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# William Law

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1809–1892

D&C 124:82, 87–91, 97–101, 107, 126

“My father is much opposed to [Mormonism] from evil reports &c. which he has heard,” William wrote.<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, William entered baptismal waters and was ordained an elder on April 24, 1837, by Parley P. Pratt. He served as the presiding elder of the Churchville Branch in Upper Canada in 1837 and 1838. By 1839 William had moved from Upper Canada to Commerce (later Nauvoo), Illinois, and built a home near the Joseph Smith homestead. William observed,

I have carefully watched [Joseph Smith’s] movements since I have been here, and I assure you I have found him honest and honourable in all our transactions which have been very considerable. I believe he is an

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<sup>1</sup> William Law to Isaac Russell, January 17, 1839, in Lyndon W. Cook, *William Law* (Orem, UT: Grandin Book, 1994), 8.

honest upright man, and as to his follies let who ever is guiltless throw the first stone at him, I shant do it.<sup>2</sup>

In 1841 William was called to be the second counselor in the First Presidency of the Church (D&C 124:91, 126). From 1841 to 1843, he fulfilled his position with honor. During that same period, he served on the Nauvoo City Council. He was known for defending the character of Joseph Smith against such apostates as John C. Bennett and for risking his all to support the message of the Restoration. But by the winter of 1843, William had turned against Joseph Smith and Mormonism. His follies were known to the Prophet Joseph.

On January 2, 1844, William wrote, "This day I learn from remarks made by J. Smith before the city council and police, I am suspected of being a Brutus, and consequently narrowly watched, and should any misconceive my motives my life would be jeopardized." Six days later William wrote, "I was passing along the street near my house, when call'd to by Joseph Smith, he said I was injuring him by telling evil of him, he could not name any one that I talked to." Joseph informed William that his service in the First Presidency was no longer required. William was annoyed and penned, "I confess I feel annoyed very much by such unprecedented treatment for it is illegal, inasmuch as I was appointed by revelation." However, he also wrote of feeling relief: "I feel relieved from a most embarrassing situation I cannot fellowship the abominations which I verily know are practiced by this man, consequently I am glad to be free from him."<sup>3</sup>

William was excommunicated on April 18, 1844. He was angered by the action and requested that his case be reviewed at the October general conference of 1844. His request was denied. Becoming ever more livid, he accepted the invitation of dissenters to replace Joseph Smith as Church president.

On June 1, 1844, William wrote of his intent to publish the *Nauvoo Expositor*:

Our enemies rage and publish slander about us, but we cease not to vindicate the cause of truth, and oppose crime. To this end we have purchased a printing press and intend issuing in a few days a paper to be entitled the *Nauvoo Expositor*. This course has caused great alarm in the camp of our enemies.<sup>4</sup>

On June 7, 1844, William wrote,

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<sup>2</sup> William Law to Isaac Russell, November 29, 1840, in Cook, *William Law*, 11.

<sup>3</sup> William Law Nauvoo Diary, in Cook, *William Law*, 38, 46.

<sup>4</sup> William Law Nauvoo Diary, in Cook, *William Law*, 54–55.

This day the *Nauvoo Expositor* goes forth to the world, rich with facts, such expositions as make the guilty tremble and rage. 1000 sheets were struck and five hundred mailed forthwith. If the paper is suffered to continue it will set forth deeds of the most dark, cruel and damning ever perpetrated by any people under the name of religion since the world began.<sup>5</sup>

The print run of the *Nauvoo Expositor* was discontinued after the first issue—the print shop and the press being destroyed. This action led to accusations against Joseph and Hyrum Smith, their arrest, imprisonment, and martyrdom. Although William denied any complicity in their deaths, he wrote,

The judgment of an offended God had fallen upon them. During the latter part of their lives they knew no mercy, and in their last moments they found none. Thus the wicked may prosper for a time, but the hour of retribution is sure to overtake them. ...

[Joseph] was one of the false prophets spoken of by Christ who would come in sheep's clothing but inwardly be a raving wolf. ... He claimed to be a god, whereas he was only a servant of the Devil, and as such met his fate.<sup>6</sup>

A few months after the martyrdom, William moved from Nauvoo to Burlington, Iowa, and then to Hampton, Illinois. On September 29, 1844, he was taken into custody on charges stemming from the martyrdom but released the next day. He wrote to the editor of the *Upper Mississippian*, "Our lives are yet threatened by a band of desperate men, who have sworn with a solemn oath to shed our blood, even to the third generations. Our homes here in your peaceful county are to be given the burning flames, and our wives to be left widows in our midst." Yet he also wrote to the editor of his testimony of the truthfulness of Joseph Smith's early teachings: "We verily believe, and many of us know of a surety, that the religion of the Latter Day Saints, as originally taught by Joseph Smith, which is contained in the old and new Testaments, book of Covenants, and book of Mormon, is verily true."<sup>7</sup>

In Hampton, William supported his family as a merchant before entering the field of medicine. For nearly forty years he practiced medicine, first as a physician/surgeon near Apple River, Illinois, and later as a physician/surgeon in Shullsburg, Wisconsin. As to any

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<sup>5</sup> William Law Nauvoo Diary, in Cook, *William Law*, 55.

<sup>6</sup> William Law Nauvoo Diary, in Cook, *William Law*, 60–61.

<sup>7</sup> *Upper Mississippian*, September 7, 1844, in Cook, *William Law*, 91, 94.

lingering belief in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, he wrote in 1885 that there “never was a Church of Christ, but a most wicked blasphemous humbug gotten up for the purpose of making money.”<sup>8</sup> In 1887 at age seventy-eight, William said, “The great mistake of my life was my having anything to do with Mormonism.”<sup>9</sup> He then wrote,

Have never read any of the books published about the Mormons: never read Bennett’s book, have kept no papers published in Nauvoo. Haven’t a scrap of any kind; the only number of the *Expositor* I had, someone carried off. My wife (at an early day) burned up the Book of Mormon and the Doctrine and Covenants. She said no Mormon work could find a place in her house. We have lived down in a great measure the disgrace following our unfortunate association with the Mormons. We committed a great error, but no crime. This is my consolation, that we only erred in judgment.<sup>10</sup>

William died on January 12, 1892, in Shullsburg, Wisconsin, at age eighty-two.

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<sup>8</sup> 1885 Affidavit of William Law, in Cook, *William Law*, 29.

<sup>9</sup> “William Law to Wilhelm Wyl, January 7, 1887,” *The Daily Tribune*, July 3, 1887, in Cook, *William Law*, 104.

<sup>10</sup> William Law to Wilhelm Wyl, January 20, 1887,” *The Daily Tribune*, July 3, 1887, in Cook, *William Law*, 105–106.