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## Direct External Evidences - Testimony of the Eight Witnesses

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## CHAPTER XX.

### DIRECT EXTERNAL EVIDENCES—TESTIMONY OF THE EIGHT WITNESSES.

The exact time when the Eight Witnesses obtained their view of the Nephite plates is not known, but it was evidently a few days after the Three Witnesses received their testimony. All the Prophet has seen proper to say upon the subject in his own history is—alluding to the testimony that had been received by the Three Witnesses—“soon after these things had transpired, the following additional testimony was obtained.”<sup>m</sup> Then follows the testimony of the Eight Witnesses.

According to the “History of the Prophet,” by Lucy Smith,<sup>n</sup> the event happened a few days after the Three Witnesses obtained their testimony. The latter, be it remembered, received their view of the plates near the Whitmer residence, in Fayette township, New York; while the Eight Witnesses obtained their view of the plates near the Smith residence in Manchester. On the completion of the translation of the Book of Mormon Joseph sent word to his parents of the joyful event, as we have already seen, and they, in company with Martin Harris, immediately set out for Fayette, and during their brief stay at the place the vision of the Three Witnesses was given. The day following Father and Mother Smith returned to Manchester, and now the latter’s statement:

In a few days we were followed by Joseph, Oliver and the Whitmers, who came to make us a visit, and make some arrange-

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<sup>m</sup>History of the Church, Vol. I., p. 57.

<sup>n</sup>Chapter xxxi.

ments about getting the book printed. Soon after they came, all the male part of the company, with my husband, Samuel and Hyrum, retired to a place where the family were in the habit of offering up their devotions to God. They went to this place because it had been revealed to Joseph that the plates would be carried thither by one of the ancient Nephites.<sup>o</sup> Here it was that those Eight Witnesses, whose names are recorded in the Book of Mormon, looked upon them and handled them. \* \* \* After these Witnesses returned to the house, the angel again made his appearance to Joseph at which time Joseph delivered up the plates into the angel's hands.<sup>p</sup>

This narrative is confirmed by the statement of Joseph himself with respect to delivering up the record to the angel. At the time the plates were first given into the Prophet's keeping he was informed that the heavenly messenger would call for them. He then recounts the efforts made to wrest the plates from him by his enemies, and adds:

But by the wisdom of God they remained safe in my hands, until I had accomplished by them what was required at my hand. When according to arrangements, the messenger (the angel Moroni) called for them, I delivered them up to him; and he has them in his charge until this day, being the 2nd day of May, 1838.<sup>q</sup>

In the evening of the day that the Eight Witnesses saw and examined the Nephite plates, according to Lucy Smith, the Witnesses held meeting at the Smith residence, "in which all the Witnesses bore testimony to the facts as stated above,"<sup>r</sup> that is, to the facts stated in their testimonies as here

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<sup>o</sup>This was doubtless Moroni, as he was the custodian of the plates.

<sup>p</sup>"History of the Prophet Joseph," by Lucy Smith, ch. xxxi.

<sup>q</sup>"History of the Church," Vol. I., pp. 18, 19.

<sup>r</sup>"History of the Prophet Joseph Smith," by Lucy Smith, ch. xxxi.

given and which appeared in the first and in all subsequent editions of the Book of Mormon.

## THE TESTIMONY OF EIGHT WITNESSES.

Be it known unto all nations, kindreds, tongues, and people unto whom this work shall come, that Joseph Smith, Jr., the translator of this work, has shown unto us the plates of which hath been spoken, which have the appearance of gold; and as many of the leaves as the said Smith has translated, we did handle with our hands and we also saw the engravings thereon, all of which has the appearance of ancient work, and of curious workmanship. And this we bear record with words of soberness, that the said Smith has shown unto us, for we have seen and hefted, and know of a surety that the said Smith has got the plates of which we have spoken. And we give our names unto the world, to witness unto the world that which we have seen and we lie not, God bearing witness of it.

CHRISTIAN WHITMER,  
JACOB WHITMER,  
PETER WHITMER, JR.,  
JOHN WHITMER,  
HIRAM PAGE,  
JOSEPH SMITH, SR.,  
HYRUM SMITH,  
SAMUEL H. SMITH.

The testimony of the Eight Witnesses differs from that of the Three Witnesses in that the view of the plates by the latter was attended by a remarkable display of the glory and power of God and the ministration of an angel. The glory of God shone about them; the angel turned the gold leaves of the ancient record; he spoke to them or at least to David Whitmer, saying: "David, blessed is the Lord, and he that keeps his commandments;" and the very voice of God was heard out of the bright light shining about them, saying:

These plates have been revealed by the power of God; and they have been translated by the power of God. The translation

of them which you have seen is correct, and I command you to bear record of what you now see and hear.<sup>s</sup>

No such remarkable display of God's splendor and power was attendant upon the exhibition of the plates to the Eight Witnesses. On the contrary it was just a plain, matter-of-fact exhibition of the plates by the Prophet himself to his friends. They saw the plates; they handled them; they turned the leaves of the old Nephite record, and saw and marveled at its curious workmanship. No brilliant light illuminated the forest or dazzled their vision; no angel was there to awe them by the splendor of his presence; no piercing voice of God from a glory to make them tremble by its power. All these supernatural circumstances present at the view of the plates by the Three Witnesses were absent at the time when the Eight Witnesses saw them. Here all was natural, matter-of-fact, plain. Nothing to inspire awe, or fear, or dread; nothing uncanny or overwhelming, but just a plain, straightforward proceeding that leaves men in possession of all their faculties, and self-consciousness; all of which renders such a thing as deception, or imposition entirely out of the question. They could pass the plates from hand to hand, guess at their weight—doubtless considerable, that idea being conveyed, "we have seen and *hefted*, and know of a surety, that the said Smith has got the plates." They could look upon the engravings, and observe calmly how different they were from everything modern in the way of record-making known to them, and hence the conclusion that the workmanship was not only curious but ancient.

I now proceed to consider the course pursued by these Eight Witnesses with reference to their testimony. I shall

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<sup>s</sup>"History of the Church," Vol. I, pp. 54, 55.

take them in the order they seemed to have signed the testimony.<sup>†</sup>

## CHRISTIAN WHITMER.

This Witness was thirty-one years old when he beheld the plates, having been born on the 18th of January, 1798. The young man was among the first to embrace the gospel, being baptized on the 11th of April, 1830. He removed with the Church from New York to Ohio in 1831, thence to Jackson county, Missouri. He witnessed the storms of persecution rise against the Saints in the land of Zion; and shared the hardship and despoliation of the Saints incident to their expulsion from Jackson county. He died while in exile for conscience sake, in Clay county, Missouri, on the 27th of November, 1835. He held first the office of Teacher in the Church; and then successively rose to the office of Elder, High Priest, and member of the High Council of the Church in Missouri.

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<sup>†</sup>In the first edition of the Book of Mormon where the Testimony appears at the close of the volume instead of at the beginning of the work, as in the current editions, the names stand thus (Second edition the same):—

Christian Whitmer,  
Jacob Whitmer,  
Peter Whitmer, Jr.,  
John Whitmer,  
Hiram Page,  
John Smith, Sr.,  
Hyrum Smith,  
Samuel H. Smith;

instead of in a double column as in our current editions. By the way, in passing, it may not be amiss to state that some importance is attached to the arrangement of the names in our current edition, for the reason that if read across the page instead of down the columns, then Page and the members of the Smith family alternate with the Witnesses, supposedly to divert attention from the fact that the witnesses, excepting Hiram Page, were of but two families! Such is the conclusion at least of one profound(!) critic of the Book of Mormon.

Few and troubled were the years of Christian Whitmer's life after he became a Witness for the existence of the plates from which the Book of Mormon was translated; but few and troubled as the years were, they were glorious for the steadfastness of Christian's faith. He had seen his crops wasted by the wanton destructiveness of a mob, while he himself was seized and threatened with instant death if he did not make known the hiding place of brethren who were escaping from the mob. Christian Whitmer, however, did not betray his friends, notwithstanding the guns of the mob were leveled at him when their threats were made.

He remained true to his testimony and died a consistent member of the Church of Christ.

#### JACOB WHITMER.

Jacob Whitmer was thirty years of age when he saw the plates, having been born on the 27th of January, 1800. He, too, passed through the trying scenes incident to the expulsion of the Latter-day Saints from Jackson county. But after enduring well for a season he left the Church, in 1838, making his home near Richmond, in Ray county, Missouri. Here he lived a quiet, retired life, and reared his family in respectability, his eldest son, David P. Whitmer, rising to some local prominence as a lawyer, and serving one or two terms as mayor of Richmond. To the day of his death—which occurred April 21st, 1856—Jacob Whitmer was true to his testimony of the truth of the Book of Mormon. Though he severed his relations with the Church, because he did not agree with the policy of the leading Elders, he continued true to the special trust God had committed to him—an actual knowledge of the existence of the Nephite record—as long as he lived.

## PETER WHITMER, JR.

This Witness for the existence of the Nephite Record was in his twentieth year at the time he examined the plates and held them in his hands. On meeting with the Prophet Joseph, on the occasion of the latter coming to reside at the home of his father, Peter Whitmer, Sen., in Fayette township, 1829, a firm friendship immediately sprang up between them. Peter Whitmer, Jr., seems to have been one of those gentle, loving natures that finds its greatest enjoyment and usefulness in giving its allegiance to some more rugged character on whose strength it can lean, in whose courage it can find strength. He entered with enthusiasm into the work of God coming forth under the inspired words and movements of his friend Joseph, the Prophet. He was among the first to join the Church, and when, in September of 1830, a mission was appointed to the Lamanites (American Indians), under the leadership of Oliver Cowdery, young Whitmer was especially appointed to accompany him, and commanded to be afflicted in all his (Oliver's) afflictions, "ever lifting up your heart unto me in prayer, and faith for his and your deliverance."<sup>u</sup> The missionaries to the Lamanites traveled on foot from central New York to the western borders of Missouri, a distance of more than one thousand miles, and that chiefly in winter time, when storms and mud and cold had to be encountered. Peter Whitmer, Jr., remained in western Missouri, and assisted the Saints in settling Jackson county (1831-1833), where, in common with the Saints who gathered from the east, he saw the rise of that persecution which culminated in the expulsion of the Saints from that county. With many of his exiled co-religionists he found a temporary home near Liberty, Clay

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<sup>u</sup>Doc. and Cov., Sec. xxx.



county, Missouri, where he died on the 22nd of September, 1836; and was buried by the side of his brother Christian, who had died in the same neighborhood less than a year before. Consumption was the immediate cause of his death, which was doubtless hastened by exposure in the course of his missionary labors and the hardships he was forced to endure by reason of his expulsion from Jackson county. This young man—he was but twenty-seven when he died—remained true to his testimony through the seven years of toil and suffering that he lived after God called him to be a Witness for the truth of the Book of Mormon; and his fidelity to his trust under all circumstances, adds weight to the solemn words of testimony to which he signed his name in June, 1829.

#### JOHN WHITMER.

The fourth of the Eight Witnesses, John Whitmer, was twenty-seven years of age when he beheld the plates of the Nephite record. He was a young man of considerable promise, and upon the coming of Joseph Smith to his father's house, became not only his enthusiastic friend, but rendered him considerable assistance in writing as the Prophet dictated the translation of the Book of Mormon. John Whitmer was Church Historian for a number of years; for a time editor of the "Messenger and Advocate," the second periodical published by the Church (Kirtland, Ohio, 1834-1837). He was also prominent in the affairs of the Church in Missouri, being one of the assistant presidents of the Church, his brother David and William W. Phelps being the president and other assistant respectively. He endured the hardships incident to the persecutions of the Saints in that land. When settlements were being formed in the new coun-

ty of Caldwell, John Whitmer was prominently connected with the land purchases made. Indeed it was largely owing to some irregularities connected with the business, and some misunderstanding with the Prophet and other leading brethren in the Church that finally resulted in his excommunication, in March, 1838.

After the expulsion of the Church from Missouri, in the winter of 1838-9, John Whitmer purchased the greater part of the townsite of Far West, which soon reverted to farming lands and here John Whitmer continued to live, making farming his principal occupation, until his death in July, 1878. Though his relations with the Church were severed John Whitmer, up to the very close of his life, continued to bear witness that his testimony published in connection with the Book of Mormon was true. From it he never deviated. It was his testimony when living; it remains his testimony now that he is dead, unimpaired in its force by any word of his, though he was much offended at the Prophet Joseph, and for forty years had no standing in the Church. One can but regret the events which resulted in his severance from the Church, but one is compelled to admire his fidelity to the trust imposed in him by the Prophet when he made him a Witness for the existence of the Nephite record, in the presence of temptation to take a different course in the hour of his great darkness.

#### HIRAM PAGE.

This is the only Witness of the Eight not either a Whitmer or a Smith. He was a son-in-law, however, to Peter Whitmer, Sen., having married Catherine Whitmer, in 1825. He was but a young man when he became a Witness to the existence of the Nephite plates, having been born in the year

1800, in the state of Vermont. He was living at Fayette, with the Whitmers when the Prophet and Oliver Cowdery arrived there in the spring of 1829. He entered into the work with enthusiasm, and for some years was a faithful member of the Church. He followed the westward movement of the Saints from New York to Ohio and thence to Missouri. He shared in the persecutions of the Church in Jackson county; in common with his co-religionists he fled to Clay county; and subsequently settled in Caldwell county. When the trouble arose in the Church at Far West, in 1838, Hiram Page followed the fortune of the Whitmers, severed his relations with the Church and finally made his home near Excelsior Springs, some fourteen miles north and a little west of Richmond, Missouri, where he died in August, 1852. Like his fellow Witnesses he remained true to his testimony. His oldest son, Philander Page, in 1888, said to Elder Andrew Jenson:

I knew my father to be true and faithful to his testimony of the divinity of the Book of Mormon until the very last. Whenever he had an opportunity to bear his testimony to this effect; he would always do so, and seemed to rejoice exceedingly in having been privileged to see the plates and thus become one of the Eight Witnesses. I can also testify that Jacob, John and David Whitmer and Oliver Cowdery died in full faith in the divinity of the Book of Mormon. I was with all these Witnesses on their death-beds and heard each of them bear his testimony. John C. Whitmer, a nephew of Hiram Page by marriage, also testified in the presence of Elder Jenson: "I was closely connected with Hiram Page in business transactions and other matters, he being married to my aunt. I knew him at all times and under all circumstances to be true to his testimony concerning the divinity of the Book of Mormon."<sup>v</sup>

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<sup>v</sup>Latter-day Saints Biographical Encyclopaedia, p. 278.

## JOSEPH SMITH, SEN.

The sixth of the Eight Witnesses is Joseph Smith, Sen., the Prophet's father. He was the first to whom the Prophet confided the fact of Moroni's visit, and the existence of the Nephite record; and this by direct commandment of the angel Moroni himself. The Prophet hesitated to make known the vision he had received and the existence of the record, even to his father; but doubtless the integrity of the heart of Joseph Smith, Sen., was known in the heavens, and the Prophet was taken sharply to task for hesitating to trust him with the knowledge that God had imparted through Moroni. When asked why he had not confided the knowledge of his vision to his father, the Prophet expressed a fear that he would not be believed, whereupon Moroni said: "He will believe every word you say to him."<sup>w</sup> Upon this the Prophet went to his father, who was working in a field near their home, and related the whole revelation to him. The father assured his son that the great revelation was of God, and told him to go "and do as commanded by the messenger."<sup>x</sup> From that time on the youthful Prophet of the Dispensation of the Fullness of Times had no truer, or more constant or faithful friend than his father.

Joseph Smith, Sen., was 59 years of age when he handled and examined the Nephite plates, and gave his testimony of their existence to the world. He became thoroughly identified with the work which the Lord brought forth through his gifted son. He was ordained a Priest of the Most High God, and became the first Presiding Patriarch in the Church, traveling in that capacity among the

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<sup>w</sup>"Joseph Smith the Prophet," by Lucy Smith, ch. xix.

<sup>x</sup>"History of the Church," Vol. I., p. 15.

branches of the Church, especially in the Eastern States, administering comfort to the widow and fatherless, bestowing benedictions wherever he went.

In 1838, under the pressure of that severe persecution which arose against adherents of the Prophet in Ohio, the Patriarch moved to Caldwell county, Missouri, where he saw his sons Joseph and Hyrum taken by ruthless hands, dragged from their families and cast into prison for the word of God and the testimony of Jesus, while he himself, with the remainder of the faithful Saints, was banished from the State of Missouri under the exterminating order of Governor Boggs. In midwinter of 1838-9, "Father Smith," as the Saints loved to call him, arrived in Quincy, Illinois, and thence removed to Nauvoo and assisted in founding that city. The toils and exposure of his life (he had been a pioneer all his days), and the hardships attendant upon his flight from Missouri proved too much even for his sturdy frame, and on the 14th of September, 1840, Joseph Smith, Sen., in the seventieth year of his life, died at Nauvoo.

His was one of those simple, guileless natures who know naught but truth and honor and fidelity. Amidst all circumstances of discouragement and trials he kept the faith, never wavering one moment in his adherence to the truth which God had made known to him. Having seen and handled and examined the plates from which the Book of Mormon was written, he remained true and steadfast to that testimony, and if an unbelieving generation shall undertake to condemn the testimony of some of these Witnesses because they turned from the Church, they must not forget that they will have to meet the force of this righteous man's testimony, and as in prayer so in testimony, the words of a righteous man availeth much.

## HYRUM SMITH.

The seventh of the Eight Witnesses was Hyrum Smith, an elder brother to the Prophet Joseph, born February 9, 1800, and hence was thirty years of age at the time the plates were shown to him. From the beginning of the great work of the last days he was a consistent believer in it, and assisted his brother in the preservation of the plates from the hands of those who sought to wrest them from him. He early sought to know the will of the Lord concerning his relations to the great work then coming forth, and was given to understand (May, 1829) that he was to have part and lot in it; and that he was called of God to be a preacher of righteousness to this generation.<sup>3</sup> From that time forth he labored continuously and faithfully by the side of his prophet-brother in the work of God. In 1837 he was made a counselor in the First Presidency of the Church, then assembling in Caldwell county, Missouri, a position he held until January, 1841, when he was called by revelation to take the office of Presiding Patriarch in the Church, an office left vacant by the death of his father, Joseph Smith, Sen.; and which office he held at the time he met a martyr's fate.

Hyrum Smith was a brother in very deed to the Prophet; for he shared in all the trials throughout the latter's troubled career; and indeed throughout his life he was never separated from Joseph longer than six months at a time. The Prophet held him in most tender regard. Speaking of him in his journal (December, 1835,) he said:

I could pray in my heart that all men were like my brother Hyrum, who possesses the mildness of a lamb, and the integrity of a Job; and, in short, the meekness and humility of Christ;

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<sup>3</sup>See Doc. and Cov., Sec. XI.

and I love him with that love that is stronger than death, for I never had occasion to rebuke him, nor he me.<sup>z</sup>

Of Hyrum Smith the late President John Taylor also said, speaking of him as he saw him stretched a martyr upon the floor of Carthage prison:

There he lay as I had left him. He had not moved a limb; he lay placid and calm, a monument of greatness even in death; but his noble spirit had left his tenement and had gone to dwell in regions more congenial to its exalted nature. Poor Hyrum! He was a great and good man, and my soul was cemented to his. If ever there was an exemplary, honest and virtuous man, an embodiment of all that is noble in the human form, Hyrum Smith was its representative.

Such was the character of this witness to the existence of the Nephite record. He not only never denied the testimony that he received through seeing and handling the plates of the Nephite record, but he consecrated his life to the great work of God which in a way may be said to have had its origin in the coming forth of the Book of Mormon; and finally sealed his testimony with his blood, and it is in force upon all succeeding generations of men. He loved the Book of Mormon, and from it more frequently than others took the texts which formed the central thought of the discourses he delivered to the Saints. In it also he doubtless saw foreshadowed, near the close of his career, his own impending martyrdom, and the justification also of his life. On the morning of his departure from Nauvoo to Carthage, where he met his martyrdom, he read the following passage in the presence of his family, and turned down the leaf upon it:

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<sup>z</sup>Rise and Fall of Nauvoo, p. 146, also History of the Church, Vol. II., p. 338.

And it came to pass that I prayed unto the Lord that he would give unto the Gentiles grace, that they might have charity. And it came to pass that the Lord said unto me, If they have not charity, it mattereth not unto thee, thou hast been faithful; wherefore thy garments shall be made clean. And because thou hast seen thy weakness, thou shalt be made strong, even unto the sitting down in the place which I have prepared in the mansions of my Father.

And now I.....bid farewell unto the Gentiles, yea; and also unto my brethren whom I love, until we shall meet before the judgment seat of Christ, where all men shall know that my garments are not spotted with your blood.<sup>a</sup>

SAMUEL HARRISON SMITH.

The last of the Eight Witnesses was a younger brother of the Prophet's. He was born in the year 1808, hence was twenty-two years of age when he beheld and handled the Nephite plates. He was of a serious, religious nature, even in his youth; and with three others of his father's family joined the Presbyterian church. While Joseph the Prophet was engaged with Oliver Cowdery in translating the Nephite record, in Harmony, Pennsylvania, Samuel paid him a visit in the month of May, 1829, about the time that the Aaronic Priesthood was conferred upon the Prophet and Oliver by the ministration of John the Baptist. Samuel had come to inquire about the work and Joseph bore testimony of its truth and showed him some of the translation of the Book of Mormon. Samuel seems not to have been easily converted, but after much inquiry he retired to the woods and sought, by secret and fervent prayer, for wisdom to enable him to judge for himself concerning the things of which his brother had testified. The result was that he obtained a revelation for

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<sup>a</sup>Book of Mormon, pp. 599, 600 Also Doc. and Cov., Sec. cxxxv.



himself sufficient to convince him of the truth, and on the 25th day of May, 1829, he was baptized by Oliver Cowdery and returned to his father's house, in Manchester New York, greatly glorifying and praising God. He was the third person baptized by divine authority in the new dispensation, Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery being the first two. He was also one of the six members by whom the organization of the Church was effected on the 6th day of April, 1830.

As soon as the Book of Mormon was published Samuel was among the most zealous of the brethren in proclaiming it to the world, and seeking to dispose of it for the enlightenment of mankind. He shared in all the fortunes of the Church from the commencement of its existence to the time of his death, which occurred on the 30th of July, 1844, when he was but thirty-six years of age. He endured many hardships for the gospel's sake, in his extensive travels, meeting with insult and harsh treatment at the hands of scoffers and unbelievers. He witnessed also many demonstrations of the power of God and judgments which befell those who rejected his testimony.

Samuel passed through many trying ordeals of persecution. In the expulsion of the Saints from Missouri, in 1838-9, a special effort was made to capture him and some others for participating in what is known as "Crooked River Battle," for particulars of which see the Church History. He was ordained a High Priest in the Church, made a member of the High Council in Kirtland, Ohio, and was noted for the mingled qualities of justice and mercy he exercised in his office. He was among the founders of Nauvoo, and though rising to no great prominence, was known for his steadfastness in adhering to the truth. At the time of the martyrdom of his brothers, Joseph and Hyrum, he was living at Plymouth, in the eastern part of Hancock county, but

frequently visited Nauvoo. Hearing of the arrest of his brothers and their imprisonment at Carthage, he immediately went to the latter place, but only to find that the martyr's fate had already overtaken them, and in sadness he accompanied their bodies to Nauvoo. He survived them but a few weeks, his death being produced by a severe billious fever, doubtless brought on by physical and mental strain produced by the sudden death of his brothers.

Samuel Smith, like his father, Joseph Smith, Sen., and his brother Hyrum, not only remained true to the testimony to which he subscribed in the first edition of the Book of Mormon, but consecrated his life to the work which its coming forth may be said to have commenced; and like them he lived and died a martyr to that holy cause; and his testimony as theirs, is in force in all the world.

It will be observed from the foregoing account of the lives of the Eight Witnesses, with reference to their testimony to the existence of the Nephite plates, that five of them, viz.: Christian Whitmer, Peter Whitmer, Jun., Joseph Smith, Sen., Hyrum Smith, and Samuel H. Smith, all remained true throughout their lives, not only to their testimony, but faithful to the Church also, and were honorable, righteous men. While the three of the Eight Witnesses who left the Church, or were excommunicated from it, not one of them ever denied the truth of his testimony; a circumstance of some weight in helping one to determine the value of the testimony to which, with those who remained faithful to the Church, they subscribed their names when the Book of Mormon was first given to the world.