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Steadfast Testimony of the Three Witnesses

Author(s): Charles H. Hart

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Abstract: Hart refutes the claim made in the 1911 edition of the *Catholic Encyclopedia* that the Three Witnesses denied their testimonies of the Book of Mormon plates. As evidence, he cites an 1883 interview of David Whitmer, the dying declaration of Martin Harris, and an affidavit testifying that, in a Michigan murder trial, Oliver Cowdery defended the Book of Mormon.

THE LATTER-DAY SAINTS'
MILLENNIAL STAR

ESTABLISHED IN 1840

“And how be it my church save it be called in my name? For if a church be called in Moses’ name then it be Moses’ church; or if it be called in the name of a man then it be the church of a man; but if it be called in my name then it is my church, if it so be that they are built upon my gospel.” BOOK OF MORMON, 3 NEPHI 27: 8.

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STEADFAST TESTIMONY OF THE THREE WITNESSES*

ELDER CHARLES H. HART

OF THE FIRST COUNCIL OF SEVENTY AND PRESIDENT OF THE
CANADIAN MISSION

AS ANNOUNCED in this conference, I have been called to preside over the Canadian Mission. The call came to me at the close of a busy day on February 3rd, and on February 14th I was on my journey to that historic field, opened nearly ninety-five years ago by Joseph Young, the father of our late and beloved Seymour B. Young. I thought it was an appropriate thing to have a Seventy called to that field, opened by the man who was the first Seventy and the first President of Seventy in this dispensation. He was accompanied by Phineas H. Young, Elial Strong and Eleazer Miller. In six weeks’ time they had raised up a branch of the Church at Ernesttown, Ontario.

The Reverend Harry Emerson Fosdick, who has been referred to in this conference, has just issued a book bearing the date August, 1926, called *Adventurous Religion*. By that he means the same spirit and zeal and adventurous living that characterized the introduction of the Gospel in the days of the Saviour. He characterizes the incidents connected with Paul’s ministry as “the most influential uprush of spiritual power in human history”, and says that “Christianity began in a great adventure”, and that “the life to which Jesus summoned men required insight and bravery to undertake, and fortitude to continue.”

*Address delivered at the sixth session of the Ninety-seventh Annual Conference held in the Tabernacle, Salt Lake City, Utah, April 6th, 1927.

If the Reverend Fosdick would know of "adventurous religion" in this age, he need only consult the history of the Canadian Mission.

EARLY LABOURS IN CANADA

Elder Brigham Young made his way to Canada in December, 1832, wading through deep snow and crossing the lake when the ice was so thin that it bent under the weight of him and his companion; the two could not walk together, and the water above the ice wet their shoes. He and his brother, Joseph Young, raised up a branch in West Loughborough, baptizing forty-five souls. Elder Brigham Young, in July, 1833, returned to Kirtland, Ohio, accompanied by some twenty or thirty new converts. This was followed by the labours of Elder Orson Pratt. In fact, Elder Pratt thought he was the first in this dispensation to preach the Gospel in Canada. He was followed by Elder Parley P. Pratt, in 1836, and what wonderful fruits these men had in the ministry! John Taylor was providentially found in the city of Toronto, and afterwards, as you know, he became President of the Church. I am a little ahead of my story, chronologically. I should record the fact that Presidents Joseph Smith and Sidney Rigdon preached in this historic field. Old Father Nickerson and his wife, of Mount Pleasant, Ontario, drove to Kirtland and brought the Prophet Joseph and Sidney Rigdon to Mount Pleasant. There is a graphic account of this visit, written by Lydia Knight, whose maiden name was Lydia Bailey, in her *History*, on pages fourteen to twenty-three. Lawyers abbreviate by using exhibits. May we refer to these pages as an exhibit to be read as an example of "adventurous religion?"

CANADIAN CONVERTS

Someone has suggested that Canada is really entitled to much credit in opening up the British Mission, because four of the converts in Canada accompanied Elders Heber C. Kimball, Willard Richards and Orson Hyde to the British Mission. One of those persons was Joseph Fielding, the brother of Mary and Mersey Fielding.

From this early work we can get some insight into what the Lord meant, no doubt, in telling Joseph Smith to "be not weary in well-doing", that "out of small things proceedeth that which is great", that souls are precious in the sight of God, and if it be that one spends all his days in bringing "save it be one soul unto me, how great shall be your joy with him in the kingdom of my Father!" Mary Fielding now stands at the head of a posterity numbering several hundred, representing, as it were, a great cone of righteous humanity with the apex pointing to Mary Fielding Smith, the wife of the Patriarch, and with a base ever widening as the years come and go.

I had a glorious experience in this Mission, in "swinging

around the circuit", touching the great cities of Hamilton, London, Toronto, headquarters of the Mission; Ottawa, where the Dominion Parliament was in session; the great city of Montreal; Halifax, in Nova Scotia; the old city of St. John, New Brunswick; and the cities of Bangor and Portland, Maine, and back again to headquarters.

AN ERROR

While at Toronto a friend, entertaining us at dinner, with evident pride, showed me a copy of the new *Catholic Encyclopedia*. He himself had studied for the Catholic ministry, but was connected with a Protestant church. He explained to me that this edition of the *Catholic Encyclopedia* had been sponsored by the Knights of Columbus. He called my attention to an article under the heading of "Mormons." Hastily glancing through it, I was agreeably surprised at the fair treatment of the subject throughout, with the exception of two or three sentences. One sentence is very closely connected with the important event of the erection and dedication the other day of a monument to the Three Witnesses to the Book of Mormon. In the edition of the *Encyclopedia* mentioned there is a statement that the Three Witnesses, whom we honour now by a beautiful monument upon these grounds, had denied their testimony. I did not take a copy of the exact words of the later edition, but the earlier edition, the one copyrighted in 1911, uses this language:

In renouncing Mormonism subsequently, Cowdery, Whitmer and Harris, the three principal witnesses, declared this testimony false.

I am sure that the Knights of Columbus, if responsible for this error, will be pleased to correct it when their attention is called to it, because the statement is contrary to the facts. My father, James H. Hart, interviewed David Whitmer in 1883. The interview was reduced to the form of verse, afterwards read and approved by David Whitmer. It was published in the October 1883 number of the *Contributor*, volume five, pages nine and ten, to which I again make a reference for the sake of brevity.

DAVID WHITMER'S TESTIMONY

David Whitmer said:

My written statement I have ne'er denied;
I saw the angel, and I heard his voice
And wondrous things that make my heart rejoice.

After giving an account of the visitation to him of the angel, he said:

If this be not the truth, there is no truth,
And I have been mistaken from my youth;
If I'm mistaken, you may know from thence,
That there's no God, no law, no life, no sense.

I know there is a God—I've heard His voice,
 And in His power and truth do still rejoice;
 Though fools may ridicule and laugh to-day,
 They shall know the truth of what I say.

I've suffered persecution at the hands
 Of hireling preachers and their Christian bands;
 I've braved their hatred, and have them withstood,
 While they thirsted for the youthful Prophet's blood.

They came, four hundred strong, with visage bold,
 And said: "Deny this story you have told,
 And, by our sacred honour, we'll engage
 To save you from the mob's infuriate rage."

A mighty power came on me, and I spake
 In words that made the guilty mobbers quake;
 And trembling seized the surging crowd, and fear;
 But left unharmed, I felt that God was near.

Had he been disposed to deny his testimony, a good time would have been when the mob came.

THE TESTIMONY OF OLIVER COWDERY

I would also like to refer to an affidavit of a court room testimony of Oliver Cowdery, dictated by Charles M. Nielsen, formerly a city judge of this city. Again, I shall refer to this as an exhibit to be read by you later when the same may be published. It happened in a Michigan court when Oliver Cowdery was prosecuting a murder case. The attorney for the defense said in a very sarcastic manner:

"I hope, Mr. Cowdery, that when you are going to reply to my argument to the jury that you will tell us something about the angel who came down in his nightclothes while you and Joe Smith were digging golden plates out of the Cumorah Hill, by which you have deluded so many thousands of our countrymen by deceiving them in regard to the coming forth of a certain book called the Book of Mormon."

The narrative continues:

Finally Oliver Cowdery's turn came to reply. I shall never forget how his face looked, no matter how long I shall live. He was as calm as a summer morning. There was no anger in his face or in his words. In addressing the court and the jury he said:

"Oh, I do wish that I could escape replying to the challenge of my brother attorney representing the defendant in this case, but I cannot. I dare not. The angel that appeared to us was not a dream. It was not in the night time. It was in the day time while the sun was shining brightly on a clear beautiful day. We were praying in turn as we were kneeling on the ground, and while in the attitude of prayer a brilliant light surrounded us, the glory of which I cannot describe. It even surpassed the brilliancy of the sun. A beautiful personage stood before us, about two feet from the ground, and he told us that his name was Moroni, and he declared to us that the Book of Mormon had been translated by the gift

and power of God, and he commanded us to bear witness of the fact, and he said: 'If you ever deny what you have seen and heard here from me to-day, there is no forgiveness for you in this life nor in the life to come.'"

There are other interesting matters contained in this affidavit that you may read at your leisure; also, another affidavit is now being prepared at my suggestion by Elder William H. Homer, who interviewed Martin Harris in the Kirtland Temple and heard his dying declaration, and that is the point that I am coming to—the force of a dying declaration.

THE FORCE OF A DYING STATEMENT

As President Joseph Quinney, Jr., and I passed through the town of Bellville, Ontario, there was on trial before Judge Logie a murder case in which the prosecuting attorney presented an ante-mortem statement, a dying declaration, by one Charles St. Charles, a court bailiff who had been shot down. The principal testimony for the Crown was a dying declaration of Mr. St. Charles. The jury, after hearing the evidence and being instructed by the court as to the weight that should be attached to a dying declaration, brought in a verdict of not guilty, and then a very unusual thing occurred. The Judge evidently thought that the jury had disregarded the instructions of the court or the argument of counsel for the Crown as to the weight of a dying declaration, and rebuked the jury by telling the defendant that he might as easily have been convicted as acquitted upon the testimony taken, and that the court was not satisfied with the verdict and would report the case further. The English Press in its conservative way criticized the Judge for his invasion of the rights of the jury; but it indicated the weight he thought was attached very properly to a dying declaration under British law, a rule so strong in the law that judges in the States follow this rule, notwithstanding the Sixth Amendment to the Constitution of the United States, which guarantees to every man the right to be confronted by the witnesses against him. The force of a dying statement was understood in the time of Shakespeare, as indicated in his play of *King John*, when Melun, on his death-bed, gives evidence of the contemplated treachery of Louis, the French Dauphin. When not believed Melun exclaims:

Have I not hideous death before my view,
 Retaining but a quantity of life,
 Which bleeds away even as a form of wax
 Resolveth from his figure 'gainst the fire?
 What in the world should make me now deceive,
 Since I must lose the use of all deceit?
 Why should I then be false,
 Since it is true that I must die here,
 And live hence by truth?

The underlying strength of a dying declaration is given by

jurists of the Supreme Court of one of our American States as follows:

When dissolution is approaching and the dying man has lost all hope of life, and the shadows of the grave are gathering in around him and his mind is impressed with the full sense of his condition, the solemnity of the season and hour gives to his statement a sanctity of truth more impressive and potential than the formalities of an oath.

DYING DECLARATION OF THE THREE WITNESSES

I might say that the testimony of each of these three men had the weight of a dying declaration, as you may plainly know from the documents outstanding on that question. David Whitmer, in a dying declaration, as well as those other men, reaffirmed the truth of those statements; so that it is not true that they denied the testimony that is attributed to them in the Book of Mormon, and which is now perpetuated, not only in the hearts of the people, but in bronze upon this monument. I rejoice that our brethren were led to erect a monument to that very important fact in the history of the Church.

While at Toronto I had an opportunity of going forward with a little commission that President Joseph F. Smith laid upon me some time before his death, of following up a discovery in that neighbourhood—the discovery of what is called a stone cist, somewhat like the one in which the sacred plates were found by Joseph Smith. The following is from *Records of the Past*, the March and April number, 1909, pages seventy-five and seventy-six:

Discovery of stone cist in Ontario: On the farm of T. M. Edmundson, near Streetsville, in Peel County, about 22 miles west of Toronto, in the fall of 1906. It had slabs of stone for sides and ends, a clay floor and no cap stones, but these may have been removed in cultivation years ago, without discovering the side slabs which were on level with the ground, 7 feet × 1 ft. × 4½ feet deep. Stone cists have been found in Tennessee, Illinois, at points on the Delaware River and in Northern New Mexico.

I found some people by that name but have not yet found Mr. T. M. Edmundson, but I hope to do so.

WORK OF MISSIONARIES

We had a joyful time in meeting with the seventy-five fine young brethren and sisters who are missionaries in that field. I did not put in my application then, as there were some points connected with a mission presidency that I was not versed in to begin with, but I would like to put in my application now for at least one stake president in each one of the eight Districts, so that they may be inclined to follow the example of President Chipman of Alpine Stake in having a score of their stake workers join them, and then we will be fairly well equipped. We would also

like to have a powerful broadcasting station somewhere within the radius of our mission field, and also moving picture equipment. It is really a slow process to hunt for men in the Mission, where you have to persuade them to come to meetings and then have so few of them there. We have good meetings throughout, but small attendance.

I rejoice in this labour, my brethren and sisters. These young men and young women are going forward with zeal in this work of an "adventurous religion." If time permitted we might tell of examples from the experiences formerly and to-day in this Mission, matching those in the ministry in the days of Paul. The Canadian missionaries have all pledged their loyalty and support in this cause. They are going forward in response to the commission given, as recorded in the first section of the Doctrine and Covenants:

Hearken, O ye people of my church, saith the voice of him who dwells on high, and whose eyes are upon all men; yea, verily I say: Hearken ye people from afar; and ye that are upon the islands of the sea, listen together.

For verily the voice of the Lord is unto all men, and there is none to escape; and there is no eye that shall not see, neither ear that shall not hear, neither heart that shall not be penetrated. . . .

And the voice of warning shall be unto all people, by the mouths of my disciples, whom I have chosen in these last days.

And they shall go forth and none shall stay them.

THE TRUE AND LIVING CHURCH

And in that same section is a dignified presentation of the view of the Lord in reference to this Church, and it may well be read in contrast with the indictment published in the *Atlantic Monthly* for March, 1927, and referred to in the *Literary Digest* heretofore mentioned in this conference. Read that scathing indictment; which probably cannot be maintained upon all counts in connection with the dignified statement of the Lord through the Prophet Joseph, in section one, verse thirty, upon which we can, and do, and must stand:

And also those to whom these commandments were given, might have power to lay the foundation of this church, and to bring it forth out of obscurity and out of darkness, the only true and living church upon the face of the whole earth, with which I, the Lord, am well pleased, speaking unto the Church collectively and not individually.

This is a distinction which should always be observed upon our part and the part of others.

Now if I may conclude in the language of that same section:

For behold, and lo, the Lord is God, and the Spirit beareth record, and the record is true, and the truth abideth forever and ever.

This is my testimony, in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.