

The Restoration, Part II

By Marvin Cowan

Apostasy and Restoration is the title of a pamphlet published by The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons). On the last page it says "As Latter-day Saints we testify that shortly after the death of the Lord's original twelve apostles, there came seven-teen hundred years of apostasy and darkness. Then in 1820, the resurrected Savior ap-peared to Joseph Smith and called Him to be a prophet to all the world. Through him came the restoration of the priesthood, the gospel, and the true church: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints." In the LDS scripture called *The Pearl of Great Price*, Joseph Smith-History 1:3-19, Smith claimed he was fourteen years old in 1820 when a revival took place in Palmyra, New York, near Manchester where he lived. The claims of the Method-ists, Presbyterians and Baptists confused him, so he asked God in prayer which church was right and which he should join. In response, both God the Father and His Son, Jesus Christ, appeared to him and told him not to join any of the churches because they were *all* wrong along with *all* their creeds (doctrines) and *all* those who professed to believe them.

Since Joseph Smith had no witnesses to his "First Vision," is there any other way to determine whether or not his story is true? Yes, Smith mentions several details that can be compared with other records of those same details. For example, he mentions a revival among Methodists, Presbyterians and Baptists in Palmyra, New York, near his home in Manchester, just before he was visited by God and Christ early in the spring of 1820. He also said his brother, Alvin, died November 19, 1823. This kind of data can be verified or disproved by other records. For example, in verse 5, Smith claimed he was living in Manchester, New York in 1820. But in 1970, BYU microfilmed the road tax lists of Palmyra township during the Smith era. Joseph Smith, Sr., was listed among property owners and males over 21 who were required to repair the roads in Palmyra Road District No. 26 from April 1817 through April 1822 because that is where they lived. The property tax records for Manchester show that the Smith's bought their land in 1821, but there was no home on it before 1822, which agrees with the road tax records. So the Smiths did not live in Manchester in 1820.

In verse 5, Joseph Smith said that in the place where he lived there was an "unusual excitement on the subject of religion" and great multitudes united themselves to the Meth-odist, Presbyterian, and Baptist Churches. Since Smith said it was this revival that caused him to ask God which church was right in spring of 1820, the revival would have had to have been shortly before that in 1819 or early 1820. But those churches in Palmyra in 1819 and 1820 recorded more losses than gains! Nor did the area newspapers mention a revival then.

Joseph also said his brother Alvin died November 19, 1823, and Alvin's tombstone confirms that date. William Smith, another brother, and one of the original 12 LDS apostles, wrote that Rev. Stockton spoke at Alvin's funeral indicating he went to hell. Will-iam also said that Rev. Stockton and Rev. Lane later became leaders of the Palmyra re-vival and Joseph Smith, Sr., (Smith's father) refused to go to the meetings because of what Stockton had said at Alvin's funeral. Therefore, the revival had to be *after* Alvin's death. The area newspapers reported a revival in the fall of 1824 and early 1825, led by Rev. Stockton and Rev. Lane, which resulted in large numbers joining the churches. The church records for the Methodists, Presbyterians and Baptists also show large gains at that time.

But if that was the revival that caused Joseph Smith to ask God which church was right, the earliest “spring” he could have had his First Vision was in 1825. Smith also seems to be confused about what he saw in his First Vision. His earliest account in his own diary says he saw the Lord who told him his sins were forgiven. But there was no mention of all the churches being wrong. Another time he said the Lord and many angels appeared to him. The account in LDS scripture was published 22 years after it supposedly happened and says he saw “two personages” who are now identified as God the Father and Christ. But the *Bible* says “No man hath seen God at any time” (John 1:18; I John 4:12; I Tim. 6:16). The reason no man can see God is because He is invisible (Col. 1:15).

Smith’s story also claims that the angel Moroni first visited him three years *after* his First Vision and then it was *four more years* before he got the gold plates and began to translate the *Book of Mormon*. If Smith’s First Vision was in the spring of 1825, he couldn’t have begun to translate the *Book of Mormon* until 1832. But the *Book of Mormon* was registered June 11, 1829! Joseph Fielding Smith, the tenth LDS Prophet, said “Mormonism as it is called must stand or fall on the story of Joseph Smith. He was either a prophet of God divinely called, properly appointed and commissioned, or he was one of the biggest frauds this world has ever seen. There is no middle ground...If his claims and declarations were built upon fraud and deceit, there would appear many errors and contradictions, which would be easy to detect” (*Doctrines of Salvation*, Vol. I, p. 188). The errors and contradictions in Smith’s story indicate it is not true.

For more information on this subject we recommend *Inventing Mormonism* by Wesley Walters and Michael Marquardt, published by Smith Research Associates in 1994. Our next article will discuss the Angel Moroni and other heavenly visitors involved in Smith’s “Restored Church.”