



Lorenzo Snow, date and photographer unknown.

Reexamining Lorenzo Snow's 1899 Tithing Revelation

Dennis B. Horne

In September 1898, when Lorenzo Snow became the President of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, the Church was deeply in debt, and resolving this debt crisis became his first priority. As he sought solutions, he felt inspired to travel to Southern Utah and attend the St. George Stake Conference. While there, he received a powerful spiritual manifestation that showed him how to relieve the debt problem: a renewed emphasis on full tithing payment. President Snow vigorously implemented the revealed solution, and the debt crisis was mitigated before his death. A related side-issue—an alleged prophecy regarding “tithing-for-rain” in St. George—is essentially unsubstantiated in contemporary records.

Although Lorenzo Snow's presidency was relatively brief (September 1898 to October 1901) perhaps the most important activity of his administration was to rescue the Church from overwhelming fiscal difficulties. Several factors accounted for this undesirable state of financial affairs. First, only a few years earlier the country had experienced a severe nation-wide financial depression and money stringency. Known as the “Panic of 1893,” the financial meltdown resulted in the worst economic crisis the United States had ever experienced up until that time, affecting the nation's entire economic stability, including Utah's. Second, in 1887, in an effort to stop the Church from practicing plural marriage, Congress passed the Edmunds-Tucker Act, which resulted in the confiscation of much of the Church's property, significant amounts of which were never returned. Third, the confiscation of Church property by the government caused Church members to be less

DENNIS B. HORNE (gnolaumbbooks@msn.com) is a technical writer for the Materials Management Department of the LDS Church. A graduate of Weber State University, he is an independent researcher and author specializing in LDS doctrine and biography. He has written or edited works about LDS Church leaders Bruce R. McConkie, Abraham H. Cannon, Lorenzo Snow, Joseph F. Smith, and Orson F. Whitney.

inclined to make charitable contributions to the Church, sensing their donations would disappear into corrupt government hands. Fourth, the costly work of finishing the interior of the Salt Lake Temple in the early 1890s was paid for by generous donations from Church leaders and members; the result was that personal resources were depleted. And fifth, a few substantial business investments by the previous First Presidency (then consisting of Wilford Woodruff, George Q. Cannon, and Joseph F. Smith) either failed or did not realize a profit for many years. As the debts piled up during the 1890s, members of the First Presidency and the Council of the Twelve became deeply concerned. These unfortunate economic strains became a growing burden and resulted at times in a loss of reputation with creditors. As the years passed, many deliberations were held and prayers offered among general and local leaders, who diligently sought and tried various solutions—but without success.¹

During the decade of the 1890s, the principle of tithing was not neglected by Church leaders in their teachings to the Latter-day Saints. Many vigorous sermons at general and stake conferences declared tithing payment to be the solution to the Church's debt crisis. However, because the principle was taught sporadically and inconsistently, and to a people who resented the federal government's confiscation of their free-will contributions, revenue from tithing payment declined annually.

Shortly after becoming president of the Church, Lorenzo Snow immediately took personal responsibility for the Church's financial affairs.² In order to meet pressing interest payments on loans and other immediate financial needs, he approved the local sale of one million dollars of Church-issued bonds.³ This move brought some temporary relief, but Snow knew the bonds were not a satisfactory long-term solution.⁴

Snow, along with his counselors in the First Presidency, and members of the Quorum of the Twelve, believed their faith would soon be rewarded. In an April 1899 meeting of the Quorum of the Twelve, Elder Francis M. Lyman told those present that he felt "the Church would be relieved," adding that "there was going to be a great change in the financial condition of the Church." Continuing, he stated: "The stand that Pres. Snow is taking is the beginning of a great revolution. It will be but a little time when we may look for an increase of faith in the hearts of all. There will be an increase in the tithing. A wonderful change is coming."⁵ Elder Rudger Clawson, another member of the Quorum, spoke similarly: "The Spirit bore testimony to me that the prophecies uttered by the brethren while we have been together would be fulfilled."⁶

That same month President Snow asked William B. Preston, the Presiding Bishop of the Church, to begin preparations for a journey by train and carriage



Early photograph of the St. George Tabernacle, date unknown. Photograph courtesy Utah State Historical Society.

through the Central and Southern Utah settlements to St. George.⁷ Snow also invited several of the General Authorities and their wives to join the traveling party, as well as some office staff and newspaper correspondents from Salt Lake City.

The group arrived in St. George on the evening of Tuesday, May 16. President Snow's visit, having been pre-advertised, created a sense of excitement and anticipation among locals. The following morning, May 17, the St. George Stake Tabernacle was filled beyond capacity.⁸ When it came time for his address, President Snow spoke to the people for over forty-five minutes.⁹ No complete record of his remarks on this occasion is known to exist, but notes taken at the time indicate that he touched on several subjects. He mentioned that he was not sure why he had felt impressed to visit St. George, but commented that he knew President Brigham Young had been inspired to call people to settle there, and he knew that although the members were not wealthy, they were rich in faith and good works.

At some point during his address he experienced a powerful personal revelatory manifestation reaffirming the commandment that every faithful member of the Church should pay a full and honest tithing. Further, as he later repeatedly declared, it was impressed upon him that faithful members who paid their tithing from that time forward would be forgiven for their past neglect; but if they did not now observe the commandment, they would find



Early view of the interior of the St. George Tabernacle, date unknown. In May 1899, while visiting St. George, President Lorenzo Snow emphasized the need for Church members to more fully live the law of tithing.

themselves at the mercy of their enemies. He later added that observance of the law of tithing would enable the Church to pay its debts from the tithes of the people.¹⁰ He concluded his remarks by admonishing those assembled to pay a full and honest tithing, announcing that “This is the word of the Lord to all the people of this church,” and he invoked a blessing upon the congregation.¹¹

The next day, Thursday, May 18, another stake conference meeting convened. Not surprisingly, each speaker talked on the subject of tithing. Franklin D. Richards, then president of the Quorum of the Twelve, felt the unusual solemnity of the occasion, observing that “As a people we have been passed in review. . . . We want to be true and faithful on this subject of tithing; and, as President Snow presented to us yesterday morning in such lovely terms, we want to get up to this line of paying an honest, straightforward tithing. He wants to see it in all Israel, you and I want to see it.”¹²

This particular discourse by President Snow, the most influential of his ministry, was taken down stenographically by LeRoi C. Snow (a favored son of Snow’s by his last plural wife, Minnie), who was serving as a special correspondent for the *Deseret Evening News*. Although President Snow also touched briefly on other subjects—including bearing testimony of the

living reality of the resurrected Jesus Christ who had manifested himself to his mortal servants in that day—he used the occasion to emphasize what had been reaffirmed to him in the marvelous manifestation the day before: “The Lord requires me to say something to you, and since I commenced to labor in His interest, I have never failed . . . to do that which He has required at my hands; and I shall not do it today, nor any other day, the Lord being my helper.” He declared: “The word of the Lord to you is not anything new; it is simply this: THE TIME HAS NOW COME FOR EVERY LATTER-DAY SAINT, WHO CALCULATES TO BE PREPARED FOR THE FUTURE AND TO HOLD HIS FEET STRONG UPON A PROPER FOUNDA-



LeRoi C. Snow, date unknown.

TION, TO DO THE WILL OF THE LORD AND TO PAY HIS TITHING IN FULL. That is the word of the Lord to you, and it will be the word of the Lord to every settlement throughout the land of Zion.”¹³ This forceful language became the main announcement of the divine manifestation the Prophet had received the previous day.

President Snow's St. George tithing announcement became the first of many like it to come. On his return trip to Salt Lake City he determined he would stop in the communities along the way to teach the responsibility of Latter-day Saints to pay a faithful tithe. For example, while speaking in Beaver he said: “The Lord commanded me to present these things to the people. . . . We have been educated in the law of tithing for sixty-one years, but have not yet learned to observe it. We are in a fearful condition and because of it the Church is in bondage. The only relief is for the Saints to observe this law. I never before thought it to be as I know it is now.”¹⁴ At Holden he bore testimony of the revelation he had received: “When we left Salt Lake we did not know just what we were going to visit these southern settlements for, but it was clearly manifested in the first meeting in St. George. The Lord has sent us here for a special purpose. There is one important command that was given to the Latter-day Saints that has not been observed; it is the law of tithing.” He also included positive promises of blessings to those who obeyed.¹⁵ He told Church members in Scipio, “Through obeying this law the blessings of prosperity and success will be given unto the Saints.”¹⁶

The final major stop for President Snow's traveling group was in Nephi. After sharing his message of tithing with the assembled townspeople,

he met privately with the members of his company and placed upon them the obligation to testify of the revelatory experience they had witnessed in St. George:

The Lord has been with us greatly and manifested His holy will. We have had a revelation from the Lord since we left Salt Lake City, as you all understand. This manifestation that the Lord has given to me, and that you have received and borne testimony to, can never be forgotten. I know it just as well as I know anything that I ever did know. This revelation that was given to me in regard to this matter of tithing that we have talked about in the different settlements, was given to me just as fully and I know it just as clearly as any manifestation the Lord ever gave me. And this has got to go through all the Stakes of Zion, and you brethren and sisters will be called upon from time to time, perhaps, to bear testimony to this manifestation. . . . This visit of ours, there is something marvelous about it, from the day we commenced to talk upon this matter in St. George throughout all the settlements. This will be a matter of record that will go down to generations to come; it will be eternal and everlasting. Every one of you that has been a member of this company will have this matter renewed to you, and you will see it clearly; and you will see one of the greatest revolutions that has ever been made since this Church was organized, in this matter. There are things connected with it that I can see in the future. . . . I want to say, God bless the members of this company, every one of you, that we may never forget what the Lord has manifested to us, and that which we shall see clearly.¹⁷

Arthur Winter, a clerk and sermon reporter from the President's Office staff who took down this statement, recorded his own feelings about the group's experiences: "In every meeting President Snow has given to the people the word and will of the Lord concerning the payment of tithing. He has announced that the time has now come when the Lord requires the Latter-day Saints to pay their full tithing. . . . There has been an excellent feeling between all the members of the party, and we have enjoyed ourselves immensely. We come back full of the spirit of tithe-paying, and ready to bear witness that the word of the Lord has been given through President Snow."¹⁸

As fast-paced and strenuous as the trip had been, President Snow, then in his mid-eighties, had seemed to grow stronger each day. A reporter inquiring how he felt was told, "Never mind me; I am old and tough, and can stand it."¹⁹ En route to Salt Lake City, President Snow gave twenty-four talks in twenty-six meetings. In some he informed the people that members who did not comply with the commandment to pay a full tithing would not be called to ecclesiastical positions of responsibility, nor be considered worthy to enter the temple. He made it clear that he was serious about correcting tithing neglect.²⁰

On his arrival in Salt Lake City, President Snow found the Young Men's and Young Women's Mutual Improvement Association annual meetings underway, and he used the opportunity to give them the message about tithing. As President Snow concluded his address at the final meeting, Elder

B. H. Roberts, a member of the Presidency of the Seventy, wrote and then had adopted a resolution that President Snow's message be accepted and lived by all in attendance as the word and will of the Lord to them. This impromptu show of faith and loyalty moved President Snow deeply; he stood and declared: "Brethren, the God of our fathers, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob bless you. Every man who is here, who has made this promise, will be saved in the Celestial Kingdom. God bless you."²¹

Shortly after returning to Salt Lake City, President Snow called a special solemn assembly to be held in the Salt Lake Temple on July 2, 1899, for all General Authorities, stake presidencies, and ward bishoprics. Once again, his purpose was to impress on them the tithing message to the Church. Arthur Winter reported the events of the meeting: "All the First Presidency, all the Twelve, the Presiding Bishop and Elder LeRoi C. Snow spoke, and the subject dwelt upon the law of tithing, in the same strain as it was set forth on the trip to and from St. George. It was an inspiring sight to see all the leading officers of the Church gathered together in the Temple of the Lord, and there appeared to be a perfect unanimity of feeling among those present."²² President Snow strove to impress upon them their duty:

The Lord has shown me most clearly and distinctly that this is what I should say to you. The Lord testified to me while we were in St. George, before the conference there, that this is what we should tell the people. We did not know what we went to St. George for, but when we got there the Lord showed me most plainly in the first meeting, why we were there. We told the people just what they were to do and we now tell it to you.²³

"Before the meeting was dismissed," Winter further noted, "a motion was unanimously carried to the effect that we accept the word of the Lord as given through President Snow on the law of tithing, and that we covenant to obey it fully and completely."²⁴

President Snow did not relax his efforts to teach tithing to the Church. He visited stake after stake in and around Utah, testifying of the special revelatory experience he had received. He told Church members in Logan: "I never had a more perfect revelation than I received on this subject of tithing while I was in St. George."²⁵ In Heber City, he said: "I promise you if you will observe this law conscientiously that all past neglect will be forgiven you."²⁶ At the Bear Lake Stake he told the people: "When we visited the Saints in St. George we found that they were suffering greatly, because of drought. Their crops were almost a failure, they were not blessed as you seem to be, but the Lord required us to present the law of tithing to them for their observance. He requires the same of us in visiting you." At Mount Pleasant: "I knew in St. George that the Lord required this of me. I of myself am nobody. I never

sought this position as President of the Church of Christ, but now that I hold it I am going to perform my duty with the help of the Lord. I do not care what man may think of it.”²⁷ As he traveled and preached he continued to emphasize tithing payment. He told the Saints in Manti: “A few months ago, when I was in St. George, the Lord manifested to me, most clearly, that I should present this thing to the Latter-day Saints. I have now, in company with several of my brethren, visited many conferences and talked upon this subject, and the Lord has been with us in this thing.”²⁸

His messages contained generalized prophetic promises of blessings. In late October 1899, three months after he had first preached tithing to the members living in Logan, he returned to Cache Valley and told the Saints that their faithfulness in paying tithing would eventually result in a bounteous harvest. “Considering the failure of your crops this year, it is truly remarkable what an increase there is in tithing this year over last year. . . . You have done much better than I could have anticipated to live to see. Now, I say to you, in the name of the Lord, that your prospects for a rich harvest next year are of the brightest character because of your great obedience. The Lord has manifested to me most clearly that a time of great prosperity awaits the Latter-day Saints.”²⁹

According to a major subplot in the widely seen BYU-produced movie *The Windows of Heaven*, during his May 1899 visit to St. George, President Snow also prophesied that if those present would from that day onward faithfully pay a full and honest tithing, the Lord would open the literal windows of heaven, send down rain upon the dry, drought-stricken soil of Southern Utah; the rivers and ditches would be filled, and the St. George Saints would yet reap a bounteous harvest that very year. The justification for such a dramatic promise or prophecy is found in a few articles written some thirty-five to forty years later by LeRoi Snow about President Snow’s St.



Scene from the motion picture, *The Windows of Heaven*, produced by Brigham Young University (1963). Francis L. Urry portrayed Lorenzo Snow.

George visit. However, contemporary records do not corroborate any such utterance by President Snow, and historical evidence indicates otherwise. The 1899 year-end harvest was very poor, and the locals sustained heavy livestock losses. Furthermore, although it rained intermittently in Southern Utah for the next few years, it was not until 1902 that enough precipitation discernibly fell to break the drought.³⁰

In March 1900, ten months after President Snow's visit to St George, when he learned that one of the presidents of the Seventy had been assigned to attend the St. George Stake conference, Snow stated that he desired that one of the Twelve also go, whereupon Francis R. Lyman expressed his willingness to accept the invitation. Still reeling from lack of moisture, Snow told Lyman to "tell the people not to waver in their faith, but to pray fervently to the Lord for the necessary moisture, and he believed that the Lord would hear their prayers inasmuch as they strictly adhered to the law of tithing."³¹ In May 1901, two years after Snow's landmark address, Rudger Clawson reported: "Pres. Snow had promised the people of St. George country that, if they were faithful in honoring the law of tithing and other commandments of God, they should be visited by the early and latter rains. This promise had been literally fulfilled, for a recent drought of some 5 years had been broken by copious rains."³² These comments are the only known statements by Lorenzo Snow in which he is reported to have promised the Saints "rain" for the faithful observance of tithing.

As a consequence of President Snow's unwavering determination, complimented by the urging of his counselors, members of the Twelve, and local leaders to teach tithing payment throughout the Church, there began to be hopeful signs. Tithing revenues slowly increased and flowed into Church accounts. However, the debt had been severe enough that repayment was agonizingly slow and frustrating, but as the months passed, the increase in tithing revenues enabled the Church to significantly reduce many of its largest financial obligations.

Five months before President Snow's death, Elder Rudger Clawson, acting as the temporary Church accountant, shared encouraging news: "I . . . assured President Snow that, if he should live until the close of 1904, he would see the church free from every obligation. He was very much gratified with the statement and remarked that, if he were living at that time and the church were free from the bondage of debt, there would most assuredly be a big jubilation in the temple."³³ Unfortunately, President Snow did not live to celebrate such an event.

In November 1901, shortly after Snow's passing, President Joseph F. Smith and his counselors requested that Elder Clawson, in his role as a member of the Church auditing committee, provide a report regarding the

Church's financial position. Clawson wrote: "The report . . . was listened to with rapt attention by the First Presidency, who were greatly surprised and gratified with the excellent showing made and marveled at what had been accomplished in so short a time by Pres. Lorenzo Snow under the special blessing of the Lord."³⁴ The last Church bonds were redeemed in 1906 and then burned in celebration by President Joseph F. Smith.

Notes

1. For a more complete discussion of the Church's financial crisis see E. Jay Bell, "The Windows of Heaven Revisited: The 1899 Tithing Reformation," *Journal of Mormon History* 20, no. 1 (Spring 1994): 49–57.

2. In the previous LDS First Presidency, George Q. Cannon, the first counselor, had exercised significant financial responsibility. This changed under President Snow. See Ronald W. Walker, *Qualities that Count: Heber J. Grant as Businessman, Missionary, and Apostle* (Provo, UT: BYU Studies, 2004), 223.

3. President Joseph F. Smith prevailed upon President Snow to sell the bonds locally in Utah. This move caused Frank J. Cannon, son of George Q. Cannon, to become furious with President Smith for depriving him of the commission he would have received from selling them as the Church's agent. This, in part, led Frank Cannon to eventually become antagonistic toward Joseph F. Smith and the Church. See Joseph Fielding Smith Jr., *Life of Joseph F. Smith, Sixth President of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, 2nd ed. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1969), 303–04.

4. For an in-depth review of the reasons for Church debt and the sale of Church bonds as a measure to grant Snow some breathing room from financial pressures, see Leonard J. Arrington, *Great Basin Kingdom*, 387–409; and Dennis B. Horne, *Latter Leaves in the Life of Lorenzo Snow* (Springville, UT: Cedar Fort, 2012), 302–12.

5. Francis M. Lyman statement, as cited in Rudger Clawson, Journal, April 5, 1899, in *A Ministry of Meetings: The Apostolic Diaries of Rudger Clawson*, ed. Stan Larson (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1993), 44.

6. Clawson, Journal, April 5, 1899, in *A Ministry of Meetings*, 44.

7. Journal History of the Church, April 26, 1899, Church History Library, Salt Lake City, Utah; see also Clawson, Journal, May 4, 1899, in *A Ministry of Meetings*, 55.

8. "Record for Modena Route," *Salt Lake Herald*, May 17, 1899, 1.

9. See Franklin D. Richards, Journal, May 17, 1899, Church History Library.

10. See "Copy of Minutes taken in St. George Tabernacle; Wednesday, May 17, 1899," Church History Library; "In Juab and Millard Stakes," *Deseret Evening News*, May 29, 1899, 5; and Arthur Winter, Journal, May 26, 1899, Church History Library.

11. "Copy of Minutes taken in St. George Tabernacle; Wednesday, May 17, 1889." See also James G. Bleak. "Annals of the Southern Utah Mission, circa 1898–1907," Church History Library.

12. "Discourse by President Franklin D. Richards," *Millennial Star* 61, no. 38 (September 21, 1899): 593, 596.

13. "Discourse by President Lorenzo Snow," *Millennial Star*, vol. 61, no. 34 (August 24, 1899), 529–33; and no. 35 (August 31, 1899), 545–49. See also "Discourse delivered at St. George, Utah, on Thursday May 8, by President Lorenzo Snow," *Deseret Evening News*, June 3, 1899, 10, caps in original. It should be noted that when

the *Deseret Evening News* printed Snow's May 18, 1899, tithing message in the June 3 issue, a typo (dropping the "1") turned the "18" into an "8." This May 8 dating error carried over into the *Millennial Star* reprinting, and since then the mistaken date has been perpetuated in a number of LDS histories, journals, and articles. For example see *Messages of the First Presidency*, comp. James R. Clark, 6 vols. (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1965): 3:311; Gordon B. Hinckley, *What of the Mormons?: A Brief Study of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: Corporation of the President, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1947), 213–14; *2001–2002 Church Almanac* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News, 2000), 523; and Bruce C. Hafen, "Pools of Living Water: No Longer a Thirsty Land?" *BYU Studies Quarterly* 51, no. 1 (2012), 58, 65 n12.

14. "Fillmore Gives Warm Welcome," *Deseret Evening News*, May 25, 1899, 6; and "Will Arrive at Fillmore Tonight," *Deseret Evening News*, May 24, 1899, 2.

15. "In Juab and Millard Stakes," *Deseret Evening News*, May 29, 1899, 5; see also Winter, Journal, May 25, 1899.

16. "In Juab and Millard Stakes," *Deseret Evening News*, May 29, 1899, 5.

17. Winter, Journal, May 26, 1899.

18. Winter, Journal, May 27, 1899.

19. "Pres. Snow at Nephi," *Salt Lake Herald*, May 27, 1899, 1.

20. See Horne, *Latter Leaves in the Life of Lorenzo Snow*, 328–41.

21. "President Snow's Address," May 29, 1899, in *Improvement Era* 2, no. 10 (August 1899): 795. See also Clark, *Messages of the First Presidency* 3:314–17.

22. Winter, Journal, July 2, 1899.

23. Snow, "From Despair to Freedom Through Tithing," 7.

24. Winter, Journal, July 2, 1899.

25. "President Snow in Cache Valley," *Deseret Evening News*, August 7, 1899, 1.

26. "President Snow at Heber City," *Deseret Evening News*, August 14, 1899, 1.

27. "President Snow and Party Home," *Deseret Evening News*, September 5, 1899, 5; also Winter, Journal, September 2, 1899.

28. "Sanpete Stake Conference," *Deseret Evening News*, September 4, 1899, 1.

29. "Cache Stake's New President," *Deseret Evening News*, October 30, 1899, 1.

30. See Bell, "The Windows of Heaven Revisited," 66–73.

31. Journal History, March 8, 1900.

32. Clawson, Journal, April 3, 1901 in *A Ministry of Meetings*, 263.

33. Clawson, Journal, May 3, 1901, in *A Ministry of Meetings*, 278.

34. Clawson, Journal, November 18, 1901, in *A Ministry of Meetings*, 354.