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Direct External Evidences - The Three Witnesses - Subsequent Life and Testimonies - Oliver Cowdery

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CHAPTER XVI.

DIRECT EXTERNAL EVIDENCES—THE THREE WITNESSES— SUBSEQUENT LIFE AND TESTIMONIES.

OLIVER COWDERY.

The Witnesses themselves always adhered to the truth of their testimony. They never denied what they in their now celebrated testimony so solemnly affirmed. It was reported at different times during their life time that they had denied their testimony, and such statements are to be found in the earlier editions of such standard works as the American Encyclopædia and in the Encyclopædia Britannica. It is evident that the reports about Oliver Cowdery denying his testimony obtained some credence even among the Saints at Nauvoo; for in the "Times and Seasons," published by the Church at Nauvoo, one J. H. Johnson, in some verses written by him maintaining the fact that the truth stands fast though men may be untrue to it, say:

—Or prove that Christ was not the Lord
Because that Peter cursed and swore,
Or Book of Mormon not his word,
Because denied by Oliver.^p

But notwithstanding all this, the fact remains that Oliver Cowdery never denied his testimony to the truth of the Book of Mormon. Whatever his delinquencies in other respects; whatever his grievances, real or imagined; in the Church, and even while out of it, he was true, to his honor

^p"Times and Seasons," Vol. II., p. 482.

be it said, to his testimony to the Book of Mormon. Living he affirmed it, and when dying he renewed the affirmation. It must be said of him that notwithstanding the high favors which God granted him—the favor of being one of these Three Special Witnesses, blessed to see the Nephite plates and the sacred things connected with them under such a remarkable display of God's presence and power; favored to receive with the Prophet the ministration of angels who ordained them both to the Aaronic and to the Melchizedek priesthood;^q and favored afterwards to behold in open vision in the Kirtland Temple the Savior himself, and a number of angels who came on that occasion to restore to earth through these men the keys of authority and power which they held;^r favored to be the Second Elder of the Church of Christ, and the first to make public proclamation of the restored gospel—notwithstanding all this, I repeat, it must be said of him that he possessed defects of character^s which enabled the adver-

^qSee "New Witnesses for God," Vol. I., ch. xi.

^rSee "New Witnesses for God," Vol. I., ch. xi., also Doc. and Cov., Sec. cx.

^sThat the Prophet Joseph understood the defects in the character of Oliver Cowdery is evident from some remarks he records in his journal concerning him, under date of December 18, 1833. They are as follows: "Blessed of the Lord is brother Oliver, nevertheless there are two evils in him that he must needs forsake or he cannot altogether escape the buffetings of the adversary. If he foresake these evils he shall be forgiven, and shall be made like unto the bow which the Lord hath set in the heavens; he shall be a sign and an ensn unto the nations. Behold he is blessed of the Lord for his constancy and steadfastness in the work of the Lord wherefore, he shall be blessed in his generation, and they shall never be cut off, and he shall be helped out of many troubles; and if he keep the commandments, and hearken unto the counsel of the Lord, his rest shall be glorious." (History of the Church, Vol. I., p. 465). It will be observed that the promises herein made to Oliver Cowdery are based upon the conditions specified in the above passage. That the conditions were not at least altogether complied with is well known, and is further witnessed by the fact that Oliver did not escape the buffetings to which the Prophet

sary of men's souls to so far prevail against him that he transgressed some of the laws of God and lost his high station. He was excommunicated from the Church for his sins,[†] and for a time stood as a stranger to the Saints, an outcast from Israel; but in those dark days he still remained true to his testimony.

In October, 1848, after an absence of about eleven years, Oliver Cowdery returned to the Church. At that time the movement of the Church to the Rocky Mountains was under way. A larger number of the Saints were temporarily located at Kaneshville (now Council Bluffs), Iowa, and on the 21st of October of the year above given, a special conference was called, presided over by Elder Orson Hyde, of the Council of the Apostles, in which the case of Oliver Cowdery was considered. Before that conference, at which some two thousand Saints were present," Oliver Cowdery said:

Friends and Brethren—My name is Cowdery, Oliver Cowdery. In the early history of this Church I stood identified with her, and one in her councils. True it is that the gifts and callings of God are without repentance; not because I was better than the rest of mankind was I called; but, to fulfill the purposes of God, he called me to a high and holy calling.

I wrote, with my own pen, the entire Book of Mormon (save a few pages) as it fell from the lips of the Prophet Joseph, as he translated it by the gift and power of God, by the means of the Urim and Thummim, or, as it is called by the book, "Holy Inter-

alludes. Still from out of this mist of human frailty, stands clear and strong the virtue which constituted him so dauntless a witness for the truth of God. "Behold he is blessed of the Lord for his constancy and steadfastness in the work of the Lord." Still he lost his station in the Church, and that which had been conferred upon him was finally given to Hyrum Smith, brother the Prophet. See Doc. and Cov., Sec. 124:95.

[†]Mill. Star, Vol. XVI., 133.

[‡]Mill. Star, Vol. XI, p. 14.

preters." I beheld with my eyes, and handled with my hands, the gold plates from which it was transcribed. I also saw with my eyes and handled with my hands the "holy interpreters." That book is true. Sidney Rigdon did not write it. Mr. Spaulding did not write it. I wrote it myself as it fell from the lips of the Prophet. It contains the everlasting gospel, and came forth to the children of men in fulfillment of the revelations of John, where he says he saw an angel come with the everlasting gospel to preach to every nation, kindred, tongue and people. It contains principles of salvation and if you, my hearers, will walk by its light and obey its precepts, you will be saved with an everlasting salvation in the kingdom of God on high. Brother Hyde has just said that it is very important that we keep and walk in the true channel, in order to avoid the sand-bars. This is true. The channel is here. The holy priesthood is here.

I was present with Joseph when an holy angel from God came down from heaven and conferred on us, or restored the lesser or Aaronic priesthood, and said to us, at the same time, that it should remain upon the earth while the earth stands.

I was also present with Joseph when the higher or Melchizedek priesthood was conferred by holy angels from on high. This priesthood we conferred on each other, by the will and commandment of God. This priesthood, as was then declared, is also to remain upon the earth until the last remnant of time. This holy priesthood, or authority, we then conferred upon many, and is just as good and valid as though God had done it in person.

I laid my hands upon that man—yes, I laid my right hand upon his head (pointing to Brother Hyde), and I conferred upon him the priesthood, and he holds that priesthood now. He was also called through me, by the prayer of faith, an Apostle of the Lord Jesus Christ.

This speech was reported by Bishop Reuben Miller, who was present at the meeting where Cowdery spoke, and noted down in his journal at the time what was said, though his notes, it must be remarked, were not published until several

years later.^v The circumstance of Cowdery's return and the spirit of his speech is also supported by other testimony. In a letter dated at Cambridge Port, U. S. A., December 26th, 1848, Wilford Woodruff—at the time one of the Twelve Apostles, and subsequently President of the Church—writing to Orson Pratt, then president of the British Mission, said:

Dear Brother Pratt—I received a letter from Elder Hyde saying that Oliver Cowdery had come to the Bluffs with his family; and made satisfaction to the Church who had voted to receive him into the Church by baptism; and Elder Hyde expected to baptize him the next day. He was assisting Elder Hyde to put the press in operation for printing, expected to send forth the "Frontier Guardian" soon. I was truly glad to hear this, as Oliver Cowdery was the first person baptized into this Church under the hands of Joseph, and is capable of doing good in the kingdom of God; I was truly glad to hear he had returned to the fold.^w

The Star which published this letter was issued February 1st, 1849.

George A. Smith, writing from Council Bluffs under date of October 31st, 1848, ten days after Cowdery's speech before the conference, writes to Orson Pratt of this meeting:

Oliver Cowdery, who had just arrived from Wisconsin with his family, on being invited, addressed the meeting. He bore testimony in the most positive terms of 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 the main channel of the stream—where the body of the Church goes, there is the authority; and all these lo here's and

^vNamely, 13th of April, 1859. See Deseret News of that date.

^wMill. Star, Vol. XI., p. 43.

lo there's have no authority; but this people have the true and holy priesthood; "for the angel said unto Joseph Smith, Jr., in my hearing, that this priesthood shall remain on the 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 (Oct. 30th,) President Hyde and myself spent the evening with Brother Cowdery. 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 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 today, 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." I remain, as ever, your brother in the kingdom of patience. (Signed) GEORGE A. SMITH.*

The "Star" in which this letter was published was issued January 1st, 1849, a little more than two months after Cowdery's speech already quoted.

Oliver Cowdery had been excommunicated by the action of a High Council of the Church some ten years before, and it was held by some that he could only be restored by the action of a High Council.^y Such a council was therefore called. In the course of its proceedings Oliver said:

*Mill. Star, Vol. XI., p. 14.

^yFearing that silence as to the specific offenses of Oliver Cowdery might leave the reader to fancy that his wrong doing was more serious than it really was, I here state the charges against him sustained before the High Council at Far West, in 1838: 1st. "Persecuting the brethren by urging on vexatious law suits against them, and thus distressing the innocent. 2nd. Seeking to destroy the character of Joseph Smith, Jr., by falsely

Brethren, for a number of years I have been separated from you. I now desire to come back. I wish to come humbly and to be one in your midst. I seek no station. I only wish to be identified with you. I am out of the Church. I am not a member of the Church, but I wish to become a member of it. I wish to come in at the door. I know the door. I have not come here to seek precedence, I come humbly, and throw myself upon the decisions of this body, knowing, as I do, that its decisions are right and should be obeyed.²

On motion of Elder Orson Hyde, Oliver Cowdery was received into the Church by baptism. It was the intention of this Witness of the Book of Mormon to go with the body of the Church to the Salt Lake valley, but while visiting with his fellow Witness, David Whitmer, at Richmond, Missouri, he was taken ill and died, March 3rd, 1850. Previous to

insinuating that he was guilty of adultery. 3rd. Treating the Church with contempt by not attending meetings. 4th. Leaving his calling, to which God had appointed him by revelation, for the sake of filthy lucre, and turning to the practice of law. 5th. disgracing the Church by being connected in the "bogus" business, as common report says." (See Mill. Star, Vol. XVI., p. 133; also "Missouri Persecutions," p. 179.) It should be observed that upper Missouri in 1838 was infested with a gang of sharpers engaged in counterfeiting the United States currency, and rumor, for a time, connected Oliver Cowdery with them: but whether he was, or was not guilty of such connection was not proven before the council, it was merely proven that "rumors" connected him with those criminals. It should also be said that Oliver Cowdery was not present at the council which acted on his case though of course an opportunity was given him to be present. How many of the charges brought against him would have failed had he been there to oppose them, one may not conjecture. It was a general time of turbulence in the affairs of the Church. A wave of wild land speculation swept through the country, and the Saints and some leading Elders became entangled in it. Charges and counter charges were made; brethren misunderstood each other and became estranged in their feelings, and pride and bitterness prevented reconciliations. It was under such circumstances that Oliver Cowdery for a time was lost in the mists.

²Deseret News of April 13th, 1859.

going to Richmond, for the purpose of meeting David Whitmer, his wife's brother, Oliver was detained by snow storms some two weeks at the temporary home of Samuel W. Richards—just then returned from his first mission to the British Isles.

Of his interesting association with Oliver during this time Elder Richards says:

To hear him describe in his pleasant but earnest manner the personality of those heavenly messengers, with whom he and the Prophet had so freely held converse, was enchanting to my soul. Their heavenly appearance, clothed in robes of purity, the influence of their presence so lovely and serene; their eyes that seemed to penetrate to the very depths of the soul, together with the color of the eyes that gazed upon them, were all so beautifully related as to almost make one feel that they were then present: and as I placed my hands upon his head where these angels had placed theirs, a divine influence filled the soul to that degree that one could truly feel to be in the presence of something that was more than earthly; and from that day to this—almost fifty years ago—the interest of those glorious truths upon the mind has never been lost, but as a beacon light ever guiding to the home of their glory for a like inheritance.

But before taking his departure he wrote and left with the writer of this the following statement, which we believe to be his last living testimony, though oft repeated, of the wonderful manifestations which brought the authority of God to men on earth:

Testimony.

While darkness covered the earth and gross darkness the people; long after the authority to administer in holy things had been taken away, the Lord opened the heavens and sent forth his word for the salvation of Israel. In fulfillment of the sacred scriptures, the everlasting gospel was proclaimed by the mighty angel (Moroni) who, clothed with the authority of his mission, gave glory to God in the highest. This Gospel is the "stone taken from the mountain without hands." John the Baptist,

holding the keys of the Aaronic priesthood; Peter, James, and John, holding the keys of the Melchisedek priesthood, have also ministered for those who shall be heirs of salvation, and with these administrations ordained men to the same priesthood. These priesthoods, with their authority, are now, and must continue to be, in the body of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Blessed is the Elder who has received the same, and thrice blessed and holy is he who shall endure to the end.

Accept assurances, dear brother, of the unfeigned prayer of him who, in connection with Joseph the Seer, was blessed with the above ministrations and who earnestly and devoutly hopes to meet you in the celestial glory.

(Signed)

OLIVER COWDERY.

To Elder Samuel W. Richards, January 13th, 1849.

Phineas H. Young, a brother of President Brigham Young, was present at Oliver's death, at Richmond, Missouri, and of that event said:

His last moments were spent in bearing testimony of the truth of the Gospel revealed through Joseph Smith and the power of the holy priesthood which he had received through his administrations.

David Whitmer, speaking to Orson Pratt and Joseph F. Smith of Oliver Cowdery's death, said:

Oliver Cowdery died the happiest man I ever saw. After shaking hands with the family and kissing his wife and daughter, he said "Now I lay me down for the last time; I am going to my Savior;" and he died immediately, with a smile on his face.²

This statement also agrees with the one David Whitmer published in his "Address to all Believers in Christ:"

²Mill Star, Vol. XL., p. 774, Pratt and Smith statement.

Neither Oliver Cowdery nor Martin Harris ever at any time denied his testimony. They both died reaffirming the truth of the divine authenticity of the Book of Mormon. I was present at the death bed of Oliver Cowdery, and his last words were, "Brother David, be true to your testimony to the Book of Mormon." He died here in Richmond, Missouri, on the 3rd of March, 1850. Many witnesses yet live^a in Richmond, who will testify to the truth of these facts, as well as to the good character of Oliver Cowdery.^b

^aThis was said in 1887.

^bAddress to all Believers in Christ, p. 8.