

**“What Greater Witness can you have than from God?”
A Look at the Undeviating Testimony of Oliver Cowdery including his
Rebirth, Reconciliation and Return to Mormonism**

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Address commemorating the bicentennial anniversary of the
birth of Oliver Cowdery, second witness to Mormonism given on the town green in
Wells, VT on September 23, 2006

I Introduction:

Honor to have the opportunity to speak in Wells, Vermont on the bicentennial anniversary commemoration of the birth of Oliver Cowdery.

Family Background: Not raised in Utah nor was I raised LDS, diverse family
Richard L. Evans Chair of Religious Understanding

Do not have to believe what I am going to tell you, but you cannot understand
Mormonism without understanding what over 12 million LDS believe.

Mormonism predicted to be the next World Religion. Recently *Newsweek*
magazine had a picture of Joseph Smith on the cover of their magazine (October
17, 2005) kneeling before God and Jesus Christ. The caption read, “The Making
of the Mormons . . . The Future of a Booming Faith.” Sociologist Rodney Stark
has estimated that based on the growth of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-
day Saints there will be about 267 million Mormons by the year 2080.

Today we commemorate Oliver Cowdery, who was the second elder of the
Restored Church (D&C 20:2), one of the six founding members of the LDS
Church, and one of three witnesses to the Book of Mormon. Oliver served as
Joseph Smith’s scribe in writing the Book of Mormon which is now considered to
be one of the most influential books in America.¹ Thus, today we commemorate
an individual who has influenced not only Mormon history and theology, but has
also shaped American History and Religion.

II Latter-day Saint View of Religious Freedom and of other Religions

“We claim the privilege of worshipping Almighty God according to the dictates
of our own conscience, and allow all men the same privilege, let them worship how,
where, or what they may.”²

Joseph Smith declared, “If it has been demonstrated that I have been willing to die
for a Mormon, I am bold to declare before heaven that I am just as ready to die for a
Presbyterian, a Baptist, or any other denomination. It is a love of liberty that inspires my
soul. . . . If I esteem mankind to be in error, shall I bear them down? No, I will lift them
up and each in his own way if I cannot persuade him that my way is better!”³

¹ For example, in an article released on the web August 28, 2003, by Jerome Kramer titled, “20 Books That
Changed America,” Kramer lists the Book of Mormon as third on his list. See
<http://wyldone.proboards4.com/index.cgi?board=art&action=display&thread=1062103043>

² 11th Article of Faith

³ *The Words of Prophet Joseph Smith*, (Provo, Utah: BYU Religious Studies Center, 1980), 229.

III Background of Oliver Cowdery

1. “In America Oliver Cowdery was descended from Edward Fuller, who came on the Mayflower. The Cowdery’s came in the ‘Great Migration’ of Puritans to Massachusetts Bay in 1630, along with John Winthrop, and others who established Harvard College in 1636.” The Joseph Smith family was related to the Fuller family which made Oliver the third cousin of Luck Mack Smith (mother of Joseph Smith, Jr.) though it is thought that Oliver was probably not aware of it. Oliver Cowdery was born on October 3, 1806 to William Cowdery Jr. and Rebecca Fuller, [who died when Oliver was three]. He was the youngest of eight children.⁴ He later married Elizabeth Ann Whitmer, sister of David Whitmer, whom he would later serve together as one of three special witnesses to the Book of Mormon.

2. Vermont Years: Concerning Oliver’s youth, his sister Lucy Cowdery Young noted:
Now in regard to Oliver he was born in the Town of Wells in the state of Vermont [...] when he was three years of age Father married my Mother she resided in the Town of Poultney so Oliver was brought up in Poultney Rutland County Vermont and when he arrived at the age of twenty he went to the State of New York where his older brothers were married and Settled and in about two years my father moved there.⁵

Another historian wrote, “Oliver Cowdery was born in Wells on October 3, 1806, after a summer of drought in southwestern Vermont. According to a Wells historian, ‘no rain fell from seeding time to harvest. Crops were almost a complete failure.’”⁶ He continued, “Oliver would have attended school during the long winter term, possibly studying composition and figures under Almon Hopson, an instructor who taught in Wells for twenty years. The school day began with reading the Bible, and reading was stressed more than any other subject. Quill pens were difficult to make, and paper was ‘very course [sic] and scarce.’ In this spare setting, young Oliver began to acquire the skills of logic and language that served him so well in future years.”⁷

In Vermont, Oliver learned the 3 R’s of reading, writing and arithmetic. However, when he left, he learned the 3 R’s of restoration, revelation and reconciliation.

⁴ G. Homer Durham, “Oliver Cowdery, 1806-1850. . .,” Address delivered July 12, 1980, Wells, VT, 2-3.

⁵ **Lucy Cowdery Young to Brigham H. Young, March 7, 1887**, Archives Division, Historical Department, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City, as cited in Larry E. Morris, *Oliver Cowdery’s Vermont Years and the Origins of Mormonism*, BYU Studies 39, no. 1, (Provo, UT: 2000), 107.

⁶ **Wood, History of the Town of Wells, 29**, as cited in Larry E. Morris, *Oliver Cowdery’s Vermont Years and the Origins of Mormonism*, BYU Studies 39, no. 1, (Provo, UT: 2000), 107.

⁷ Larry E. Morris, *Oliver Cowdery’s Vermont Years and the Origins of Mormonism*, BYU Studies 39, no. 1, (Provo, UT: 2000), 112.

IV Meeting the Smith Family in Manchester, NY – (1828-1829, he was appointed for a sixteen week term as a teacher in Manchester, NY). Boards with the Joseph Smith Sr. family as a school teacher (Historical Background of D&C Section 6) wherein he learns of the Book of Mormon

V. Trip to Harmony, PA (130 miles south) to meet Joseph Smith in April 1829 (JSH 66-67)

Professor Susan Easton Black wrote, “In April 1829 he accompanied Samuel Smith to Harmony, Pennsylvania, to meet the Prophet: ‘Near the time of the setting of the sun, Sabbath evening, April 5th, 1829, my natural eyes, for the first time beheld this brother...On Tuesday the 7th, commenced to write the Book of Mormon.’”⁸ Oliver referred to this period of translation as “days never to be forgotten.” This book, now published in dozens of languages, serves as a second witness to the teachings of the Bible and of the divinity of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

4. Counsel to O.C. – “Seek not for riches, but for wisdom” (D&C 6:7)
5. Inspiration to O.C. – “If you desire, you shall be the means of doing much good” (D&C 6:8)
6. Revelation to O.C. – An inquiring mind led to revelation. I know your thoughts, reminder the work is true, cast your mind on the night that you cried unto me (D&C 6:14-17, 21-24). Thus, he receives a 2nd witness.
7. Learns process of receiving revelation (D&C 8:2; 9:7-9) which is a second witness to the process taught in the Bible: (John 14:26; I Cor. 2:11; I Thess. 5:21)

VI Oliver Cowdery as a Witness to the Restoration

1. May 15, 1829 - Visit of John the Baptist, Aaronic Priesthood keys restored (JSH 68-72). Oliver became the first person baptized in this dispensation under the authority invested in John the Baptist who baptized Jesus Christ.
2. Shortly there after, he was a witness to the visit of Peter, James and John and bestowal of Melchizedek Priesthood keys
3. Moved upon by an inspired desire to be one of three special witness to the Book of Mormon (Historical Background of D&C Section 17)
4. Extract from the Testimony of the Three Witnesses to the Book of Mormon: Another Testament of Jesus Christ:
“ . . . And we also know that they have been translated by the gift and power of God, for his voice hath declared it unto us; wherefore we know of a surety that the work is true. And we also testify that we have seen the engravings which are upon the plates; and they have been shown unto us by the power of God, and not of man. And we declare with words of soberness, that an angel of God came down from heaven, and he brought and laid before our eyes, that we beheld and saw the plates, and the engravings thereon; and we know that it is by the grace of God the Father, and our Lord Jesus Christ, that we beheld and bear record that these things are true.
5. Took the Book of Mormon manuscript a chapter at a time to E. B. Grandin in Palmyra, NY – (The Book of Mormon was published March 30, 1829)

⁸ **Oliver Cowdery, *Messenger and Advocate* 1 (October 1834):14**, as cited in Susan Easton Black, *Who’s Who in the Doctrine and Covenants* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1997), 75.

6. April 6, 1830 – Organization of the Church. He acted as one of six official organizers of the Church in order to satisfy the requirements of the state of New York.
7. April 13, 1830 – Oliver gave the first public address to the Church.
8. October 1830 – Oliver presided over the first LDS mission to the Native Americans, which included 1500 miles of travel and a stop in Kirtland, Ohio wherein many baptisms occurred, resulting in the LDS Church growing three times its size.

VII Oliver’s Departure from membership in the LDS Church, while never deviating from his testimony of the Book of Mormon.

1. “Beware of pride, lest thou enter into temptation.” (D&C 23:1) Oliver struggled with the universal sin of pride as we all do to one degree or another. He was excommunicated in April 1838 for a variety of issues, which included not supporting the government of the Church. However, G. Homer Durham writes, “What may have been false accusations, mingled with misunderstandings growing from the sale of land, finally led to his refusal to appear before a Church Council.” Those who brought the charges, all lost their Church membership and later became enemies of the Church. During the following decade, he continued to practice law, primarily in Tiffin, Ohio (1840-1847). In 1843 he served as the secretary of the Methodist Church, which he fellowshipped with.⁹ It is purported that while he was in Wisconsin for a period working as an attorney that Oliver was confronted in a courtroom concerning his written testimony of the Book of Mormon. In 1855, Brigham Young publicly reported that Oliver responded that his testimony was not an issue of mere belief, but of knowledge. Oliver stated, “what I have there said that I saw, I know that I saw.”¹⁰

VIII Rebirth, Reconciliation and Return through humility and the fellowship of the Saints

Background: During a six year period (1842-1848) Phineas Young, brother of Brigham Young, and brother in law of Cowdery (Phineas being married to Oliver’s half sister Lucy) continually wrote and paid visits to Oliver. At the same time, Church leaders were feeling after Oliver. For example, Willard Richards, who kept the Prophet Joseph Smith’s journal was directed by Joseph in the spring of 1843 to “Write to Oliver Cowdery and ask him if he has not eaten husks long enough, if he is not most ready to return.” The Twelve sent a letter to Oliver with an invitation to return to the fold which among other things stated, “your brethren are ready to receive you. . . . Your dwelling place you know ought to be in Zion.” Cowdery received the letter December 20, 1843. Just five days later (Christmas day) Oliver responded in a friendly manner, but was not quite ready to re-claim his Church membership as he felt the circumstances surrounding his excommunication had not been examined in their true light.¹¹

⁹ G. . Homer Durham, “Oliver Cowdery, 1806-1850. . .,” Address delivered July 12, 1980, Wells, VT, 8.

¹⁰ Richard Lloyd Anderson, *Investigating the Book of Mormon Witnesses* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1981), 58-59.

¹¹ Scott H. Faulring, “The Return of Oliver Cowdery,” 4-5 <http://farms.byu.edu>

In the most touching of all his letters written November 23, 1846 while still out of the LDS Church, Oliver pled indirectly through Phineas to his brother Brigham (now the chief leader of the Saints for public exoneration prior to his contemplated return:

I have cherished a hope, and that one of my fondest, that I might leave such a character, as those who might believe in my testimony, after I should be called hence, might do so, not only for the sake of the truth, but might not *blush* for the private character of the man who bore that testimony. I have been sensitive on this subject, I admit, but I ought to be so, You would be, under the circumstances. Had you stood in the presence of John, with our departed brother Joseph, to receive the Lesser Priesthood—and in the presence of Peter, to receive the Greater, and looked down through time, and witnessed the effects these two must produce, you would feel what you have never felt, were wicked men conspiring to lessen the effects of your testimony on man, after you should have gone to your long sought rest.¹²

The following year, Brigham Young wrote to him:

Return to our father's house, from whence thou hast wandered, and partake of the fatted calf and sup and be filled,...and renew thy testimony to the truth of the Book of Mormon with a loud voice, and faithful heart and you will soon feel the Holy Ghost burning your bones like fire in the dry stubble...and the Saints, His sons and daughters will with open arms hail thee as their long lost brother found in the New and Everlasting Covenant.¹³

Phineas Young paid the Cowdery family a visit at their home in Elkhorn, Wisconsin, in October, 1848. Phineas then escorted Oliver, his wife Elizabeth and their only surviving child Maria out of their six children, to Pottawattamie County, Iowa, Kanesville, Iowa in order to attend the local conference being held and to bring the Cowdery family back into fellowship with the Saints. They arrived on Saturday afternoon October 21st while Elder Orson Hyde of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles was speaking, whom Oliver had ordained to the sacred office of Apostleship in 1835. “Reportedly, Hyde stopped speaking, came down from the stand and embraced Cowdery. Taking him by the arm, Orson brought Oliver up to the platform. After a brief introduction by Elder Hyde, Oliver was invited to speak to the conference. Cowdery stood for a few moments looking out into the numerous faces in the audience. Oliver recognized some, but most were strangers to him. Finally, after more than a decade’s lonely separation from the people he loved, the Second Elder was united with the Saints of God. With overwhelming emotion swelling in his heart, yet in a clear and striking voice, Oliver addressed this gathering of nearly 2,000 people – the largest Mormon audience he ever spoke to.”¹⁴

¹² **Letter by Oliver Cowdery to Phineas Young, Tiffin, Ohio, November 23, 1846**, as cited in Dr. Richard Lloyd Anderson, “The Second Witness of Priesthood Restoration: Second in a Series on The Three Witnesses,” *The Improvement Era*, V. 7, number 9 (September 1968): 21-22.

¹³ **Letter from Brigham Young to Oliver Cowdery, 22 November 1847**, as cited in Susan Easton Black, *Who’s Who in the Doctrine and Covenants* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1997), 76.

¹⁴ Scott H. Faulring, “The Return of Oliver Cowdery,” 19-20 <http://farms.byu.edu>

“The most detailed record of this public speech was then written by Reuben Miller, who later insisted that his diary contained a verbatim report,”¹⁵ which is as follows:

“Friends and Brethren:

My name is Cowdery—Oliver Cowdery. In the history of the Church, I stood identified with him, and was in her councils not because I was better than other men was I called to fill the purpose of God. He called me to a high and holy calling. I wrote with my own pen the entire Book of Mormon (save a few pages) as it fell from the lips of the Prophet Joseph Smith, and he translated it by the power and gift of God, by means of the Urim and Thummin, or as it is called by that book, the ‘Holy Interpreter’.

I beheld with my eyes and handled with my hands, the gold plates from which it was translated. I also saw with my eyes and handled with my hands, the ‘Holy Interpreters.’ That book is true, Sidney Rigdon did not write it; Mr. Spalding did not write it; I wrote it myself as it fell from the lips of the Prophet. It contains the everlasting Gospel, to preach to every nation, kindred, tongue and people. It contains the principles of Salvation, and if you my hearers, will walk by its light, and obey its precepts, you will be saved with an everlasting salvation in the Kingdom of God.

I was present with Joseph when an Holy Angel from Heaven came down and conferred upon us, or restored the Aaronic Priesthood, and said to us, at the same time, that it should remain on earth while the earth stands. I was also present with Joseph when the Higher or Melchizedek Priesthood was conferred on each other by the will and commandment of God. This priesthood as was then declared, was also to remain upon the earth until the last remnant of time.

Brethren, for a number of years, I have been separated from you. I now desire to come back. I wish to come humble and be one in your midst. I seek no station. I only wish to be identified with you. I am out of the Church, but I wish to become a member. I wish to come in at the door; I know the door, I have not come here to seek precedence. I come humbly and throw myself upon the decision of the body, knowing as I do, that its decisions are right.

Oliver Cowdery.”¹⁶

Following meetings with Church leaders which took place in the weeks following the conference, Oliver Cowdery was unanimously received back into full fellowship and was rebaptized by Elder Orson Hyde on November 12, 1848. Elder Hyde then immediately ordained Oliver to the office of an elder in the Melchizedek Priesthood. The next ten weeks, Oliver assisted Orson with setting up a printing press for what would soon be the LDS periodical published in Kanesville, Iowa, the *Frontier Guardian*. As 1849 dawned, Oliver made the decision to take his wife’s family, the Whitmer’s in Richmond, Missouri, before launching a journey to Zion in the Salt

¹⁵ Dr. Richard Lloyd Anderson, “The Second Witness of Priesthood Restoration: Second in a Series on The Three Witnesses,” *The Improvement Era* V. 7, number 9 (September 1968): 22.

¹⁶ Stanley R. Gunn, *Oliver Cowdery Second Elder of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints: A Thesis Presented to the Faculty of the Division of Religion, Brigham Young University*. (Stanley R. Gunn: 1942), 166, as cited in *The Improvement Era*, number 24, p.620.

Lake Valley. Six months later, he was asked by Brigham Young to travel to Washington DC with their congressional delegate Almon W. Babbit, but Cowdery's health would not permit it and his health from that point on continued to deteriorate. In his state of ill health and poor financial affairs, coupled with the fact that the 49ers were crowding the trail that year; he postponed the trip, and never joined the main body of the Saints in the Valley of the Great Salt Lake, where he intended to launch a fruit tree business.¹⁷

Cowdery biographer Stanley Gunn writes,

“But these earthly ambitions were not to be realized, for his chronic lung condition was recognized as consumption, and on March 3, 1850 at the Whitmer home, his family assembled around his bed, and he requested his attendants to lift him up in order that he might talk to his family and friends who were present. He then admonished them to live according to the teachings set forth in the Book of Mormon and he promised them that if they were faithful to this they would be assembled with him in Heaven. He then said: “Lay me down and let me fall asleep.” A few minutes later his spirit departed from his earthly body. David Whitmer testified . . . “Oliver died the happiest man I ever saw. After shaking hands with the family and kissing his wife and daughter, he said ‘Now I lay down for the last time; I am going to my Saviour’; and he died immediately with a smile on his face.”¹⁸

CONCLUSION: Although Oliver Cowdery strayed from membership in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, for a period of his life, he never denied his testimony of the Book or Mormon, Another Testament of Jesus Christ, nor the angelic ministers whom he claimed restored the priesthood of God to the earth. He was tenderly nursed back to membership in his LDS faith through his dear friend and brother in law, Phineas Young . **Regardless of whatever religious denomination we adhere to, perhaps we can learn from the example of Phineas and from these words which Latter-day Saints attribute to Jesus Christ speaking to the ancient inhabitants of America as attested in the Book of Mormon:** **“Ye shall not cast him out of your synagogues, or your places of worship, for unto such shall ye continue to minister; for ye know not but what they will return unto me with full purpose of heart, and I shall heal them; and ye shall be the means of bringing salvation unto them” (3 Nephi 18:32).**

Finally, when G. Homer Durham spoke to the Wells, Vermont Historical Society on the occasion of the placement of markers to the memory of Oliver Cowdery, he said, “May God bless the memory of Oliver Cowdery. May God also bless the Vermont town that gave him birth, and the great vigorous fourteenth state of the Union, the state of Vermont. May spiritual vitality and strength always emanate from this place to bless all mankind, without distinction, everywhere.”¹⁹ I would simply request the same thing and conclude by thanking you for the opportunity of joining you on this historic occasion.

¹⁷ Scott H. Faulring, “The Return of Oliver Cowdery,” 1, 23-25 <http://farms.byu.edu>

¹⁸ Stanley R. Gunn, *Oliver Cowdery Second Elder of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints: A Thesis Presented to the Faculty of the Division of Religion, Brigham Young University.* (Stanley R. Gunn: 1942), 170-71, as cited in **Mill, Star, XII, p. 207.**

¹⁹ G. Homer Durham, “Oliver Cowdery, 1806-1850. . .,” Address delivered July 12, 1980, Wells, VT, 12.