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THE STRENGTH OF THE  
'MORMON' POSITION

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# **Orson F. Whitney**

## **The Strength of the 'Mormon' Position**

### **THE STRENGTH OF THE "MORMON" POSITION**

**By Elder Orson F. Whitney,**

**Of the Council of the Twelve, Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints**

Upon the pinnacle of the Temple in Salt Lake City, there stands the gilded statue of an Angel, in the act of sounding a trumpet, symbolizing the restoration and proclamation of the Everlasting Gospel, in fulfillment of the Scripture which says:

"And I saw another angel fly in the midst of heaven, having the everlasting gospel to preach to them that dwell on the earth, and to every nation, and kindred, and tongue, and people,

"Saying with a loud voice, Fear God, and give glory to Him; for the hour of His judgment is come."—Revelation 14:6-7.

#### **Early Christian Annals**

History, tinged with tradition, affirms these to be the circumstances under which those words were uttered: The Savior had chosen Twelve Apostles, and had commissioned them to go into all the world and preach the Gospel to every creature. Obedient to the divine mandate, they had gone forth, and within fifty years had lifted the Gospel standard in every considerable city of the Roman Empire, which then had sway over the known world. One by one the Apostles had been taken: James was slain with the sword at Jerusalem; Peter was crucified, and Paul beheaded, at Rome; all had suffered martyrdom for the word of God and the testimony of Jesus—all save one, concerning whom Peter had inquired: "Lord, what shall this man do?" And the Savior, answering, had said: "If I will that he tarry till I come, what is that to thee?" (St. John 21:21-22.)

Modern revelation confirms the ancient tradition that John, the beloved disciple, did not die, but obtained a promise from the Lord that he should remain upon earth, not subject to death, and bring souls to Him. He was to "prophesy before nations, kindreds, tongues and peoples", and continue till the Lord came in His glory. (Doctrine and Covenants, Section 7.) An attempt was made upon John's life, but it proved ineffectual. He was thrown into a cauldron of boiling oil, but escaped miraculously.

#### **John on Patmos**

In the ninety-sixth year of the Christian era, this man was on the Isle of Patmos, in the Aegean Sea. Patmos was the Roman Siberia. To that desolate place the Empire banished its criminals, compelling them to work in the mines. John was an exile for the Truth's sake. But the Lord had not forgotten His servant, though men had rejected him and cast him out. The Heavens were opened, and he was shown many things pertaining to the future. He foresaw the apostasy of the Christian world, its departure from "the faith once delivered to the saints", the "falling away" foretold by the Apostle Paul (2 Thes. 2:3). But John also looked forward to a time when that faith would be restored, and when the hour of God's judgment would come. The dead, small and great, would stand before the

Great White Throne, and be "judged out of the things written in the books", every man according to his works. (Rev. 20:11-13.)

## Joseph Smith

To the Latter-day Saints, these are the days of that predicted restoration, and Joseph Smith was the divinely appointed agent for bringing back the Everlasting Gospel. Who was this Joseph Smith? He was a farmer's boy, born among the mountains of Vermont, December 23, 1805, but living with his parents in the back-woods of western New York, when his career as a prophet began. He had been much exercised upon the subject of his soul's salvation, a religious revival having recently occurred in his neighborhood. The ministers of the various sects united in calling upon the people to repent; each one urging them to join his particular congregation, and disputing among themselves upon points of doctrine and authority. The situation bewildered the boy, who was an honest seeker after light, anxious to know the true Church, in order that he might join it. One day while reading the Scriptures, he chanced upon the following passage:

"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." (James 1:5.)

Profoundly impressed by these sacred words, he resolved to test the promise by asking from God the wisdom of which he stood in need. With that object in view, he retired to the woods near his father's home, and knelt in prayer. No sooner had he begun to pray, than he was seized upon by a power which filled his soul with horror and paralyzed his tongue so that he could no longer speak. So terrible was the visitation, that he almost gave way to despair. But he continued praying; for there are two ways of offering prayer—"orally and in secret." He had been praying orally, but could not now supplicate in that manner, being unable to move his lips. Yet he continued to pray—with "the soul's sincere desire"; and just at the moment when he feared that he must abandon himself to destruction, he saw, directly over his head, a light more brilliant than noonday. In the midst of a pillar of glory he beheld two beings in human form, One of whom, pointing to the Other, said: "This is my beloved Son, hear Him".

As soon as the Light appeared, the boy found himself delivered from the fettering power of the Evil One. When he could again command utterance, he inquired of his glorious visitants which of all the religious denominations was right—which one was the true Church of Christ? To his astonishment he was told that none of them was right; that they had all gone out of the way, and were teaching for doctrine the commandments of men. The Lord did not recognize any of them, but was about to restore the Gospel and the Priesthood and establish his Church once more in the midst of mankind.

This was Joseph Smith's first vision and revelation. It came in the spring of 1820, when he was a few months over fourteen years of age. The greater part of this wonderful manifestation was the part that did not speak, the silent revealing of God as a personage; a truth plainly taught in the Scriptures (Gen. 1:26, 27; Phil. 2:5-8; Col. 1:13-15; Heb. 1-3), but ignored or denied by modern Christianity.

Three years later the youth received a visitation from an Angel, who gave his name as Moroni, the same who is represented by the statue on the Salt Lake Temple. This Angel announced himself as the last of a line of prophets who had ministered to an ancient people called Nephites, a branch of the house of Israel—not the Lost Tribes, as is often asserted, but a portion of the tribe of Joseph. They had crossed over from Jerusalem about the year 600 B. C., and, with a remnant of the tribe of Judah, which joined them later, had inhabited the Americas down to about the beginning of the fourth Christian century. At that time the civilized though degenerate nation was destroyed by a savage faction known as Lamanites, ancestors of the American Indians.

## **The Book of Mormon**

The Angel showed to Joseph where a record of the Nephites had been deposited, and subsequently delivered it into his hands, with interpreters, Urim and Thummim, by means of which the youth translated the record into English and gave to the world the Book of Mormon. It was so named for its compiler, the Nephite prophet Mormon, whose son and survivor, Moroni, had buried the metallic plates containing it in a hill, where they were found September 22nd, 1823. The Hill Cumorah, called "Mormon Hill" by the present day inhabitants of that region, is between Palmyra and Manchester, in the State of New York. For their belief in the Book of Mormon, the Latter-day Saints are termed "Mormons", and their religion, "Mormonism".

This book tells how the Savior, after his resurrection, made himself known to the Nephites—the "other sheep" referred to in John 10:16—and organized his Church among them, after the pattern of his Church at Jerusalem. Choosing twelve special witnesses, he gave to three of them the same promise that he had given to the Apostle John—that they should remain upon earth, superior to death, and bring souls to Him. He prophesied concerning America, the Land of Zion, the place for the New Jerusalem, a holy city to be built by a gathering of scattered Israel prior to His second coming. The Nephite record, containing the fulness of the Gospel as delivered to that ancient people, is a history of this chosen land and a prophecy of its future. It predicts the great work introduced by the Latter-day Prophet, a work so marvelous in some of its phases that most men reject it, deeming it a fable.

But the Christian world, with the Bible in its hands, should have been prepared for something of this kind. The Hebrew seers prophesied concerning it. Isaiah foretold "a marvelous work and a wonder", declaring at the same time that the wisdom of the wise should perish, and the understanding of the prudent be hid; meaning, evidently, that human sagacity and worldly knowledge would stand confounded before it. That prophet, speaking in the name of the Lord, gave as the reason for such innovation: "This people draw near me with their mouth, and with their lips do honor me, but have removed their heart far from me, and their fear toward me is taught by the precept of men" (Isaiah 29:13, 14). A brief yet comprehensive description of the state of the religious world at the time of the advent of "Mormonism".

## **Divine Authority**

While the Book of Mormon was in course of translation, John the Baptist, as an angel from God, conferred upon Joseph Smith and his scribe, Oliver Cowdery, the Aaronic Priesthood, which holds the keys of outward ordinances and ministers in temporal things. Subsequently the Melchizedek Priesthood, holding the keys of spiritual mysteries, and including the Aaronic as the greater includes the less, was conferred upon them by three other heavenly messengers—the Apostles Peter, James and John. Thus empowered, the two young men, with four associates, organized on the sixth of April, 1830, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. This event took place in Fayette, Seneca County, New York.

Thus was restored the Ancient Faith, with the powers of the Eternal Priesthood, the delegated divine authority that enables men to act as God's representatives, and without which no man can lawfully administer the sacred ordinances of the Gospel. "No man taketh this honor unto himself, but he that is called of God, as was Aaron". (Heb. 5:4.) Thus was re-established the true Church of Christ, and the prophetic Ensign lifted for the gathering of scattered Israel (Isaiah 11:12); an event preparatory to the Savior's second coming.

## **A Catholic Utterance**

Many years ago a learned man, a member of the Roman Catholic Church, came to Utah and spoke from the stand of the Salt Lake Tabernacle. I became well acquainted with him, and we conversed freely and frankly. A great scholar, with perhaps a dozen languages at his tongue's end, he seemed to know all about theology, law, literature, science, and philosophy. One day he said to me: "You Mormons are all ignoramuses. You don't even know the strength of your own position. It is so strong that there is only one other tenable in the whole Christian world, and that is the position of the Catholic Church. The issue is between Catholicism and Mormonism. If we are right, you are wrong; if you are right, we are wrong; and that's all there is to it. The Protestants haven't a leg to stand on. For if we are wrong, they are wrong with us, since they were a part of us and went out from us; while if we are right, they are apostates whom we cut off long ago. If we have the apostolic succession from St. Peter, as we claim, there was no need of Joseph Smith and Mormonism; but if we have not that succession, then such a man as Joseph Smith was necessary, and Mormonism's attitude is the only consistent one. It is either the perpetuation of the Gospel from ancient times, or the restoration of the Gospel in latter days."

My reply was substantially as follows: "I agree with you, Doctor, in nearly all that you have said. But don't deceive yourself with the notion that we "Mormons" are not aware of the strength of our position. We are better aware of it than anyone else. We have not all been to college; we cannot all speak the dead languages; we may be 'ignoramuses', as you say; but we know that we are right, and we know that you are wrong". I was just as frank with him as he had been with me.

## **An Episcopal View**

At a later period I conversed with another man of culture, a bishop of the Episcopal Church. He affirmed that if Joseph Smith, at the outset of his career, had become acquainted with the Episcopalians, he would have been content and would have looked no further for spiritual light. "The trouble is", said the Bishop, "Joseph encountered the Methodists, the Baptists, the Presbyterians and others, with their conflicting creeds and claims. These failing to satisfy him, he sought elsewhere. Now the Episcopalians have an unbroken succession of authority all down the centuries, and if Joseph Smith had become informed as to them, he would never have taken the trouble to organize another church."

And these are some of the views that learned men take of "Mormonism". With all their learning, they are not able to come to a knowledge of the truth. They do not begin to dream of the greatness of God's work, the grandeur of Christ's cause. They have no idea of the real strength of its position. They assume that Joseph Smith stumbled upon something of which he did not know the true value, and that it was sheer luck which gave to "Mormonism" its vantage ground, its recognized strength of position. Never was there a grosser error. There are concepts as much higher than these, as the heavens are higher than the earth. The "Mormons" are not the "ignoramuses" when it comes to a consideration of the Gospel's mighty themes.

## **The Real Reason**

Yet it is not because of human "smartness"—not because the followers of Joseph Smith are brainier than other people, that they have a greater knowledge of God and are capable of loftier ideals in religion. It is because they have received, through the gift of the Holy Ghost, a perceptive power, a spiritual illumination which the world, with all its culture, does not possess, and without which no

man can know God or comprehend His purposes. It cannot be had from books and schools. Colleges and universities cannot impart it. It can come only in one way—God's way, not man's. The Latter-day Saints have it, not because of any greater natural ability than other men and women possess, but because they have bowed in obedience to the divine will, thus making themselves worthy to receive this inestimable boon. All mankind may have it upon precisely the same conditions.

### **Another Objection**

The Episcopal Bishop whom I have mentioned remarked to me on another occasion, that his main objection to "Mormonism" was that we "Mormons" were not interested in anything going on outside of our own community. He declared that we gave no credit to other peoples or to other systems for the good they were accomplishing. "For instance", said he, "we retranslate the Scriptures, making them more plain, more intelligible, with a view to enlightening mankind thereon; but you give us no credit for that. We uncover ancient cities, buried civilizations, here in America and elsewhere; we decipher old-time inscriptions on obelisks, in documents, etc., seeking to acquaint the present with the past; but you put no value on such work. We found hospitals and infirmaries, maintain missions, carry the name of Christ to the heathen, publish the Bible by millions of copies, and are endeavoring to place one in every home. But you take no account of these things; you are not interested in our efforts; you think them all vain and of no worth".

### **Not a Narrow Religion**

The remark surprised me. I was astonished that any well informed person could entertain such an opinion respecting us and our religion. There may be such a thing as a narrow "Mormon"; there may be such a thing as a narrow notion in the mind of some "Mormon"; but there never has been and there never will be such a thing as a narrow "Mormonism". Far from ignoring what other peoples and other systems are doing, it takes account of everything, and assigns it to its proper place in the universal scheme. "If there is anything virtuous, lovely, or of good report, or praiseworthy, we seek after these things." So says the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, in one of its Articles of Faith.

"Mormonism" is a much bigger thing than Catholic scholars or Episcopal bishops imagine. It is the greatest system of philosophy that the world has ever known, the grandest poem that Divine Genius ever created, the mightiest melody ever struck from the vibrant harps of Eternity. It is the sublime drama of all the ages, and the last act is now on, the final scene about to unfold.

### **What "Mormonism" Stands For**

"Mormonism" stands for the restoration of the Gospel in this dispensation; but that is not all. It stands for the Gospel itself in all the dispensations, as those periods are termed during which God has spoken to man and dispensed from heaven these saving principles and powers. This is but one of a number of such periods, reaching from the days of Adam down to the present time. The Gospel preached by the ancient Twelve was a restored Gospel, just as much as it is to-day. It had been upon Earth before the age of the Apostles. "Christianity", the faith of the once despised "Christians", is now "Mormonism", the religion of the unpopular "Mormons". What matter the names bestowed upon it by men? Truth is not to be disposed of by pelting it with epithets. The character of a jewel is not changed by covering it with rubbish and dirt. A diamond is a diamond, whether it sparkle in the dust at your feet, or glitter in the diadem of a queen.

"Mormonism" is not a product of the Nineteenth Century. Joseph Smith did not originate it, nor did any other man. What is called "Mormonism" is the Everlasting Gospel, the religion of all the ages, God's great plan for the salvation of the human family; and not only their salvation, but their exaltation if they obey it in fulness. The Gospel has a three fold power; it redeems, saves, and glorifies. Redemption is resurrection, but that is not sufficient; it is not enough that man be brought forth from the grave. All men, good and bad, will be resurrected; but resurrection is not salvation, any more than salvation is exaltation. Many redeemed from the grave will be condemned at the final judgment, for evil deeds done in the body; and many will be saved, yet come short of the glory that constitutes exaltation.

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