

Hard Questions in Church History

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Questions to Consider

- Why trust a 14-year-old boy?
- Why did Joseph not record the experience until 1832?
- Why are the multiple accounts different?
- Why didn't Joseph tell his parents?

Background to the First Vision: 1801-1840 Second Great Awakening: Revivals and Camp Meetings

During the first decades of the Nineteenth Century, American enthusiasm for the subject of religion soared. A search to feel the Spirit prevailed. The period became known as the “Second Great Awakening” (1801–1840). The exuberance of the era was driven by yearnings for a witness of the Holy Spirit or “the power” as evidence of conversion and cleansing. Thousands of seekers gathered in camp meetings and religious revivals to “feel the Spirit” and “get the power.” To put numbers in perspective, an August 1801 revival at Cane Ridge, Kentucky boasted upwards of 25,000 seekers. The largest city near Cane Ridge was Lexington, with a population of 2,000 inhabitants.

Hordes of seekers traveled for days from outlying towns and cities to hear spiritually charged preachers at revivals. The outpouring the spirit evoked was described as “‘groaning, crying out, falling down and screaming’; the ‘terrible speaking’ of itinerants; the clapping, stomping, singing, roaring, and ‘hearty loud Laughter.’ . . . It was the shouting that turned into screams and screeches that especially disgusted.” One participant said, “The noise was like the roar of Niagara” (Schmidt, *Hearing Things: Religion, Illusion, and the American Enlightenment*, 66).

In the 1790s, when the American population spread westward over the Appalachians, itinerant preachers followed in their wake. So great was the “Awakening” that Church buildings could not keep up with the missionaries or their converts. Worship services, known as “camp meetings,” were popular on the frontier. Itinerant preachers carried portable platforms from town to town and notified the community when they were arriving to ensure a crowd. At an appointed time, seekers gathered in anticipation of a spiritual experience (often without refined religious manners). Ministers spoke for hours—often without notes—relying on the inspiration of the Spirit. Historians Edwin C. Gaustad and Leigh Eric Schmidt estimate that by 1811, one-third of the national population—three to four million people—attended summer revivals (Gaustad and Schmidt, *Religious History of America*, 146). By the first half of the Nineteenth Century, the number of preachers per capita tripled (Hatch, *Democratization of American Christianity*, 4). These numbers are significant in light of the fact that “the nation’s population did not even double during this interval” from 1776 to 1806. (Finke and Stark, *Churching America, 1776-2005*, 55-59).

The spiritual zeal seized sophisticated intellectuals as well as passionate itinerant preachers. Three main religious themes emerged in newspapers, pamphlets, sermons, and university speeches:

1. Revelation
2. Depravity of Man
3. Trinity

In addition to these hot topics, the printed word also recorded an interest in the reality of God, freedom of the will, infant baptism, universal salvation, and reason. Howe, *What Hath God Wrought*, 446-448).

Burned-over District

Whether from Manifest Destiny or otherwise, as the borders of the new nation expanded to the frontier the newly-opened lands became a magnet for missionaries and converts alike. This was especially the case in Western New York, where the longing for a spiritual conversion spread like a wildfire. The area was dubbed “The Burned-over District” due to the outpouring of itinerant preachers and religious revivals that burned through the developing towns. In 1824, nearly one-fourth of the nation’s Presbyterian ministers were preaching in the Burned-over District. They were joined by representatives of the Methodists, Episcopalians, Society of Friends, Baptists, and Freewill Baptists. More than anywhere else in the nation, the Burned-over District kindled a fire of the Holy Spirit to new levels of religious enthusiasm.

Religious Revivals in New England and New York (1815-1818)

Historian Whitney Cross charted revivals in the New England and New York between 1815 and 1818 (*Burned-over District*, 10-12, 13, 355).

Rhode Island	Connecticut	Pennsylvania	New Jersey	Eastern New York	Vermont	Massachusetts	Burned-over District or upstate NY
6	15	21	21	21	45	64	80

The number of revivals grew exponentially in Western New York. Historian Milton V. Blackman Jr. found that between 1819 and 1820, there were fifty towns in Western New York with revival activities. In July 1819, just thirteen miles south of the Joseph Smith, Sr. farm, approximately 110 Methodist ministers gathered for the Genesee Conference (Bushman, *Joseph Smith and the Beginnings*, 53). These ministers and their converts had an impact on young Joseph, Jr., who wrote, “I became somewhat partial to the Methodists” (JS-H 1:8).

After two centuries of Puritan thought dominating the nation, there came a great change in religious preference due to the influence of democratic independence and the Second Great Awakening. In 1800, the largest churches in the United States were all based on Calvinist or Reformed thought (Congregationalist, Presbyterian, Baptist, and Episcopalian). With the western migration moving, college-trained preachers could keep up with the population expansion. However, the egalitarian and more mobile faith of Methodist itinerant preachers (who required no formal education) moved west with growing nation. Halfway through the Nineteenth Century, the United States also opened her doors to more Catholic immigrants. These two facts had an impact on the

Church Member ship		
	1776-84	1806-10
Methodist	4,921	130,570
Baptist	53,101	172,972

young nation’s theology. Even though Methodists and Catholics were a small fraction of the population in 1800, by 1850, they became the two largest faiths in the nation. The teenage Joseph Smith felt more inclined to join the wave of Methodist egalitarian theology, although he still had doubts.

Accounts of the First Vision

When the 14-year-old Joseph Smith “came to the conclusion that I must either remain in darkness and confusion or else I must do as James directs, that is, ask of God,” he was answered by a vision opening a new dispensation (JS-History 1:12). Desiring to pray aloud, he left his family’s crowded log home and walked to the maple grove, where he had left his ax, to pray in privacy. He may have chosen a spot while helping his family tap their trees for maple sugar, or perhaps they had been pruning their maple grove. Whatever motivated him to mark his spot, it was part of his preparation to ask God—out loud and outside—for a spiritual witness, forgiveness, and to learn which church to join. His answer later became known as his First Vision, which heralded the beginning of the restoration of Christ’s Church on earth.

Eight accounts of Joseph Smith’s first vision were formulated by himself. Five other men recorded their first-hand experiences hearing Joseph share details from his first vision. Although some are short and others long, they show a “high degree of independent, cumulative corroboration among the accounts” (Welch and Carlson, eds. *Opening the Heavens*, 70). In ten of the thirteen accounts Joseph describes two heavenly personages—God the Father and His Son Jesus Christ. The secondhand accounts written in Joseph Smith’s lifetime (1805-1844) mention that the light evolved into a vision of God and the Lord. A summary of the accounts by Dean Jessee, John W. Welch, and James Allen follows:

Personal Accounts Given by Joseph Smith

1. 1832—The 1832 account of the First Vision is the earliest known record. It was dictated by the Prophet Joseph to scribe Frederick G. Williams between the summer of 1832 and the end of November 1832.
2. 1835, November 9—In 1835, the Prophet Joseph related his experience in the sacred grove to a Kirtland visitor named Robert Matthias. The account was recorded in Joseph Smith’s journal by scribe Warren Parrish.
3. 1835, later in the year—re-recording of Joseph’s 1835 account, with a few alterations (i.e. Warren Parrish and Frederick G. Williams changed it from first person to third).
4. 1835, Nov 14—Joseph summarized a conversation that referenced “the first visitation of Angels.”
5. 1835, the Nov 14, 1835 short summary was rewritten in Joseph Smith’s history.
6. 1838, March—Account dictated by Joseph to his scribe James Mulholland; later canonized in Pearl of Great Price—Joseph Smith-History.
7. 1842—A selection from Joseph Smith’s history prepared for John Wentworth, editor and proprietor of the *Chicago Democrat*. Wentworth’s letter was intended for George Barstow’s *New Hampshire History*.
8. 1842—Request from an author publishing on American religions, Rupp (mainly duplicated).

Second-hand Accounts by Others Who Heard Joseph Speak about His First Vision

1. 1840, September—Orson Pratt published a missionary pamphlet in the British Isles, which Joseph later used.
2. 1842—Orson Hyde published a missionary pamphlet in Germany, which included a retelling of the first vision.
3. 1843—Levi Richards recorded in his diary on the day Joseph told him about his first vision.
4. 1843—David Nye White, the editor of a Pittsburgh newspaper, visited Nauvoo. The Prophet met him and shared his First Vision. He published it September 15, 1843 in the *Weekly Gazette*, and reprinted it on September 23 in the *New York Spectator*. It sounds as if the text had been rephrased or paraphrased at times.
5. 1844—Alexander Neibaur’s was Joseph’s Hebrew and German tutor in Nauvoo. He asked the prophet to retell his story and recorded it in his diary on May 24, the day he arrived as an immigrant in Nauvoo. His private account includes with intimate details (“blue eyes,” “white cloth drawn over his shoulder,” etc.).

Details Found in Joseph Smith’s Recitations of the First Vision

For a fuller account of this chart, see James Allen and John Welch’s full article in *Opening the Heavens*, 56-68. From this chart, notice how most of the items Joseph mentioned remain quite consistent from 1832 to 1844.

	1832 (JSmith)	1835 (JSmith)	1838 (JSmith)	1840 (PPratt)	1842 (JSmith)	1842 (OHyde)	1843 (Richards)	1844 (White)	1844 (Neibaur)
Concern for soul	x	x		x	x	x			
Confused	x	x	x	x	x	x			
Read Scriptures (James 1:5)		x	x	x	x	x		x	x
Prayed	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Churches?		x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Evil Powers		x	x	x		x			x
Prayed for Help		x	x	x		x			
Fire / Light Appeared	x	x	x	x	x			x	x
Brighter than Sun	x		x		x				
Two Personages		x	x	x	x	x		x	x
Identical		x		x	x	x			
Thy Sins Forgiven	x	x		x					
Glory			x	x	x	x		x	
All Churches Astray	x		x	x	x	x		x	x
Gospel Promised				x	x	x			
Felt Joy, Peace,	x	x		x		x			x

Calmness, or Love									
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Three Accounts of Joseph Smith’s Retellings of the First Vision

I will include here just three of the Prophet Joseph’s long accounts here; the others can be found online at JosephSmithPapers.org. The 1838 account of the First Vision has been canonized in the Pearl of Great Price. It was recorded by James Mulholland and first published in 1842 in the *Times and Seasons* in Nauvoo, Illinois. The published account was part of a longer history dictated by the Prophet Joseph Smith.

1) The 1832 account of the First Vision is the earliest known record, and in his own handwriting (grammar, punctuation, and capitalization standardized).

At about the age of twelve years, my mind become seriously impressed with regard to the all-important concerns for the welfare of my immortal soul, which led me to searching the scriptures—believing, as I was taught, that they contained the word of God and thus applying myself to them. My intimate acquaintance with those of different denominations led me to marvel exceedingly, for I discovered that they did not adorn their profession by a holy walk and godly conversation agreeable to what I found contained in that sacred depository. This was a grief to my soul.

Thus, from the age of twelve years to fifteen I pondered many things in my heart concerning the situation of the world of mankind, the contentions and divisions, the wickedness and abominations, and the darkness which pervaded the minds of mankind. My mind became exceedingly distressed, for I became convicted of my sins, and by searching the scriptures I found that mankind did not come unto the Lord but that they had apostatized from the true and living faith, and there was no society or denomination that was built upon the gospel of Jesus Christ as recorded in the New Testament. I felt to mourn for my own sins and for the sins of the world, for I learned in the scriptures that God was the same yesterday, today, and forever, that he was no respecter of persons, for he was God.

For I looked upon the sun, the glorious luminary of the earth, and also the moon, rolling in their majesty through the heavens, and also the stars shining in their courses, and the earth also upon which I stood, and the beasts of the field, and the fowls of heaven, and the fish of the waters, and also man walking forth upon the face of the earth in majesty and in the strength of beauty, whose power and intelligence in governing the things which are so exceedingly great and marvelous, even in the likeness of him who created them. And when I considered upon these things, my heart exclaimed, “Well hath the wise man said, ‘It is a fool that saith in his heart, there is no God.’” My heart exclaimed, “All, all these bear testimony and bespeak an omnipotent and omnipresent power, a being who maketh laws and decreeth and bindeth all things in their bounds, who filleth eternity, who was and is and will be from all eternity to eternity.” And I considered all these things and that that being seeketh such to worship him as worship him in spirit and in truth.

Therefore, I cried unto the Lord for mercy, for there was none else to whom I could go and obtain mercy. And the Lord heard my cry in the wilderness, and while in the attitude of calling

upon the Lord, in the sixteenth year of my age, a pillar of light above the brightness of the sun at noonday came down from above and rested upon me. I was filled with the spirit of God, and the Lord opened the heavens upon me and I saw the Lord.

And he spake unto me, saying, “Joseph, my son, thy sins are forgiven thee. Go thy way, walk in my statutes, and keep my commandments. Behold, I am the Lord of glory. I was crucified for the world, that all those who believe on my name may have eternal life. Behold, the world lieth in sin at this time, and none doeth good, no, not one. They have turned aside from the gospel and keep not my commandments. They draw near to me with their lips while their hearts are far from me. And mine anger is kindling against the inhabitants of the earth, to visit them according to their ungodliness and to bring to pass that which hath been spoken by the mouth of the prophets and apostles. Behold and lo, I come quickly, as it is written of me, in the cloud, clothed in the glory of my Father.”

My soul was filled with love, and for many days I could rejoice with great joy. The Lord was with me, but I could find none that would believe the heavenly vision. Nevertheless, I pondered these things in my heart.

2) In 1835, the Prophet Joseph related his Sacred Grove experience to a visitor to Kirtland—a man named Robert Matthias. The account was recorded in Joseph Smith’s journal by scribe Warren Parrish.

Being wrought up in my mind respecting the subject of religion, and looking at the different systems taught the children of men, I knew not who was right or who was wrong. And considering it of the first importance that I should be right in matters that involve eternal consequences, being thus perplexed in mind I retired to the silent grove and bowed down before the Lord, under a realizing sense that he had said (if the Bible be true), “Ask, and you shall receive; knock, and it shall be opened; seek, and you shall find,” and again, “If any man lack wisdom, let him ask of God, who giveth to all men liberally, and upbraideth not.”

Information was what I most desired at this time, and with a fixed determination to obtain it, I called upon the Lord for the first time in the place above stated. Or in other words, I made a fruitless attempt to pray; my tongue seemed to be swollen in my mouth, so that I could not utter. I heard a noise behind me, like some person walking towards me. I strove again to pray but could not. The noise of walking seemed to draw nearer. I sprung up on my feet and looked around but saw no person or thing that was calculated to produce the noise of walking.

I kneeled again. My mouth was opened and my tongue liberated, and I called on the Lord in mighty prayer. A pillar of fire appeared above my head. It presently rested down upon me and filled me with joy unspeakable. A personage appeared in the midst of this pillar of flame, which was spread all around and yet nothing consumed. Another personage soon appeared, like unto the first. He said unto me, “Thy sins are forgiven thee.” He testified unto me that Jesus Christ is the son of God. And I saw many angels in this vision. I was about fourteen years old when I received this first communication.

3) The 1842 First Vision account is taken from Joseph Smith’s history prepared for John Wentworth, editor and proprietor of the *Chicago Democrat*.

When about fourteen years of age, I began to reflect upon the importance of being prepared for a future state, and upon enquiring about the plan of salvation, I found that there was a great clash in religious sentiment; if I went to one society, they referred me to one plan, and another to another, each one pointing to his own particular creed as the summum bonum of perfection. Considering that all could not be right, and that God could not be the author of so much confusion, I determined to investigate the subject more fully, believing that if God had a church it would not be split up into factions, and that if he taught one society to worship one way, and administer in one set of ordinances, he would not teach another principles which were diametrically opposed. Believing the word of God, I had confidence in the declaration of James; “If any man lack wisdom, let him ask of God, who giveth to all men liberally and upbraideth not, and it shall be given him.”

I retired to a secret place in a grove and began to call upon the Lord. While fervently engaged in supplication, my mind was taken away from the objects with which I was surrounded, and I was enwrapped in a heavenly vision and saw two glorious personages who exactly resembled each other in features and likeness, surrounded with a brilliant light which eclipsed the sun at noonday. They told me that all religious denominations were believing in incorrect doctrines and that none of them was acknowledged of God as his church and kingdom. And I was expressly commanded to “go not after them,” at the same time receiving a promise that the fulness of the gospel should at some future time be made known unto me.

Sources

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