
“Strange Notions and False Spirits”

D&C 41: Introduction

Three days after the Prophet Joseph Smith and his wife Emma arrived in Kirtland, Ohio, Joseph received this revelation. In a preface to the revelation, he wrote, “The members were striving to do the will of God, so far as they knew it, though some strange notions and false spirits had crept in among them.”¹

What were the strange notions and false spirits that the Prophet Joseph was referring to? At Church meetings the newly baptized clamored for a chance to show off their “god-given” abilities—questionable revelations and unusual physical movements. They contended that physical demonstrations were a reflection of the gifts of the Spirit. Some would

swoon away, and make unseemly gestures, and be drawn or disfigured in their countenances. Others would fall into ecstasies, and be drawn into contortions, cramps, fits, etc. Others would seem to have visions and revelations, which were not edifying, and which were not congenial to the doctrine and spirit of the gospel.²

Their actions were not unlike revival meetings in which emotions were exhibited in a fever of physical demonstrations.

Numbered among the “false spirits” present in Kirtland was a man known as Black Pete, who claimed to see angels and receive letters directly from heaven. George A. Smith wrote of Black Pete running “off a steep wash bank twenty-five feet high” and falling into the

¹ History, 1838–1856, volume A-1 [23 December 1805–30 August 1834], 93.

² Scot Facer Proctor and Maurine Jensen Proctor, *Autobiography of Parley P. Pratt: Revised and Enhanced Edition* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2000), 70–72.

Chagrin River in an attempt to catch a flying revelation.³ Heman Basset claimed to receive a revelation from an angel. After reading his revelation to others, he showed a picture of what he said was a group of angels. Then there was Mrs. Hubble, who professed to be a “prophetess of the Lord.”⁴

One strange notion was the concept of “the family” which held “all things common” and had organized a “common stock” (Acts 4:32). John Whitmer viewed the family system as set up on the Isaac Morley farm as—

going to destruction very fast as to temporal things; for they considered from reading the scripture that what belonged to a brother, belonged to any of the brethren. Therefore they would take each other’s clothes and other property and use it without leave which brought on confusion and disappointment, for they did not understand the scripture.⁵

Failure to discern between the strange notions and false spirits led to differences of opinion and widespread doctrinal confusion among the Saints in Ohio. So widespread did the confusion become that converts expressed aloud their belief that only the Prophet Joseph Smith could set the Church in order. Through teaching correct principles and doctrines, Joseph convinced many of those led astray by strange notions and false spirits to abandon their preconceived notions and accept the “more perfect law of the Lord.”⁶

³ George A. Smith, “Historical Discourse,” *Journal of Discourses*, 11:3–4.

⁴ John Whitmer, *History*, 1831–circa 1847, 11. Joseph Smith Papers.

⁵ Whitmer, *History*, 1831–circa 1847, 11.

⁶ Letter to the Church, circa February 1834, Document Transcript. Joseph Smith Papers.