

From Dusting Feet to Saving Souls: Mormon Mission in Thought and Practice

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New prophecies convinced the first Mormons the end was near and as the Bible had predicted, an “overflowing scourge” of sickness and death was coming. One revelation penned by Joseph Smith, founder of Mormonism, called for elders to evangelize everywhere during this period of rising tribulation. Where they met rejection, they were to cast the dust of that home or town from their feet in a special ritual designed to absolve them of any burden of guilt, should apocalyptic devastation befall the rejecters. Such apocalyptic intensity would not fully endure. Mormon leaders would eventually discontinue the feet-dusting ritual among a growing population of full-time missionaries. The decline in this missionary ritual corresponded with a profound missiological development in Mormonism, a shift from connecting mission with the end of the world to the connection of mission with personal salvation—or, put technically, a shift from an eschatological to a soteriological orientation. This paper charts the two-hundred-year development of Mormon missiology through the prism of the soteriological turn and argues this changing outlook explains how Mormons today have arrived at their approaches to mission.