, ceremonies, events, and so on. Inaugural addresses are one kind of epideictic rhetoric.

the past and limited to fewer outlets, which were subject to strong fact-checking and editorial control. Today, however, we live amid an explosion of internet platforms, online publications, cable TV outlets, and radio talk shows that constantly bombard us with political news, analysis, and commentary. With a huge array of electronic devices to choose from, most of us have constant access to online media and can consume what is breathlessly called “breaking news” whenever we want. But all of this has led to a new danger: The truth value of what many people see, read, or hear may be highly questionable. Because much so-called news has not been rigorously checked for accuracy and fairness and because editorial controls are much weaker than in the past, rumors and conspiracy theories spread like wildfire. Outright lies are planted by internet trolls, some domestic and some foreign, on online platforms where they will be seen by thousands and shared and reshared until the lies are so pervasive they seem true. When we consume less-than-accurate information and then spread it further in conversation, in texts, in email attachments, in Facebook posts, in tweets and retweets, truth is degraded even further, and confusion begins to reign rather than clarity. Jonathan Rauch’s 2021 book *The Constitution of Knowledge: A Defense of Truth* admirably outlines the history and nature of the epistemic crisis we now face, which is nothing less than an assault on facts, objectivity, and truth. I will summarize a few of Rauch’s major points and show how they are relevant to the moral obligation every citizen-rhetor has to communicate messages to an audience that are as true and as fair as possible.⁵²

In his book, Rauch describes the rise of what he calls “the Constitution of Knowledge.” Just as the United States Constitution was the product of the American Revolution, the Constitution of Knowledge was the product of the scientific revolution of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The Constitution of Knowledge is not a written document, but rather a “social operating system” that allows experts to cooperate and create knowledge for the public good “on the basis of rules, not personal authority or tribal affiliation or brute force.”⁵³ This constitution exerts its sway through institutions, values, and norms that have been established to ensure that the knowledge produced by experts will be valid and reliable. Rauch calls those who submit to the government of the Constitution of Knowledge

52. See Jonathan Rauch, *The Constitution of Knowledge: A Defense of Truth* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2021), 118–88, for an extensive discussion of how digital media have disabled information gatekeeping and hugely enabled disinformation and trolling.

53. Rauch, *Constitution of Knowledge*, 47.

the “reality-based community.”⁵⁴ Many highly educated and creative individuals belong to this community, made up of all those who work in their specialized spheres to produce true statements about whatever reality they investigate. They might be scientists and scholars of all stripes working at many different kinds of institutions; attorneys, judges, detectives, and forensic investigators making sure our judicial system is fair and operates on facts; professional journalists who attempt to gather and report facts accurately as they investigate ongoing events; and government agents such as intelligence analysts, meteorologists, budget specialists, labor statisticians, and agricultural experts. All of these experts are educated in the knowledge, rules, norms, and values of the community they belong to, and they adhere to codes of ethical conduct. Members of the reality-based community have an allegiance to truth above all. They do what they do in order to serve the broad public interest, knowing that we make progress together as we apply reliable knowledge to solving problems in many different realms. Both politicians and voters are well-advised to heed the knowledge that is produced by these experts because of the careful way it is produced before being put to use.

Members of the reality-based community understand that knowledge is, in effect, validated propositions created by the social networks they belong to. Because knowledge is social, it exists independent of individual minds and bodies and can be stored in books, libraries, archives, databases, equations, and the like.⁵⁵ It can be referred to and used as a precedent for creating new knowledge. As experts seek answers to questions and confirmation of hypotheses, they actually welcome disagreement and doubt because the resolution of such produces stronger knowledge. The knowledge-producing system encourages autonomy, freedom, and diversity—especially diversity of opinion—and does “not allow any person or faction to use force or intimidation to control what others say or believe.”⁵⁶ The Constitution of Knowledge, Rauch says, is like the United States Constitution in that both create “dynamic stability” in large, diverse, and argumentative populations; both have to adapt to change without losing continuity; and both have to be “open to many factions and viewpoints, yet captured by none.”⁵⁷

54. Rauch, *Constitution of Knowledge*, 16.

55. Rauch, *Constitution of Knowledge*, 86–87.

56. Rauch, *Constitution of Knowledge*, 76.

57. Rauch, *Constitution of Knowledge*, 79–80.

The foregoing explanation of the reality-based community is important as we consider how to make our political rhetoric contribute to moderation and unity. Expertise, particularly scientific expertise, is increasingly under attack by some in our political system. They seem to want to substitute their private opinions, feelings, and theories for the public knowledge carefully created by experts. But Rauch identifies ten principles which those who create knowledge for the public good must be committed to in order to regulate their work and keep it from serving merely private interests. These principles are all important and work together, but I will address only five here.⁵⁸ The first principle is objectivity, the notion that truth is truth regardless of who is expressing it; it isn't subject to the perspective of one person or group.⁵⁹ The next principle is exclusivity, an understanding that chaos would reign if there were no unified public commitment to one objective reality. Exclusivity means there can be no “alternative facts.”⁶⁰ The principle of fallibilism, the understanding that one could be wrong, requires one to be humble, tolerant, and forbearing. Fallibilism is related to the principle of disconfirmation, which means that anyone who offers a proposition for confirmation as a fact has to expect it to survive the tests of impersonal peer review, replication, and counterarguments in order to be accepted by the community as a whole.⁶¹ The principle of accountability is secured by layers of protection built into the knowledge-producing system, first by each person's internal “epistemic conscience” that forbids hiding evidence, falsifying data, cherry-picking quotes, and so on; and second, by other members of the community, who can challenge or ignore claims that don't withstand scrutiny. In extreme cases, institutions preserve accountability by sanctioning those who violate rules, including firing and withdrawing credentials.⁶² The commitment of experts to

58. The other principles are pluralism, which means all members welcome competing ideas, and they follow the principle of civility by decorously criticizing only ideas, not individuals; professionalism, which means that one has not only credentials but an earned reputation for integrity; institutionalism, which is realized through universities, organizations, associations, and agencies that keep knowledge-making networks functioning effectively. The final principle is that no one tells bald-faced lies of the sort that evince utter disdain for whether their statements square with reality or not. Commitment to these principles demonstrates that the core value of the epistemic community is learning; the principles ensure that the path of inquiry will not be blocked. See Rauch, *Constitution of Knowledge*, 103–8.

59. Rauch, *Constitution of Knowledge*, 103.

60. Rauch, *Constitution of Knowledge*, 103–4.

61. Rauch, *Constitution of Knowledge*, 103.

62. Rauch, *Constitution of Knowledge*, 104–5.

these five bedrock principles of the reality-based community makes it possible for the rest of us to determine whether, in the words of the *General Handbook* of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, sources of information are “credible, reliable, and factual.”⁶³ If members of different political parties each have their own “realities” and “facts,” a moderate path to governing will be impossible to achieve. If we citizen rhetors don’t base our political arguments on knowledge we can all agree on, the goal of finding unity is hopeless.

The creation of the Constitution of Knowledge is in its own way as miraculous as the creation of the U.S. Constitution. The professional communities that adhere to its rules were developed mainly in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries—and new ones are continuing to arise. Taking just one example—medicine—we can see the rapid pace of innovation once the social networks were formed among doctors and scientists to establish guidelines for knowledge making, and to collect, test, peer review, and disseminate research. Medical researchers gave us “penicillin and cortisone in the 1940s; streptomycin, open-heart surgery, and polio vaccine in the 1950s; kidney transplantation in the 1960s; chemotherapy, in vitro fertilization, and angioplasty in the 1970s, and much more.”⁶⁴ Only ten days after a novel coronavirus was identified early in 2020, scientists from different nations, working together, decoded its genetic sequence. Twelve days later, “scientists at the National Institutes of Health published an analysis of how the virus invaded human cells.”⁶⁵ By late 2020, the first vaccines had been developed to blunt the deadly effects of this virus. President Russell M. Nelson declared the development of the first vaccines “a literal godsend,” and alluding to the knowledge-making networks that brought about this achievement, he added, “We are thankful for the countless doctors, scientists, researchers, manufacturers, government leaders, and others who have performed the grueling work required to make this vaccine available.”⁶⁶

The praise of President Nelson, a former pioneer in heart surgery turned spiritual leader to millions of Latter-day Saints around the globe,

63. *General Handbook: Serving in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (2021), 38.8.40.

64. Rauch, *Constitution of Knowledge*, 66.

65. Rauch, *Constitution of Knowledge*, 70.

66. Tad Walch, “President Russell M. Nelson and the COVID-19 Vaccine: What the Church Leader Has Said and Done,” *Deseret News*, April 29, 2021, <https://www.deseret.com/faith/2021/4/29/22407953/president-nelson-on-covid-19-vaccine-comments-speeches-actions-prayers-shot-church-news>.

illustrates a point that Rauch is careful to make in his book: There is no hypocrisy, no conflict of interest, in a scientist who is also a believer in God and a member of a religion. Having faith in God does not disqualify one from participating in or using the work of the reality-based community. “The Constitution of Knowledge needs supremacy in the realm of public knowledge but not in the realm of private belief.”⁶⁷ Thus it makes no judgments about the paths people take to acquire their religious beliefs, such as faith, revelation, study, or upbringing. As Latter-day Saints, we can feel confident in blending divinely revealed knowledge with knowledge produced by secular experts following rules sanctioned by the Constitution of Knowledge. There are stumbles in every knowledge-making community, to be sure—facts that must be corrected, qualified, expanded, even superseded on the basis of further evidence and testing—but such stumbles don’t invalidate the whole endeavor. Indeed, the identification and correction of errors show that the enterprise is working to constantly refine our understanding. Understanding how valid, reliable knowledge is created will help a citizen-rhetor find the best evidence to use in arguments about political matters.

What does the foregoing imply for the quest to improve the level of political rhetoric today? One implication is that any citizen-rhetor who listens to a political message or who gathers information and evidence for crafting such a message must be careful to separate fact from fiction. Keith A. Erekson, the former director of the Church History Library of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, offers excellent advice for judging the reliability of information in his book *Real vs. Rumor: How to Dispel Latter-day Myths*. Although the book aims to help Latter-day Saints judge the quality of historical writing about the Church, many of its guidelines can be applied to judging written and spoken statements about political issues as well. For example, to determine whether a source is trustworthy, Erekson advises considering its rhetorical situation first. Ask questions such as these: “When and where was this written? Who is the author? Who is the intended audience? What was the author’s purpose? What type of writing is this—an article, a speech, an essay, an editorial, a newspaper report, a blog post?” Answers will help you evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of the source. Connecting the source to wider contexts may help illuminate its purpose and contents. The historical context is almost always relevant as is the biographical one—what else is known about the author or about other people who

67. Rauch, *Constitution of Knowledge*, 115.

may be named in the source? Other contexts that may cast light on the source are literary, ethical, material, and eternal.⁶⁸

Erekson advises analyzing the assumptions and values of the author as well as the argument. He recommends reading a source to uncover what he calls the storyline, the structure, the situation, and the script. The storyline is the basic narrative, including characters; the structure is the organization, which might be chronological or some other order; the situation is the time and place of the storyteller. By “script,” he means “a general template,” often hidden, for a specific story.⁶⁹ Scripts for stories tend to be repeated; they are themes that may underlie many similar stories. Erekson’s advice will not always apply to reading a political source, but it might. Sources you find in the political domain might try to persuade readers to believe the script that “Senator X is a tax-and-spend liberal” or “Representative Z cares nothing about minorities.” As you read, ask yourself whether the storyline and structure justify the script (that is, the underlying point you are meant to infer), or whether a different script might be drawn from the story, or whether the story itself needs to be replaced.⁷⁰

Finally, after you read the source, you should evaluate its significance. Erekson distinguishes significance from truth. Some things may be true but hardly significant to others, either historically, contemporaneously, or personally. And some things might seem significant but not be true.⁷¹ Because significance should be based on truth, Erekson devotes several chapters to explaining how to determine if a source is accurate, authentic, reliable, fair, and comprehensive.⁷² If a source is inaccurate, inauthentic, unreliable, or unfair, it will not provide a sound basis for a credible argument. A source that is not comprehensive may still have value, provided it is used with other sources that compensate for its limits. A strong argument will consider all relevant facts, sources, and stories. As we apply Erekson’s advice to judging political news and commentary from the internet, television, newspapers, or radio, we need to consider the limits of whatever we are reading or listening to. We should read, watch, and listen to multiple sources so that we can compare them and try to discern the reasons for differences. Perhaps one or more of the sources is biased

68. See Keith A. Erekson, *Real vs. Rumor: How to Dispel Latter-day Myths* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2021), 120.

69. See Erekson, *Real vs. Rumor*, 55.

70. Erekson, *Real vs. Rumor*, 57–58.

71. Erekson, *Real vs. Rumor*, 108.

72. See Erekson, *Real vs. Rumor*, 118–79.

or intentionally misleading. We can discover that by applying Erikson’s advice.

The Latter-day Saint citizen-rhetor who wants to engage fellow beings in political discourse must be careful to support claims with evidence that is trustworthy. Offering anything less damages the ethos of the rhetor and insults the intelligence of the audience. It hardly needs saying that arguments based on lies, conspiracy theories, misinformation, or disinformation will not promote healthy outcomes in the political realm. Because we want better political discourse in this time of division, hatred, and anger, we can’t afford to make flimsy or morally objectionable arguments. We must base our beliefs and our arguments on evidence that is accurate, credible, reliable, fair, and as comprehensive as possible. Only then can we establish a strong and workable margin of overlap with our audience.

Conclusion

We have an obligation to do all we can to improve the quality of political rhetoric in the United States (and in other nations) today. As citizens we can do much, even if we don’t hold elected office, to reach out to our friends, neighbors, family members, and fellow citizens to engage them in dialogue about political matters that will help lower the temperature in our overheated, distrustful, and polarized environment. Our numbers are small, but Christ has called the members of his kingdom, his Church, to be the salt of the earth (see Matt. 5:13 and 3 Ne. 12:13) and the leaven in the loaf (see Matt. 13:33). A little salt goes a long way to flavor a pot of soup, just as a little yeast can make several loaves of bread rise. As disciples of Christ, we must see to it that we are using our small strength to do great things, even in the world of politics. “Disciples . . . must do politics,” says Griffith, “but our politics must be of a different sort,” presented through rhetoric that exhibits “a style of our own,” a different way of approaching political argument.⁷³

As citizen-rhetors, we can create and project a genuinely loving, warm, interested ethos to all the audiences we might encounter in political discussions. Instead of trying to conquer them through our rhetorical prowess, we can invite them to join us in finding the margin of overlap between our interests and theirs. We can understand audiences better by respecting the values that animate their political choices. Rather than

73. Thomas W. Griffith, “A Politics of At-one-ment,” *Humanities* (Spring 2021): 24.

denigrate their choices, we must realize that their beliefs bring strengths to the body politic by countering the weight of opposing beliefs. We should realize that there are ways to compromise with those whose ideological foundations and political priorities are different from ours. The founders of the United States knew compromise was indispensable to creating a national government. The framers of the Constitution deliberately made compromise a necessary component of government by having the various branches of government balance and check each other. Likewise, we must recognize the necessity of compromise and see it, when we reach it, as a success, not as a failure.

Finally, we must realize that all our attempts to connect as rhetors and audiences will founder if we do not value truth, reality, and facts. The messages we convey to each other cannot be based on lies, misinformation, conspiracies, and the like, for these generally inspire only anger, hatred, and division; they won't help establish a common basis on which we can build lasting laws and policies to promote the common good. If we realize that we as citizen-rhetors must moderate our discourse to connect with audiences, we must also realize that the people we elect to represent us in government cannot be extreme partisans who view compromise as an evil and refuse to engage colleagues on the other side of the aisle. We cannot elect those who campaign or attempt to govern by using lies and half-truths, who don't listen to their opponents but shout them down at every opportunity, who troll and smear their adversaries with *ad hominem* attacks. If we desire to moderate and to unify in this nation, we must elect representatives who are willing to moderate their positions and their rhetoric for the sake of unity, for the sake of protecting and realizing the common good. Our national and state legislatures should be functioning like the "America in One Room" study cited earlier—with representatives sitting down together, studying the issues dispassionately, discussing them, and seeing whether there is a middle way to resolve political issues that will satisfy the majority. Perhaps we haven't stopped to realize how much we have in common with those we consider our opponents because we have been too busy throwing rhetorical bombs on social media and elsewhere. We must cease contributing to the anger and start to love those whom we deem our enemies. We must realize that, in truth, no one should be our enemy. Everyone is our neighbor—Samaritan, Jew, Gentile, Catholic, Protestant, Muslim, Buddhist, and so on. Christ said to love our neighbors as ourselves. Political progress can only be made when we look for the common humanity in our neighbors, when we consider how to identify our desires, values, and interests with theirs, and when we

approach them with love and concern to discuss how we can both moderate our political positions to find greater unity.

There is more at stake here than political stability and progress in the United States. “Our political allegiances must be secondary to our commitment to help the Church become an instrument for healing and reconciliation in the world. And if our political allegiances get in the way of that commitment, if they become a source of division within the Church, we must understand that those allegiances are impeding the most important work in the world today.”⁷⁴ In this profound statement, Griffith is surely referring to the work of gathering scattered Israel, which the Church does through both its worldwide missionary efforts and its extensive global network of temples. Both efforts bring the gospel of peace to all—living or dead—who will accept it. The Church’s headquarters are in the United States, where anger, hatred, division, and lies threaten to pull our government and our nation apart. All committed Latter-day Saints must contribute to the Church’s ability to operate from within a peaceful, orderly environment, secured by the rule of law. It is incumbent upon each of us who wants the Church to succeed in its mission to do our part to help the United States, the cradle of the Restoration, succeed as well. Let us all be willing to sacrifice, just as the framers of the Constitution did, to moderate our political positions and our political rhetoric for the sake of greater national unity.

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74. Griffith, “Politics of At-one-ment,” 24.