
Peter Whitmer Jr.

(1809–1836)

D&C 16, 30

In 1829 twenty-year-old Peter Whitmer Jr. became acquainted with the Prophet Joseph Smith. Their friendship grew as the Prophet and his wife, Emma, and scribe Oliver Cowdery lived in the Whitmer home in Fayette, New York. During the months of their residency, Peter was privileged to assist Joseph Smith as a scribe as he translated the Book of Mormon. Peter was also privileged to be one of the Eight Witnesses of the Book of Mormon who saw and handled the gold plates.

In June 1829 Joseph Smith received a revelation from the Lord declaring what would “be of the most worth” to Peter: “The thing which will be of the most worth unto you will be to declare repentance unto this people, that you may bring souls unto me, that you may rest with them in the kingdom of my Father. Amen” (D&C 16:1, 3–6). The first soul Peter brought to the Lord was his own as he entered baptismal waters in June 1830, being baptized by his brother-in-law Oliver Cowdery. He subsequently was ordained an elder in the Melchizedek Priesthood. According to his brother David Whitmer, Peter was one of the first seven elders ordained in this dispensation.

In September 1830 Peter was called by revelation to preach with Oliver Cowdery the message of the Restoration:

Behold, I say unto you, Peter, that you shall take your journey with your brother Oliver, for the time has come that it is expedient in me that you shall open your mouth to declare my gospel . . . to build up my church among the Lamanites. . . . Be diligent in keeping my commandments, and you shall be blessed unto eternal life (D&C 30:5–6, 8).

One month later, Peter was called to be a missionary companion of Parley P. Pratt, Oliver Cowdery, and Ziba Peterson “into the wilderness among the Lamanites” (D&C

32:2). The four missionaries began their journey in October 1830, anticipating many opportunities to share the Book of Mormon with Indian tribes. Upon reaching Buffalo, New York, they preached to the Cattaraugus Indians. From Buffalo they journeyed to Kirtland, Ohio. They baptized over 120 converts in Ohio, including Lyman Wight, who reported hearing Peter testify that he had seen the gold plates. Of their preaching, Peter's diary states only, "We declared the Book of Mormon."¹ They then journeyed to Sandusky, Ohio, and preached to the Wyandot Indians. From Sandusky, they traveled to Cincinnati and then about two hundred miles further to St. Louis. The last three hundred miles, they trekked through trackless wastes of snow to Independence, Missouri, a distance of about fifteen hundred miles from where they started.

In the frontier town of Independence, Peter was hired to sew a suit for Alexander Doniphan before returning to Ohio. At a Church conference held on October 25, 1831, in Ohio, Peter was ordained a high priest by Oliver Cowdery. Notes from the conference include excerpts from a speech given by Peter: "My beloved brethren ever since I have had an acquaintance with the writing of God I have [viewed] eternity with perfect confidence."²

Peter returned to Independence, Missouri, with his family. He supported his family by working as a tailor. His business was such a success that he employed Mary Elizabeth Lightner to assist him. "I went to work for Peter Whitmer, who was a tailor by trade, and just married," wrote Mary.

He was crowded with work, and Lilburn W. Boggs offered him a room in his house, as he had just been elected lieutenant governor, and wanted Peter to make him a suit for his inauguration ceremonies. Peter did make [the suit], and I stitched the collars and faced the coat. Mr. Boggs often came in to note the progress of the work.³

In 1833 Peter and his family suffered from outrages of mobocracy and religious persecution. They were driven from their home and forced to cross the Missouri River to reach safety in Clay County, Missouri. Residing in a temporary shelter on the mosquito-ridden swamplands of the county proved harmful to Peter's health. Nevertheless, he had enough strength to extend hospitality to the sick of Zion's Camp. Heber C. Kimball

¹ Peter Whitmer Jr. quote, in Richard Lloyd Anderson, *Investigating the Book of Mormon Witnesses* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1981), 126.

² Donald Q. Cannon and Lyndon W. Cook, eds., *Far West Record: Minutes of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1830–1844* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1983), 21.

³ "Mary Elizabeth Rollins Lightner Autobiography," *Utah Genealogical and Historical Magazine* 17 (July 1926), 196.

wrote of Peter's kindness to him: "I went to Liberty, to the house of brother Peter Whitmer, which place I reached with difficulty, being much afflicted myself with the disease that was among us. I stayed there until I started for home. I received great kindness from them."⁴ It is assumed that Peter also extended kindness to his oldest brother, Christian, who died in 1835.

Although Peter himself suffered from consumption and infection at the time of his brother's death, he willingly accepted the assignment to serve on the local high council. Unfortunately, on September 22, 1836, Peter died near Liberty, Clay County. He was buried by the side of his brother Christian Whitmer. Their brother-in-law Oliver Cowdery extolled the faithfulness of the Whitmer brothers:

By many in this church, our brothers were personally known. They were the first to embrace the new covenant, on hearing it, and during a constant scene of persecution and perplexity, to their last moments, maintained its truth—they were both included in the list of the eight witnesses in the Book of Mormon, and though they have departed, it is with great satisfaction that we reflect, that they proclaimed to their last moments, the certainty of their former testimony.⁵

⁴ Heber Kimball, "Extract from Journal," *Times and Seasons* 6 (March 15, 1845): 839.

⁵ Oliver Cowdery, "The Closing Year," *Messenger and Advocate* 3 (December 1836): 426.