

“AROUSE THE PEOPLE”:  
THE REFORMATION CORRESPONDENCE BETWEEN  
BRIGHAM YOUNG AND JOHN TAYLOR<sup>1</sup>

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The Mormon Reformation<sup>2</sup> was instigated by President Brigham Young in late August and early September of 1856. For several months, Brigham Young had been unhappy with what he perceived to be the spiritual sluggishness of the Saints. In 1855, in an effort to raise the collective spiritual level of the Mormon community, Young initiated a home missionary program. “Many are stupid careless and unconcerned,” Young noted at General Conference in October 1855. “They are off their watch, neglect their prayers, forget their covenants and forsake their God, and the devil has power over them” (JD 3:115-118). But for whatever good it might have accomplished, the home missionary movement did not produce sufficient results, and Young reasoned that more vigorous measures were needed. In September 1856 Young sent counselor Jedediah M. Grant to Kaysville, Utah to conduct a four-day conference and preach reform. During the course of the conference, Grant, in a fiery, impassioned manner reminiscent of revivalist preachers, challenged convened Saints to throw off the shackles of lethargy and renew their gospel covenants through rebaptism.

Some five hundred Saints took Grant at his word and thus the opening salvo in the Mormon Reformation was history. For the next several weeks a revival swept through Zion. It was a spirited time and few Latter-day Saints remained unaffected. In its initial stages, the First Presidency, Brigham Young, Heber C. Kimball, and especially Jedediah Morgan Grant, pelted and censured the Saints, exposed the severity of their sins, and urged them to repent. Not surprisingly, most Church members, anxious to be saints in word and deed, came to realize the depth of their spiritual poverty and responded in positive fashion. There was an immediate increase in meeting

attendance, in tithing and offerings, in individual and family prayer. In short, a refreshingly new eagerness of spirit permeated Mormon country.

Brigham Young was clearly pleased with the overall improvement in community morale and unity and sought to instigate reformation in other areas where there were concentrations of Latter-day Saints, both in the United States and abroad. In October 1856 Young began writing to Church leaders in far-off locales, describing the course and effect of reformation at Church headquarters and instructing them to commence reform in their own areas.

Elder John Taylor was one such leader to hear from Young. Taylor, an apostle since 1838, was sent to New York in the fall of 1854 to preside over the churches in the eastern states, to supervise emigration, and to publish a newspaper, *The Mormon*, in defense of the Church. Brigham Young first wrote to Taylor on 30 October 1856. After briefly criticizing his fellow apostle for not following instructions on emigration and for not exercising proper financial acumen, Young advised him to begin reform among eastern congregations.

BRIGHAM YOUNG TO JOHN TAYLOR,  
30 OCTOBER 1856

Bro Taylor, we are arousing the people of this Territory to a Sense of their obligations and their duties. great and thorough reformations are pervading every quorum, every family, neighbourhood and Settlement. The power of the Highest is resting [upon?] us and blessing

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our exertions. We wish to Suggest to you that probably a Reformation might transpire in New York even Among the Saints, And in the other States And in Europe and other places where there are any Saints. We assure you they get into darkness, become dull, dead, and have not the living waters.

Arouse yourself first, get the Holy Ghost and be ye filled with it and pour it out upon the people Preach evenings Make appointments in the various branches and fill them. Make the Elders feel the fire in you and make them labor.

Ordain Elders and send them out into every ward of the City, unto every nook and corner thereof, humble yourself before the Lord and cause all the Saints to do likewise. Preach life and Salvation unto the Elders & into the people, and then make them do the same. be lively in the things of God and make all the Elders and members do also. Let all! every one go forth in the power and might of Elijah's God and wake up the people, and not preach them to sleep. let them get more faith and more good works. Raise up branches in a hundred places where now there are none, and be active and vigilant in preaching to the people. Let all the Elders do likewise and you will Soon find the burdens roll off from your Shoulders. Pursue this course and you will soon find yourself, full of light and joy. Your pathway may be beset by devils but you will overcome and triumph over opposing obstacle. In this way you will find that the people will Sustain you and your paper and feel it is a privilege that you be freed from a thousand burdens.

What we Said first, we Say last. preach, preach! preach! life and salvation into the people and let all the Elders and Saints live faithful and humble before the Lord, let them live their religion and may the lord of Hosts bless you for ever, in the name of Jesus. Amen.

Brigham Young wrote Taylor again on 7 December 1856. Most of the letter focused on emigration, and there was no mention of the course of reform in Zion. Young did tell Taylor of the sudden death of Jedediah M. Grant. Grant took sick in early November and never recovered, dying on 1 December 1856. The chief architect

of the Reformation and a tireless laborer in its behalf, Grant's demise was attributed to overexertion and within days of his death, he assumed martyr status.

BRIGHAM YOUNG TO JOHN TAYLOR,  
7 DECEMBER 1856

As you will observe from our paper we have been compelled to part for a season with our beloved Jedediah M. Grant his departure was very sudden and unexpected. He labored beyond his strength which together with his little cold brought upon him his sickness from which he did not recover.

Taylor responded to Brigham Young with two modest but hopeful letters of his own. He had dutifully followed his file leader's instruction and the result was an increased outpouring of the spirit. Elder Taylor's first response was dated 24 February 1857.

JOHN TAYLOR TO BRIGHAM YOUNG,  
24 FEBRUARY 1857

I was very much gratified to learn that you were progressing so well in your reformation in the Vallies. I have heard of its searching renovating influences from various quarters, as well as by your letters to me and I can assure you, Br. Young, that nothing will give me greater pleasure than to second your exertions here as far as lies in my power. I have observed long ago that a dead dull spirit seemed to have taken advantage of the saints, and I have been led to talk to them plainer than I ever did to any saints before, & impelled by the Spirit I have spoken to them things that were repulsive to my own national feelings. Some time ago, I counselled them to renew their Covenants and no one here is considered a member of the Church who has not done it. We have the City divided into wards, and a president for each, who represents them every week, and every member is visited every week by the Teachers. We have an Elders and Priests quorum, we have besides our Sunday meeting, prayer preaching, & testimony meetings in each ward, during the week, & there is now a very good spirit among the Saints. In Philadelphia and other places it is about the same.

Since counsel arrived I have layed it before them and have exhorted them to renewed diligence. The Saints I believe now are doing as well as they know how.

On 18 April 1857 Taylor again wrote Brigham Young, giving him an update on Reformation progress in the eastern states. It was the last letter he wrote to President Young concerning affairs in New York. In May 1857 John Taylor departed the east leaving William I. Appelby and T.B.H. Stenhouse in charge of publishing *The Mormon*. Publication of the paper soon ground to a halt in September with the approaching Utah War.

JOHN TAYLOR TO BRIGHAM YOUNG,  
18 APRIL 1857

In relation to our affairs everything is moving on harmoniously and prosperously, the revival commenced in the valley has spread itself to here & I have never seen a better spirit nor more energy displayed abroad than there is here at the present time both officers & members seem desirous to do all they can to roll on the work & to promote the interests of Zion. We have had very good conferences both in New York & Philadelphia. The spirit of God was powerfully in our midst & the utmost unanimity & harmony prevailed.

## NOTES

1. Brigham Young's letters to John Taylor are found in the "Brigham Young Letterbooks," under the dates indicated. In his biography of Taylor, B.H. Roberts did publish a portion of the 30 October 1856 correspondence. See Roberts, *The Life of John Taylor* (SLC: Bookcraft, 1963), 267. Elder Taylor's letters to Brigham Young are found in "Brigham Young, Incoming Correspondence," again, under the dates indicated. Both the Letterbooks and the Incoming Correspondence are located in the Archives Division, Church Historical Department, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City, Utah.

2. Standard studies on the Mormon Reformation include Gustive O. Larson, "The Mormon Reformation," *Utah Historical Quarterly*, 26 (January 1958): 45-63; Paul H. Peterson, "The Mormon Reformation of 1856-1857: The Rhetoric and the Reality," *Journal of Mormon History*, 15 (1989): 59-87. Insightful studies on important Reformation leaders have been written by Gene Sessions, *Mormon Thunder: A Documentary History of Jedediah Morgan Grant* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1982); Thomas G. Alexander, "Wilford Woodruff and the Mormon Reformation of 1855-1857," *Dialogue* (Summer 1992): 25-39.