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Oliver Cowdery

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Abstract: This series presents a sketch of the life of Oliver Cowdery, in an attempt to dispel inaccuracies previously published. Though he faltered and fell, he should be honored, for he never joined the Church's enemies nor did he deny his testimony of the Book of Mormon as the work of the Lord. Cowdery was the scribe for most of the Book of Mormon and was one of the Three Witnesses. The second part focuses on Cowdery's separation from the Church.

THE LATTER-DAY SAINTS'
MILLENNIAL STAR.

[ESTABLISHED 1840.]

“He who makes a baseless insinuation against a neighbor's integrity of honor is guilty of an injustice which is atrocious and monstrous in comparison with the petty depredation of the despicable thief who breaks into his house and surreptitiously carries away his goods.”

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OLIVER COWDERY.

BY JUNIUS F. WELLS.

(Continued from page 215.)

From this time, until the spring of 1838, Oliver Cowdery was intimately associated with Joseph Smith in developing the organization of the “Mormon” Church. He and the other two witnesses, Whitmer and Harris, selected and ordained the twelve apostles, when they were called, in February, 1835, at Kirtland, Ohio. From this quorum came the governing authority, which has continued up to the present time—the first presidency of three, and the twelve apostles.

After the “Mormons” had been driven out of Jackson county, Missouri, northward into Caldwell and Daviess counties, and during the period of continual uprising of the people against the “Mormons,” differences arose, and a number of the leading converts fell away. Among these were the Whitmers and Oliver Cowdery. The latter had married Elizabeth Ann Whitmer, a sister of David, the witness, in Kaw township, Jackson county, Missouri, on December 18, 1832. She was born at Fayette, New York, January 22, 1815.

Oliver Cowdery's separation from the “Mormons” came about through dissensions with the local leaders, over questions of policy relating to their material or temporal affairs and authority; and also through prevalent jealousies and strife that had taken opportunity to work their utmost evil from the confusion incident to the breaking up and driving of the people from county to county

and ultimately from the state. The continued discord resulted finally in charges preferred by Seymour Brunson, April 11, 1838, which are here given in full, together with his reply :

“ To the Bishop and Council of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints :

“ I prefer the following charges against President Oliver Cowdery :

“ First—For persecuting the brethren by urging on vexatious law-suits against them, and thus distressing the innocent.

“ Second—For seeking to destroy the character of President Joseph Smith, Jr., by falsely insinuating that he was guilty of adultery.

“ Third—For treating the Church with contempt by not attending the meetings.

“ Fourth—For virtually denying the faith by declaring that he would not be governed by any ecclesiastical authority or revelation whatever, in his temporal affairs.

“ Fifth—For selling his lands in Jackson county, contrary to the revelations.

“ Sixth—For writing and sending an insulting letter to President Thomas B. Marsh, while the latter was on the High Council attending to the duties of his office as president of the council, and by insulting the High Council with the contents of said letter.

“ Seventh—For leaving his calling to which God had appointed him by revelation, for the sake of filthy lucre, and turning to the practice of law.

“ Eighth—For disgracing the Church by being connected in the bogus business, as common report says.

“ Ninth—For dishonestly retaining notes after they had been paid; and finally, for leaving and forsaking the cause of God, and returning to the beggarly elements of the world, and neglecting his high and holy calling, according to his profession.”

“ OLIVER COWDERY’S REPLY.

“ FAR WEST, MISSOURI, April, 12, 1838.

“ DEAR SIR:—I received your note of the 9th inst., on the day of its date, containing a copy of nine charges preferred before yourself and council against me, by elder Seymour Brunson.

“ I could have wished that those charges might have been deferred until after my interview with President Smith ; but as they are not, I must waive the anticipated pleasure, with which I had flattered myself of an understanding, on those points, which are grounds of different opinions on some Church regulations, and others which personally interest myself.

“ The fifth charge, reads as follows: ‘ For selling his lands in Jackson county, contrary to the revelations.’ So much of this charge, ‘ for selling his lands in Jackson county,’ I acknowledge to be true, and believe that a large majority of this Church have

already spent their judgment on that act, and pronounced it sufficient to warrant a disfellowship; and also that you have concurred in its correctness, consequently have no good reason for supposing you would give any decision contrary.

“Now, sir, the lands in our country are allodial in the strictest construction of that term, and have not the least shadow of feudal tenures attached to them, consequently they may be disposed of by deeds of conveyance, without the consent or even approbation of a superior.

“The fourth charge is in the following words, ‘For virtually denying the faith by declaring that he would not be governed by any ecclesiastical authority nor revelation whatever in his temporal affairs.’

“With regard to this, I think I am warranted in saying the judgment is also passed, as on the matter of the fifth charge, consequently I have no disposition to contend with the Council; this charge covers simply the doctrine of the fifth, and if I were to be controlled by other than my own judgment, in a compulsory manner, in my temporal interests, of course could not buy or sell without the consent of some real or supposed authority. Whether that clause contains the precise words, I am not certain—I think, however, they were these: ‘I will not be influenced, governed or controlled in my temporal interests by any ecclesiastical authority or pretended revelation whatever, contrary to my own judgment.’ Such being still my opinion, shall only remark that the three great principles of English liberty, as laid down in the books, are ‘the right of personal security, the right of personal liberty, and the right of private property.’ My venerable ancestor was among the little band who landed on the rocks of Plymouth in 1620—with him he brought those maxims, and a body of those laws which were the result and experience of many centuries, on the basis of which now stands our great and happy government; and they are so interwoven in my nature, have so long been inculcated into my mind, by a liberal and intelligent ancestry, that I am wholly unwilling to exchange them for anything less liberal, less benevolent, or less free.

“The very principle of which I conceive to be couched in an attempt to set up a kind of petty government, controlled and dictated by ecclesiastical influence, in the midst of this national and state government. You will, no doubt, say this is not correct; but the bare notice of these charges over which you assume the right to decide is, in my opinion, a direct attempt to make the secular power subservient to Church direction—to the correctness of which I cannot in conscience subscribe—I believe that principle never did fail to produce anarchy and confusion.

“This attempt to control me, in my temporal interests, I conceive to be a disposition to take from me a portion of my Constitutional privileges and inherent right—I only respectfully ask

leave, therefore, to withdraw from a society assuming they have such right.

"So far as relates to the other seven charges, I shall lay them carefully away, and take such a course in regard to them as I may feel bound by my honor, to answer to my rising posterity.

"I beg you, sir, to take no view of the foregoing remarks other than my belief in the outward government of this Church. I do not charge you, or any other person who differs with me on these points, of not being sincere; but such difference does exist, which I sincerely regret.

"With considerations of the highest respect, I am your obedient servant,

"OLIVER COWDERY.

"Rev. Edward Partridge, Bishop of the Church of Latter-day Saints."

"The Bishop and High Council, assembled at the Bishop's office, April 12, 1838. After the organization of the Council, the above charges of the 11th instant were read, also the letter from Oliver Cowdery, as will be found recorded in the Church records of the city of Far West, Book A. The 1st, 2nd, 3rd, 7th, 8th and 9th charges were sustained. The 4th and 5th charges were rejected, and the 6th was withdrawn. Consequently he (Oliver Cowdery) was considered no longer a member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.*

At this period Oliver Cowdery's connection with the "Mormon" people ceased, though he never retracted his testimony concerning their rise and progress. He remained away from them for eleven years, or until about a year before his death. He lived a part of this time in Ohio, Michigan and Wisconsin, practicing law. At one time he was chosen prosecuting attorney, and, on a certain occasion, while prosecuting a criminal, the opposing attorney taunted him with his former connection with the "Mormons," and as being a witness to the Book of Mormon, hoping thus to break down his influence with the jury. He replied that he was the same man who had given his testimony to the Book of Mormon; that it had been before the world for years, and that he stood by it, that he could not deny it. His courage in upholding this position, contrary to his opponent's expectation, appealed favorably, rather than otherwise, to the jury, and he won his case.

The death of Joseph Smith, at Carthage, Illinois, June 27, 1844, had been followed by the expulsion of the "Mormons" from the state of Illinois, in 1846, and their migrating to the Missouri river and the Rocky Mountains in 1847 and 1848. On February 27, 1848, Oliver Cowdery addressed a letter to the leaders of the "Mormon"

* *History of the Church*, Vol. III, pages 16, 17, 18.

Church, from Elkhorn, Walworth county, Wisconsin, indicating his intention of rejoining them. This he postponed until the fall, however, when he proceeded from his home in Wisconsin to Kaneshville (Council Bluffs), on the Missouri river. The main body of the "Mormons" had gone on their wonderful pilgrimage to the Rocky Mountains. A large congregation, however, remained there, awaiting an opportunity to proceed. They were under the Presidency of Orson Hyde, one of the original twelve apostles, who had been ordained by Oliver Cowdery and his associate witnesses of the Book of Mormon. To this congregation Oliver Cowdery came in October, 1848. The story of his return has been told by many persons who were present. It is given in a letter written by George A. Smith, on October 31, 1848, to Orson Pratt, and published in the *Millennial Star*, Vol. 11, in 1849 :

"We had meetings on Saturday and Sunday, which were designed as a kind of finish to our conference. Although the weather was very unfavorable, we had nearly two thousand people on the Sabbath (October 29, 1848). Brother Hyde gave a great deal of instruction. * * * Oliver Cowdery, who had just arrived from Wisconsin with his family, upon being invited, addressed the meeting. He bore testimony, in the most positive terms, to the truth of the Book of Mormon, the restoration of the priesthood to the earth, and the mission of Joseph Smith as the prophet of the last days, and told the people if they wanted to follow the right path, to keep to the main channel of the stream; 'where the body of the Church goes, there is the authority, and all those 'lo heres' and 'lo theres,' have no authority, but these people have the true and holy priesthood; for the angel said unto Joseph Smith, Jr., in my hearing, that this priesthood shall remain on earth unto the end.' His testimony produced quite a sensation among the gentlemen present who did not belong to the Church, and it was gratefully received by all the Saints. Last evening myself and Brother Hyde spent with Brother Cowdery. He told us he had come to listen to our counsel, and would do as we told him. He had been cut off from the Church by a Council; had withdrawn himself from it; stayed away eleven years; and now came back, not expecting to be a leader, but wished to be a member and have a part among us. He considered that he ought to be baptized, and did not expect to return without it. He said that Joseph Smith had fulfilled his mission faithfully before God until death. He was determined to rise with the Church, and if it went down, he was willing to go down with it. I saw him to-day; told him I was going to write to you. He sends his respects to you; he says, 'Tell Brother Orson I am advised by the brethren to remain here this winter, and assist Brother Hyde in the printing office, and as soon as I get settled I will write him a letter.'"

(To be continued.)