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Milton V. Backman, Jr.

Shortly after Joseph Smith submitted portions of the printer's copy of the manuscript of the Book of Mormon to Egbert B. Grandin for publication, newspapers in Ohio and New York printed a series of articles with an explanation of Mormonism that excluded divine intervention. In addition to stigmatizing Joseph Smith with disparaging names, critics identified him with others who had brought forth unusual religious claims. Included in this list were Mohammed, Emmanuel Swedenborg, Mother Ann Lee, Jemima Wilkinson, and various popes and Quaker leaders. As expressed in an article written by Alexander Campbell and published in the *Painesville Telegraph* on 8 March 1831, "Every age of the world has produced impostors and delusions." Noting that history is replete with appearances of false prophets, Campbell said that this "New York imposter" (meaning Joseph Smith) was no different than his predecessors. Although critics charged Joseph Smith with being an ordinary prophet and the religion he founded as a product of his time, his claims and contributions were different from those of other religious leaders (2:1).

In a recent study of Protestant primitivism in America entitled *Illusions of Innocence*, Richard T. Hughes and C. Leonard Allen aptly identify significant parallels and radical differences between Mormonism and other restoration movements. In a chapter entitled, "Soaring with the Gods," these scholars observe that Alexander Campbell, Barton Stone, and many other restorationists sought a recovery of biblical patterns.

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These reformers held that the New Testament was the only legitimate guide for recovering the truth and insisted that others had failed in such efforts. Restorationists like these did not, however, seek a restoration of God's power as manifest among the earliest Christians, nor did they long for a restoration of His authority. Like most Protestants, they held that priesthood was conferred not by the laying on of hands by those having authority but was a direct endowment from God to believers. Consequently, they were searching for principles and practices other Protestants had failed to recover (Hughes and Allen 133–34, 170; Humbert 172–73).¹

Although the thrust of most restorationists of the early nineteenth century was to emulate a pattern of belief and worship described in the New Testament, they disagreed on whether this recovery was a process or a possibility. Some leaders taught that the restoration was a continual process of recovery, but faltered as they attempted to define the essentials. Others eventually taught that they had recovered the essentials of the New Testament church (Hughes and Allen 125).

In some respects, Joseph Smith's quest for truth was more in harmony with that of Roger Williams than Alexander Campbell's. Both Joseph Smith and Roger Williams believed in the disruption and vanishing of the true apostolic church. Both held that churches which they investigated taught

¹ Sidney Rigdon would have embraced all of the concepts described in this paragraph except the view regarding restoration of God's power. Based on the writings of many of his followers, Rigdon probably was searching for a return of God's power (but not of authority). Meanwhile, a number of followers of Rigdon, such as Parley P. Pratt, John Murdock and Edward Partridge claimed to be searching for a restored authority. For example, Parley P. Pratt declared, "Peter proclaimed this gospel, and baptized for remission of sins, and promised the gift of the Holy Ghost, because he was commissioned so to do by a crucified and risen Saviour. But who is Mr. Rigdon? Who is Mr. Campbell? Who commissioned them? . . . These Reformers claimed no new commission by revelation, or vision from the Lord, while they had not the least shadow of claim by succession." After joining a group organized under Rigdon's direction, Parley said that he did not claim any authority. However, after joining the Church, Parley was called on a mission and introduced the restored gospel to Sidney Rigdon. "At length," he added, "Mr. Rigdon and many others became convinced that they had no authority to minister in the ordinances of God; and that they had not been legally baptized and ordained. They, therefore, came forward and were baptized by us, and received the gift of the Holy Ghost by the laying on of hands" (Pratt 14, 35–36). In addition to possibly believing in the need for a return of God's power, another major difference between Rigdon and Campbell was Rigdon's belief in restoring a communal order.

incorrect doctrines and that a recovery without divine intervention was impossible. Both also sought a restoration of authority by heavenly messengers (Hughes and Allen 136–37).

As differences among Joseph Smith, Roger Williams, and other restorationists are considered, similarities become less significant. Williams died a seeker; Joseph Smith found and taught the reality of the restoration. Unlike most reformers of his age, Joseph Smith emphasized that the restoration which he directed was more than a recovery of beliefs and sacraments described in the New Testament. It was the “restitution of all things” spoken of by the mouth of all of God’s prophets since the world began (Acts 3:21). Joseph Smith’s unusual explanation of that scriptural reference includes a restoration of all basic doctrines, covenants, ordinances, blessings, authority, and power unfolded and held by all ancient prophets from Adam to Peter, James, and John (*Words of Joseph Smith* 10, 39, 43–44, 246; hereafter *Words*).

The unusual interpretation by Joseph Smith regarding restitution of all things is compounded by the doctrine of the antiquity of the gospel. The Prophet brought forth many records that contain historical and doctrinal information not found in the Old and New Testaments. For Latter-day Saints, these works not only substantiate many events and beliefs described in the Bible, but they also include narratives and teachings not found in any modern edition of the Old and New Testament. Therefore, the restitution of all things by the Prophet Joseph Smith included principles and practices not clearly enunciated in modern biblical texts. Historical and doctrinal information not found in the Bible is not only located in all of the modern scriptures of the Latter-day Saints, but also in Joseph Smith’s Inspired Revision of the Bible.

According to the revelatory writings of the Prophet Joseph Smith, prophets of antiquity, including Adam, Enoch, Isaiah, and Malachi, understood and embraced all basic principles and ordinances of the gospel. The plan of redemption or salvation was prepared from before the foundation of the earth and

provided salvation to God's children in all ages. This gospel included faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, knowledge of the atoning sacrifice of Christ, repentance, baptism by immersion for the remission of sins, and reception of the Holy Spirit. From the days of Adam through the era of Paul, prophets also taught the reality of a second coming and a millennial reign of the Savior. Moreover, Joseph Smith emphasized that prophets who lived prior to the meridian of time held God's power and authority, giving them the right to perform ordinances necessary for exaltation (Moses 5:58; 6:59, 64–66; D&C 132).

One of the unusual records brought forth by the Prophet Joseph Smith was the Book of Mormon. This work, unlike any other book, declares that it was written by ancient American prophets for a later generation. It also contains an uncommon description of the gospel of Jesus Christ as embraced by early Americans. It teaches that prior to the birth of the Savior, people in America believed in Christ, organized as worshippers of Christ, ordained others by the laying on of hands, and baptized with authority. While they kept the law of Moses, they looked forward with steadfastness to Christ, "until the law [should] be fulfilled" (2 Nephi 25:24; see also Mosiah 18:17–18; Alma 6:1; 9:21; 2 Nephi 6:13; Jacob 4:4–5). As latter-day converts accepted this book as the word of God, they embraced a distinct belief regarding the nature and substance of the restoration.²

² Prior to meeting Mormon missionaries, most converts to the Church during the 1830s were seeking a return to New Testament Christianity. After accepting the Book of Mormon as the word of God brought forth by a modern prophet, these converts changed their quest from emulation to a belief in a restoration. They also replaced their desire to locate a church patterned after the New Testament to embracing an uncommon belief regarding the restitution of all things (see Backman's "Writings of Early Latter-day Saints"). This data base collection contains the writings of more than eighty Latter-day Saints who joined the Church during the 1830s. Selected topics and words or phrases may be searched. A search, for example, of the topics "pre-LDS beliefs" and "conversion" and the words "New Testament" brought forth information from the following journals that indicate that prior to their conversion to Mormonism these individuals were seeking a return of New Testament Christianity: Milo Andrus, Benjamin Brown, Solomon Chamberlain, Levi Hancock, Joseph Holbrook, Orson Hyde, Joel Johnson, John Corrill, Heber C. Kimball, John Murdock, Parley P. Pratt, Joseph Knight, Newel Knight, Thomas B. Marsh, David Pettigrew, Sanford Porter, Ebenezer Robinson, Lucy Mack Smith, Lorenzo Snow, Eliza R. Snow, George A. Smith, Abraham Smoot, Daniel Tyler, Nancy Tracy, and George A. Smith.

Two studies, one of Mormon converts who gathered to Kirtland and the other of converts in Britain prior to 1852 clearly indicated that most who stated reasons for joining the Restored Church emphasized their belief that Mormonism “conformed to their image of pristine Christianity,” including teachings, power and authority (Grandstaff 26–27; Thorp 62–63).

Partly because practices described in the Book of Mormon were generally identified strictly with a post-Messianic church, Alexander Campbell condemned what he regarded as an amalgamation of beliefs and sacred rites from different ages. While he and other critics held that this combination was sheer confusion, Latter-day Saints insisted that this blending was evidence of the reality of a restitution of all things (Hughes and Allen 146–47).

In harmony with teachings of Joseph Smith, converts to The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints emphasized in their writings that there was not only a culmination of teachings and ordinances in the dispensation of fulness of times, but there was a restoration of all essential authority. This authority, they taught, had been lost during the disruption of the New Testament Church. Dating this apostasy much earlier than most Christians, Latter-day Saints taught that keys of the priesthood (the right to use the priesthood) were not passed on to others by the ancient apostles. Consequently, the restitution during the Dispensation of Fulness of Times included not only the restoration to Joseph Smith of the priesthood and keys held by New Testament prophets, but also included the restoration of all special authority held by prophets from Adam to Elijah (see D&C 13; 110:11–16; 128:20–21).

The order in which authority was restored was also unusual. New Testament prophets restored their keys before Old Testament leaders. Approximately six years after John the Baptist had restored the lesser priesthood and Peter, James, and John the higher priesthood (later called the Melchizedek Priesthood after a leader of the Old Testament), Moses, Elias, and Elijah committed upon Joseph Smith special keys of the

priesthood. These keys included those of gathering Israel and of leading the ten tribes back, and of sealing families together and uniting husbands and wives in the temple (D&C 110:11–16; *Words* 54–55).

One early convert to Mormonism, Sidney Rigdon (who during the 1820s had been influenced by the teachings of Alexander Campbell and had been an influential restorationist preacher in Ohio) recognized significant differences between the restoration by Joseph Smith and the claims of Campbell. Some of these differences were identified in a revelation recorded by the Prophet shortly after he met Rigdon. “Behold thou wast sent forth, even as John,” the revelation reads, “to prepare the way before me” (D&C 35:4). Prior to his conversion to the Church, the revelation continued, Rigdon “didst baptize by water unto repentance, but they received not the Holy Ghost” (v 5). After he had received God’s authority, individuals whom he baptized would “receive the Holy Ghost by the laying on of the hands, even as the apostles of old” (v 6). This revelation further emphasized that “miracles, signs, and wonders” would be manifest among believers (v 8). In a series of articles published in the *Messenger and Advocate*, Rigdon emphasized these differences and interpreted the biblical prophecy regarding restitution of all things as a restoration of “all spiritual gifts” and “every blessing” enjoyed among men from the beginning. He added that Joseph Smith had not only restored correct beliefs, such as the principle of laying on of hands for the gift of the Holy Ghost, but had also received God’s power and authority. He further testified that this restored power included revelations, visions, healing, prophecy, and speaking in tongues (“Millennium” 117; “Saints” 418; “The Gospel No. III” 37–38). “Let me here observe,” Rigdon explained, “that whatever the gospel was, it now is, and ever will be, that it has not nor will it change: its laws are the same; its ordinances are the same; its institutions are the same; its commands are the same, and its regulations are the same” (“Gospel No. VII” 118).

Another uncommon characteristic of the restoration by the Prophet Joseph Smith was its emphasis on witnesses. Unlike other religious leaders, Joseph Smith surrounded himself with an array of witnesses who substantiated many of his religious experiences. In harmony with teachings found in the Latter-day Saint scriptures (the Book of Mormon and Doctrine and Covenants), these witnesses verified various phases of the restitution of all things (2 Nephi 27:12–14; Ether 5:3–4; D&C 6:28). As far as we know, whenever the priesthood or its keys were restored to the earth, another witness was present and received the same powers conferred upon Joseph. Oliver Cowdery was in the Kirtland Temple during the restoration of the lesser and higher priesthoods. He was also with Joseph Smith in the Kirtland Temple and received the keys restored by Moses, Elias, and Elijah (D&C 110:11–16).

In his published and unpublished writings, Oliver Cowdery substantiated Joseph Smith's testimony that John the Baptist did indeed restore the lesser priesthood to Joseph and him by the laying on of hands. Unlike other accounts recorded in Christian history, these two men claimed that during a vision they saw, heard, and felt the hands of a heavenly being upon their heads. While others believed in apostolic succession, sought a restoration through emulation, or claimed inspiration from heaven to go forth and preach, Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery proclaimed that they received authority by the laying on of hands from messengers sent by God (Cowdery 15–16; Smith 942).

This uncommon law of witnesses was not limited to events in which priesthood power and authority were restored, but it was also applied to the Book of Mormon. Eleven witnesses testified that the Book of Mormon plates existed, three claiming to have been shown the plates by an angel and eight others were shown them by Joseph Smith. When skeptics criticized miraculous events associated with the rise of the Church, missionaries sometimes replied that Joseph Smith was not an ordinary prophet. His testimony does not stand alone. Various witnesses,

they added, unlike any others in religious history, verified Joseph Smith's religious experiences, from the existence of the Book of Mormon plates to the restoration of the priesthood (Orson Pratt 147–72).

In the early 1840s, Joseph Smith restored a distinctly modern concept regarding temple laws, ordinances, worship, and blessings, including work for the living and the dead. Temple ordinances, he taught, included endowments and sealings and aided Latter-day Saints in their quest to become one with God. By entering into a new and everlasting covenant of marriage and keeping God's commandments, he explained, individuals could enter the highest degree in the mansions of heaven and "inherit thrones, kingdoms, principalities, and powers" and be blessed with "a continuation of the seeds forever and ever" (D&C 132:19). Then, according to his revelatory writings, these individuals shall "be gods . . . because they have all power, and the angels are subject unto them" (vv 18–20). No other religious leader or community promised disciples such rewards.

For most Latter-day Saints, the unusual blending of the old with the new was not a problem. Most saw no contradiction in baptizing for the dead in modern temples, buildings that, in their view, had roots stemming back to the ancient world. Nor were they concerned that they performed this ordinance in fonts placed on the back of twelve oxen, representing the twelve tribes of Israel. This amalgamation was also depicted in their marital practices, which included relationships and authority of Old Testament prophets performed in modern settings (D&C 132:1, 29–40; *Words* 328).

In 1839 when Parley P. Pratt initially learned the doctrine of celestial marriage from the Prophet Joseph Smith, he gained a new understanding of other principles of the gospel, including man's relationship to God, characteristics of the godhead, plurality of Gods, and premortal life. He further recognized that there was a harmony in these teachings and, being acquainted with various religious systems, he understood that these

concepts were the distinct theological contributions of Joseph Smith. While recalling this sudden expansion of knowledge, Pratt wrote:

It was from him that I learned that the wife of my bosom might be secured to me for time and all eternity; and that the refined sympathies and affections which endeared us to each other emanated from the fountain of divine eternal love. It was from him that I learned that we might cultivate these affections, and grow and increase in the same to all eternity; while the result of our endless union would be an offspring as numerous as the stars of heaven, or the sands of the sea shore.

It was from him that I learned the true dignity and destiny of a son of God, clothed with an eternal priesthood, as the patriarch and sovereign of his countless offspring. It was from him that I learned that the highest dignity of womanhood was, to stand as a queen and priestess to her husband, and to reign for ever and ever as the queen mother of her numerous and still increasing offspring. . . . I felt that God was my heavenly Father indeed; that Jesus was my brother, and that the wife of my bosom was an immortal, eternal companion; a kind ministering angel, given to me as a comfort, and a crown of glory for ever and ever. In short, I could now love with the spirit and with the understanding also.

Yet, at that time, my dearly beloved brother, Joseph Smith, had barely touched a single key; had merely lifted a corner of the veil and given me a single glance into eternity. (260)

Another close associate of the Prophet who recognized his unusual contributions was John Taylor, later to become the third president of the Church. He testified that Joseph Smith inaugurated the Dispensation of Fulness of Times. This is “a dispensation,” he asserted, “in which all the other dispensations are merged or concentrated. It embraces and embodies all other dispensations that have existed upon the earth wherein God communicated himself to the human family” (*Journal of Discourses* 21:94; hereafter *JD*). After John the Baptist had restored the Aaronic Priesthood and Peter, James and John the Melchizedek Priesthood to Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery, “Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, Elijah, Elias, and many other leading characters mentioned in the Scriptures, who had operated in the various dispensations, came and conferred upon Joseph the various keys, powers, rights, privileges and

immunities which they enjoyed in their times.” President Taylor further emphasized that the knowledge, intelligence, priesthood, powers, and revelations which had been conferred upon various prophets in different ages was “restored to the earth by the ministration and through the medium of those who held the holy Priesthood of God in the different dispensations in which they lived” (*JD* 23:48–49).

Many uncommon aspects of Mormon history cannot be understood without recognizing the belief of Latter-day Saints regarding Joseph Smith’s distinct contributions. While members of the Church experienced greater persecution than adherents of any other Christian church in the young American republic, their faith was the motivating power that enabled them to escape the refiner’s fire and cross and tame a vast desert. This faith is also the dominant force propelling self-supporting missionaries to serve throughout the world. Moreover, it is the power that motivated converts to participate in one of the unusual episodes in world history, the gathering of a religious community. Like a few other groups, Latter-day Saints gathered to seek refuge, to learn doctrines, to be purified, and to prepare for the Second Coming. But unlike these others, they gathered to receive distinct blessings in sacred temples. These and other blessings were restored by the Prophet Joseph Smith during the dispensation when there was a restitution of all things.

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