



Type: Book Chapter

The New Witness Introduced

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Source: *New Witnesses for God: Volume I - Joseph Smith, The Prophet*

Published: Salt Lake City; Deseret News, 1911 (2nd Edition)

Pages: 171-182

CHAPTER XI.

THE NEW WITNESS INTRODUCED.

At the beginning of the nineteenth century, the western part of the State of New York was a new country, by which I mean—one recently settled, and comparatively a wilderness. At the close of the Revolutionary War, which secured to the former British Colonies independence, the people of the new-born nation found their country and themselves impoverished. Manufactures, owing to the narrow and selfish policy of England toward her colonies (that policy had been to discourage the colonies from manufacturing, lest they should compete with the manufactures of England) could scarcely be said to have an existence. Commerce, owing to the fact that the new nation had not yet established a commercial standing in the world, afforded little opportunity for American activity. Moreover, the American people themselves, of that generation, because of the conditions which had surrounded them in the New World, were neither skilled artisans capable of competing with the British workmen in manufacturing, nor had they the cunning that comes by training, which qualified them for immediate success. What they did possess was sturdy physical frames—constitutions unimpaired either by the excesses practiced among barbarians, or by the vices which abound in older civilizations. They possessed strong hands, superb courage and simple tastes, and with these they entered into that almost boundless empire of wilderness to the west of them, to make homes for themselves and their children.

Looking from the standpoint of our modern life, which

knows so much of ease and comfort, the lot of these pioneers was a hard one. The soil which their rude shares upturned to the sun was indeed virgin and fertile, but before it could be cultivated it had to be cleared of its heavy growth of timber and underbrush, and with the means then employed, to clear a farm was well-nigh the labor of a life-time. Each pioneer with the help of a few neighbors—which help he paid for by helping them in return—built his own house, his barn, his sheds, and fenced his “clearing.” Each family within itself was practically self-supporting. The hum of the spinning-wheel, the rattle of the shuttle and the thumping of the loom was heard in every home, as wool and flax were converted into fabrics to clothe the family; and every pioneer cultivated such a variety of products that his farm and his labor supplied his wants and those of his household. Happily for their contentment, the conditions in which they lived rendered their wants but few.

In settling the wilderness the pioneers were not disposed to crowd each other. They settled far apart. It often happened that a man’s nearest neighbor would be two or three miles away, so that the country for a long time was but sparsely settled. Towns were few and far between, and were only slowly builded. No such mushroom-growth of towns was known as that which characterized the settlement of the great prairie states in subsequent years. A few families settling on a stream furnishing water power for a grist-mill, or at some point on lake or stream frequented by the Indians for the purpose of trading their furs, formed the nucleus of these towns, and soon school-houses and churches increased their attractions.

It was a simple, honest life these pioneers led. A life full of toil; for it was a stubborn fight they had with the wilderness to subdue it. And yet their very hardships tended to-

wards virtue. A busy life in honorable pursuits can never be a vicious one; and the constant toil of these men in wood and field so kept hands and head employed that there was left no time nor opportunity nor much of inclination to pursue evil. Their amusements were few and simple, consisting in the main of the occasional gathering of neighbors for social enjoyments—the love of youth and maiden seeking its legitimate expression in that companionship which alone satisfies the hunger of the heart, I doubt not, was the incentive which brought about these gatherings—at least their frequency; and the old, well pleased to see their own youth reflected in that of their sons and daughters, looked on with unconcealed delight.

Not only was this life in the wilderness favorable to morality, it contributed equally well to the cultivation of the religious sentiment in man. Man is by nature a religious animal, and where natural conditions prevail instead of artificial ones, true to his nature, man inclines toward a religious state of mind. There is something in the awful stillness of the wood that says to man—"God is in this solitude!" The murmur of the brook, splashing over its pebbly bed, and the mournful sighing of the winds through the tree tops, whisper to his spirit the fundamental truth of all religion—"God lives!" The stars looking down through the trees or mirrored in stream or lake bear witness to the same great truth; while the orderly course of the seasons, bringing with such undeviating regularity seed time and harvest, the period of summer's growth and winter's rest, accompanied by the fact of the sun shining for the evil as for the good; and the rain falling upon the just and the unjust alike, gives ample evidence of God's interest in the world he has created and of his beneficence and mercy towards all men.

When conditions were so favorable for the development

of natural religion, it is not surprising that profound interest was manifested also in revealed religion. Especially when we remember that these pioneers of the wilderness were but from one to three generations removed from ancestors who had left the Old World for the express purpose of worshipping God according to their understanding of that same revealed religion. That skepticism of the eighteenth century which in some quarters had such a baneful influence upon religious belief, was scarcely felt in these settlements remote from the old centers of the New World civilization. These men of the wilderness believed the Bible and looked upon it with the reverence worthy of men descended from Protestant fathers who had in their system of theology made it take the place of pope and church, and established it as their sole authority and infallible guide in the matters of faith and morals. While many of them refused to identify themselves with any of the various sects about them, or subscribe to their creeds, they were profound believers in the word of God, and often confessed this short creed which they duly impressed upon their descendants: "I believe in God, in the Bible, and in a state of future rewards and punishments."

There was no lack of zealous churchmen among the pioneers, sectaries who taught special forms of faith and contended for the necessity of particular dogmas and formulas with all that ardor and narrowness of view that usually characterizes the sectarian mind. Their contentions for the correctness of their respective creeds were not always free from bitterness; but for all that the Protestant sects in the main recognized each other as parts of a great universal church, and occasionally would so far put away the differences of creed which separated them as to unite for the purpose of holding union protracted meetings for the conversion of unbelievers.

During the continuance of these meetings the minister avoided preaching any doctrine except such as could be accepted by all the sects—evangelical doctrine. Professedly their sole effort was to lead the unconverted to believe in and accept Christ, let them join what sect they pleased. Usually matters went on very agreeably until the converts made by these united efforts began to express their preference for one or the other of the different religious sects. Then would break out those fierce sectarian struggles for advantage which ever have been so disgraceful to Protestant Christendom. The good feeling temporarily exhibited during the union meetings nearly all disappeared, and by the fact of its vanishing impressed an observer with the idea that all along it was more pretended than real. Sectarian zeal was unbounded in its efforts to secure as many of the new converts as possible to its own peculiar denomination. There was a cry of lo here and of lo there, not unfrequently accompanied with remarks of detraction about the opposing sects. The priests, each jealous for his own church, contended fiercely with one another, so that they who ought to have been the most exemplary in that conduct which makes for peace on earth and good will towards men, were often the most to be blamed for stirring up contention.

Such a wave of religious fervor brought about in the manner above set forth, and attended with results described, passed over the western part of the State of New York in the winter and spring of 1820. The movement at that time was of unusual interest, first on account of its extent, and second on account of the intensity of the religious excitement produced. It can well be imagined that with these two conditions existing, the bitterness among the sects taking part in the movement would be correspondingly great when it came to dividing up the spoils. By which I mean when the con-

verts made by a unity of effort began to file off some to one sect and some to another. Such was the case. Presbyterians opposed Mehtodists, and Methodists Baptists; and Baptists opposed both the other sects. All was strife, contention, confusion, beneath which Christian charity and good will to man—these weightier matters of the law—were buried so far out of sight that it might be questioned if they ever existed.

Standing somewhat apart from, but watching with intense interest this religious excitement, and wondering greatly at the confusion and strife attendant upon it was a lad fourteen years old.^a He was born of parents numbered among the pioneers of the wilderness, and up to that time had lived with them surrounded by the conditions already described in the first part of this chapter as so favorable to morality and the development of religious sentiment. By this religious agitation the mind of the lad was stirred to serious reflection accompanied with great uneasiness on account of the sectarian strife so incessant and so bitter. He saw several members of his father's family connect themselves with the Presbyterian sect, but he himself was more partial to the Methodist Church; and at times he felt some desire to be united with it. The tumult arising from the religious contention, however, was such as to bewilder him, and he felt himself incompetent to decide who was right and who was wrong. "What is to be done?" he would often ask himself. "Who of all these parties are right? Or are they all wrong together? If any one of them be right, which is it and how shall I know it?"^b

Young as he was, his native intelligence taught him that something was radically wrong with all this contention over religion. It was clear even to his boyish mind that God

^a Joseph Smith the prophet was born in Sharon, Windsor County, State of Vermont, 23rd of December, 1805.

^b "Pearl of Great Price," p. 83. (1902 edition always quoted).

could not be the author of all this confusion. God's church would not be split up into factions in this fashion; if he taught one society to worship one way, and administer one set of ordinances, he would not teach another principles diametrically opposed.^c

Influenced by these reflections he refrained from joining any of the sects and in the meantime studied the scriptures as best he could for himself. While thus engaged his attention was attracted to that passage in James which says:

"If any of you lack wisdom, let him ask of God, that giveth to all men liberally, and upbraideth not; and it shall be given him."

That passage was like the voice of God to his spirit. "Never," he was wont to say in later life—"never did any passage of scripture come with more power to the heart of man than this did at this time to mine. It seemed to enter with great force into every feeling of my heart."^d He reflected upon it again and again, and as he did so the impression grew stronger that the advice of the ancient apostle offered a solution to his perplexities. It never occurred to him to think that the passage meant other than it said, or to question the universal application of the advice it gives. He knew nothing of the sophistry of the schools of theology which too often made the word of God of none effect by their learned exegesis. Through the innocent eyes of a mere boy, he looked the proposition of James squarely in the front, and, thanks to the teachings of parents who revered the word of God, he believed what the man of God said, and he be-

^c See Joseph's reasoning upon this subject, published in his account of the rise of the church, written for Mr. John Wentworth, proprietor of the "Chicago Democrat" (1842). This article is also found in a pamphlet published by Geo. A. Smith, entitled "Answers to Questions," p. 37. Also "History of the Church," Vol. IV, ch. xxxi.

^d "History of the Church," Vol. I, p. 4.

lieved further that he expressed that which the Lord inspired him to say; so that it came to him with the full force of a revelation. Under such circumstances what was more natural than for him to reason thus: If any person needs wisdom from God, I do, for how to act I do not know, and unless I can get more wisdom than I now have, I shall never know.^e But one conclusion could be arrived at through such a course of reflection: he must either remain in darkness and confusion or do as James directed—ask of God. And since he gives wisdom to them that lack wisdom, and will give liberally and not upbraid, he thought he might venture. And so at last he did. He selected a place in a grove near his father's house, and there one beautiful morning in the spring of 1820,^f after looking timidly about to ascertain that he was alone, the boy knelt in his first attempt at vocal prayer, to ask God for wisdom.

No sooner had he begun calling upon the Lord than there sprang upon him a being from the unseen world, who so entirely overcame him, and bound his utterance, that he could not speak. Thick darkness gathered about him, and it seemed to the struggling boy that he was doomed to sudden destruction. He still exerted all his power to call upon the Lord to deliver him from the power of the enemy who had seized him. But still his unseen though none the less real enemy continued to prevail. Despair filled his heart. He was about to abandon himself to destruction when at the moment of his greatest alarm he saw a pillar of light exactly over his head, above the brightness of the sun, which descended gradually until it fell upon him. No sooner did this light appear than he was free from the enemy which had

^e His reasoning set down here is paraphrased from his own account of what he thought. "History of the Church," Period I, Vol. I, p. 4.

^f The exact date of this occurrence is not known.

held him bound. As the light rested upon him he saw within it two Personages whose brightness and glory defy all description. They stood above him in the air, and one of them pointing to the other said:

“JOSEPH, THIS IS MY BELOVED SON, HEAR HIM.”

The object of the lad in going to that place to engage in secret prayer was to learn of God which of all the sects was right, that he might know which to join. No sooner, therefore, did he recover his self-possession than he asked the personage to whom he was thus introduced, which of all the sects was right—which he should join. He was answered that he must join none of them; for they were all wrong. Their creeds were an abomination in God’s sight; the professors of them were all corrupt—“They draw near me with their lips,” said the personage, talking to him, “but their hearts are far from me; they teach for doctrine the commandments of men; having a form of Godliness but denying the power thereof!”

Again he was told that he must join none of them.

Many other things were said to him on that occasion which the Prophet has not recorded, except to say that he was promised that the fullness of the gospel would at some future time be made known to him.^g

With this the vision closed, and the boy on coming to himself was lying upon his back looking up into heaven. He arose to his feet and looked upon the place of his fierce struggle with his unseen though powerful enemy—the place also of his splendid vision!

What a change had come to the lad in one brief hour! He was no longer struggling with doubts or troubled with perplexities as to which of the sects was right. He had gone

^g“Answers to Questions,” p. 37. Also the Wentworth Letter, “History of the Church,” Vol. IV, p. 536.

to that place of prayer plagued with uncertainty, now no one among the children of men so well assured as he of the course to pursue. He had proved the correctness of James' doctrine—men may ask God for wisdom, receive liberally and not be upbraided. He knew that the religious creeds of the world were untrue; that they taught for doctrine the commandments of men; that religionists observed a form of godliness, but in their hearts denied the power of God; that they drew near to the Lord with their lips, but their hearts were far from him. He knew that God, the Father, lived, for he had both seen him and heard his voice; he knew that Jesus lived and was the Son of God, for he had been introduced to him by the Father, conversed with him in heavenly vision and had received instruction and a promise that the fullness of the gospel should yet be made known to him. Up to that time his life had been uneventful, and of a character to make him of no particular consequence in the world; now he stood as God's WITNESS among the children of men. Henceforth he must bear witness to the great truths he had learned. His testimony will arouse the wrath of men, and with unrelenting fury they will pursue him. Slander, outright falsehood and misrepresentation will play havoc with his reputation. Everywhere his name will be held up as evil. Derision will laugh at his testimony, Ridicule mock it. On every hand he will be met with the cry of "False prophet! false prophet!" Chains and the dungeon's gloom await him; mobs with murderous hate will assail him again and again; and at the last, while under the protection of the law, and the honor of a great commonwealth pledged for his safety, he will be murdered in cold blood for the word of God and the testimony of Jesus!

How little that fair-haired boy, standing there in the unpruned forest, with the sunlight stealing through the trees

about him, realized the burden placed upon his shoulders that morning by reason of the visitation he received in answer to his prayer!

Here is not the place for argument, that is to come later; but let us consider the wide-sweeping effect of this boy's vision upon the accepted theology of Christendom.

First, it was a flat contradiction to the assumption that revelation had ceased, that God had no further communication to make to man.

Second, it reveals the errors into which men had fallen concerning the personages of the Godhead. It makes it manifest that God is not an incorporeal being without body, or parts; on the contrary he appeared to the Prophet in the form of a man, as he did to the ancient prophets. Thus after centuries of controversy the simple truth of the scriptures which teach that man was created in the likeness and the very image of God—hence God must be the same in form as man—was reaffirmed.

Third, it corrected the error of the theologians respecting the oneness of the persons of the Father and the Son. Instead of being one in person as the theologians taught, they are distinct in their persons, as much so as any father and son on earth; and the oneness of the Godhead referred to in the scriptures, must have reference to unity of purpose and of will; the mind of the one being the mind of the other, and so as to the will and other attributes. The Godhead is made up of harmonized, divine intelligences.

The announcement of these truths, coupled with that other truth proclaimed by the Son of God, viz.: that none of the sects and churches of Christendom were acknowledged as the church or kingdom of God, furnish the elements for a religious revolution that will affect the very foundations of modern Christian theology. In a moment all the rubbish

concerning religion which had accumulated through all the centuries since the gospel and authority to administer its ordinances had been taken from the earth, was grandly swept aside—the living rocks of truth were made bare upon which the Church of Christ was to be founded—a New Dispensation of the gospel was about to be committed to the earth—God had raised up a Witness for himself among the children of men.