

## David Whitmer: His Evolving Beliefs and Recollections

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It is frequently remembered that David Whitmer never denied his testimony as one of the Three Witnesses of the Book of Mormon, despite the fact that he withdrew from the fellowship with the main body of Latter Day Saints in 1838. While this report is accurate, the underlying reality is more complex. In the lifetime of Joseph Smith, Jr., Mormonism evolved significantly. David and the Whitmer family were attracted to the earliest expressions of the Mormon restoration and often resisted subsequent changes as they were introduced. After Smith's death, David Whitmer continued to yearn for the early Church of Christ as it had been organized in 1830. Throughout the rest of his life, David peeled back layer after layer of later Mormon teachings—rejecting concepts including the changes to the church's name, the office of “high priest,” and the equation of the office of “prophet, seer, revelator, and translator” with the presidency of the church. In this process of deconstruction, David's testimony of the Book of Mormon remained, but his recollections of the early church evolved to suit his own vision of the primitive Church of Christ.

### Connections with Early Mormonism, 1829-1838

David Whitmer first heard about Joseph Smith and the gold plates from his association with Oliver Cowdery.<sup>1</sup> In June of 1829, nearly a year prior to the formal organization of the Church of Christ, David Whitmer was baptized by Smith. Later in the month David, Oliver Cowdery, and Martin Harris were told they would view the gold plates by faith or by spiritual means.<sup>2</sup> The testimony of their visions was printed at the end of the first edition of the Book of Mormon. Shortly after the church was organized in Manchester, New York, David started performing service to the church, holding the office of Elder.

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<sup>1</sup> Ronald E. Romig, "David Whitmer: Faithful Dissenter, Witness Apart," in Roger D. Launius and Linda Thatcher, eds., *Differing Visions: Dissenters in Mormon History* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1994), 23-24.

<sup>2</sup> H. Michael Marquardt, *The Joseph Smith Revelations: Text and Commentary* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1999), 49. See *The Doctrine and Covenants of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City, Utah, 1981), section 17, verses 2-3, cited hereafter as LDS D&C; and *Book of Doctrine and Covenants* (Independence, Missouri: Herald Publishing House, 1990), Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints [now Community of Christ], section 15, verse 1 (cited hereafter as RLDS D&C).

When Hiram Page began to receive messages through his peep stone,<sup>3</sup> David Whitmer believed they represented true revelations. David's brothers John and Peter, along with Oliver Cowdery, all initially agreed and accepted them. Joseph Smith prevailed upon the group and showed them their error in accepting these revelations. Later that year, David's younger brother, twenty-one-year-old Peter Whitmer Jr., left on the mission to the Lamanites (Native Americans) with Cowdery and two other church ministers. This mission resulted in the establishment of two primary gathering places for the Saints—Kirtland, Ohio, and Jackson County, Missouri.

Before leaving New York to go to Ohio, David Whitmer married Julia Ann Jolly in January 1831. That summer David traveled from Kirtland to Jackson County, arriving in August 1831. While there, he signed his name to Bishop Edward Partridge's bishop's license. After this trip, Whitmer returned to Kirtland and was ordained to the high priesthood (the office of high priest) by Oliver Cowdery in October. The next month David attended a conference concerning publishing Joseph Smith's revelations,<sup>4</sup> after which David fulfilled a short mission with Reynolds Cahoon to obtain money and property for Smith's Bible "translation."<sup>5</sup>

The call came for David and Julia to move to Jackson County, Missouri, in 1832. A little over a year later they were driven from their new home in Jackson County, along with the other Saints. In the fall of 1833, they settled in neighboring Clay County. Their son David John was born soon after their arrival. The following year, Joseph Smith led an armed expedition known as "Zion's Camp" from Kirtland to Clay County in a failed attempt to reclaim Mormon property in Jackson County. This was Smith's third trip to Missouri and he used the occasion to organize the presidency of the church in Missouri and the "High Council of Zion" (Missouri). The minutes of the 7 July 1834 meeting mention that Joseph ordained David as president with David's brother John and William W. Phelps as his two counselors. The minutes copied into the *Far West Record* indicate that those present covenanted "with uplifted hands to heaven that they would uphold Brother David Whitmer as President, head and leader in Zion (in the absence of br[other]. Joseph Smith jr.)."<sup>6</sup> However, the minutes do not specify that Smith ordained David to be his successor, as many attendees later recalled.

The next year David Whitmer's family traveled from Missouri to Kirtland. There, together with Oliver Cowdery and Martin Harris, David selected twelve apostles in February 1835. While in Kirtland, David sat on the Kirtland High Council, served as a general agent for the church's literary firm, and was appointed as a "Captain of the

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<sup>3</sup> LDS D&C 30:1-4; RLDS D&C 29:1, September 1830.

<sup>4</sup> Donald Q. Cannon and Lyndon W. Cook, *Far West Record: Minutes of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1830-1844* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1983), 26-27, cited hereafter as Cannon and Cook, *Far West Record*.

<sup>5</sup> Reynolds Cahoon Journal, November 1831, Family and Church History Department, Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City, cited hereafter as LDS Archives.

<sup>6</sup> Cannon and Cook, *Far West Record*, 72-73.

Lord's Host."<sup>7</sup> Julia and David's daughter, named after her mother Julia Ann, was born on 28 September 1835. In early 1836, David helped draft rules for the "House of the Lord" (Kirtland Temple) and received his washing and anointing in connection with the Kirtland endowment. He attended the dedication of the temple on 27 March and reported that he "saw angels in the house."<sup>8</sup>

David was also present when Joseph Smith gave the word of the Lord concerning the church's banking project, the Kirtland Safety Society. David Whitmer "warned us," wrote Wilford Woodruff, "to humble ourselves before God lest his hand rest upon us in anger for our pride & many sins that we were run[n]ing into in our days of prosperity as the ancient Nephites did."<sup>9</sup> David's vocal opposition to the project resulted in charges against himself and other church leaders for their conduct before the Kirtland High Council. However, David was discharged by the council and no business was transacted against those charged. David and family returned to Missouri in the summer of 1837. By this time, David's counselors in the Missouri presidency, John Whitmer and William W. Phelps, had established a new settlement for the Missouri Saints, which they called "Far West," in what became Caldwell County.

On 30 January 1838, David and his brothers John and Jacob, along with Frederick G. Williams, Oliver Cowdery, William W. Phelps, and Lyman E. Johnson, held a meeting in Far West to consider their alternatives to vexing problems that they believed were occurring in the church. The group thought that forces within the church were "endeavoring to unite ecclesiastical with civil authority and force men under a pretense of incurring the displeasure of heaven to use their earthly substance contrary to their own interest and privilege." They appointed two committees: one to publicize their grievances and the second committee (consisting of William W. Phelps, Lyman Johnson, and John Whitmer) "to look for a place for the above named individuals in which to settle."<sup>10</sup> David and this group of men and their families became known as the Missouri "dissenters."

Opposition to the dissenters in Missouri was led by Thomas B. Marsh, president of the Council of Twelve Apostles. Marsh held a "general assembly" at Far West on 5 February in which the Missouri Presidency (David Whitmer, John Whitmer, and William

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<sup>7</sup> Bruce N. Westergren, ed., *From Historian to Dissident: The Book of John Whitmer* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1995), 173, entry of 24 September 1835. Original in Community of Christ Library-Archives, Independence, Missouri.

<sup>8</sup> Joseph Smith Journal, entry of 27 March 1836, LDS Archives. See Dean C. Jessee, ed., *The Papers of Joseph Smith: Journal, 1832-1842* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1992), 2:203.

<sup>9</sup> Scott G. Kenney, ed., *Wilford Woodruff's Journal*, Typescript (Midvale, Utah: Signature Books, 1983), 1:120, 122, entries of 6 and 17 January 1837. Original in LDS Archives.

<sup>10</sup> Oliver Cowdery to Warren and Lyman Cowdery, 4 February 1838, Oliver Cowdery Letterbook, 85, Henry E. Huntington Library, San Marino, California. The dissenters did look for an alternate place to settle. Thomas Marsh noted on 18 May: "In company with Joseph, Sidney and others, I went north in Daviess County. We met with Oliver Cowdery, Lyman E. Johnson and others encamped, who were also exploring northward on Grand River" ("History of Thos. Baldwin Marsh," *Deseret News* 8 (24 March 1858):18.

W. Phelps) were not sustained in their office.<sup>11</sup> David and his counselors did not accept the legality of Marsh's actions. On 10 March they wrote to Marsh, "It is contrary to the principles of the revelations of Jesus Christ, and his gospel, and the laws of the land, to try a person for an offence, by an illegal tribunal, or by men prejudiced against him or by authority that has given an opinion, or decision beforehand or in his absence."<sup>12</sup>

On 15 March, a day after his arrival in Far West, Joseph Smith met with the Missouri bishopric and High Council, now led by Marsh. The recorded minutes of their meeting mention David's 1834 ordination: "President Joseph Smith[,] Jr gave a history of the ordination of David Whitmer, which took place in July 1834, to be a leader, or a prophet to this Church, which (ordination) was on conditions that he (J. Smith jr) did not live to God himself."<sup>13</sup> The minutes of the prior councils were also read and Smith approved its actions. The following month, when formal charges against David were brought before the High Council, he again wrote that he did not consider certain councils legal:

Far West Mo April 13th 1838

John Murdock

Sir I received a line from you bearing [the] date [of] the 9th inst. requesting me as a High Priest to appear before the High Council and answer to five several charges on this day at 12 o'clock.

You sir with a Majority of this Church have decided that certain Councils were legal by which it is said I have been deprived of my office as one of the Presidents of this Church[.] I have thought and still think they were not agreeable to the revelations of God, which I believe and by my now attending this Council, and answering to charges as a High Priest, should be acknowledging the correctness and legality of those former assumed Councils, which I shall not do.

Believing as I verily do, that you and the leaders of the Councils have a determination to persue [pursue] your unlawful course at all hazards, and bring others to your standard in violating of the revelations, to spare you any further trouble I hereby withdraw from your fellowship and communion—choosing to seek a place among the meek and humble, where the revelations of Heaven will be observed and the rights of men regarded.

David Whitmer.<sup>14</sup>

The High Council did not consider it necessary to investigate the case. Some council members spoke and thought David "was not worthy a membership in the Church." Thomas B. Marsh, presiding at the High Council meeting, decided that David Whitmer be no longer be considered a church member. High Council meetings also tried

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<sup>11</sup> Cannon and Cook, *Far West Record*, 139; also in *Elders' Journal of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints* 1 (July 1838):44, Far West, Missouri.

<sup>12</sup> Cannon and Cook, *Far West Record*, 146; also in *Elders' Journal* 1 (July 1838):46.

<sup>13</sup> Cannon and Cook, *Far West Record*, 151.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 177, emphasis omitted.

and excommunicated other dissenters, including Oliver Cowdery<sup>15</sup> and David's brother, John.<sup>16</sup>

Although separated from the church, the dissenters continued to live in and around Far West. In June a long, threatening letter, credited to Sidney Rigdon of the First Presidency and signed by eighty-three individuals was presented to David Whitmer and other dissenters. David and the others were warned to depart from Caldwell County. The letter included the following sentiments:

We wish to remind you that Oliver Cowdery and David Whitmer were among the principle of those who were the means of gathering us to this place by their testimony which they gave concerning the plates of the Book of Mormon; that they were shown to them by an angel; which testimony we believe now, as much as before you had so scandalously disgraced it.

The letter charged David and the others with being "united with a gang of counterfeiters, thieves, liars, and blacklegs of the deepest dye, to deceive, cheat, and defraud the saints out of their property by every art and stratagem which wickedness could invent."<sup>17</sup> Of those warned out, only William W. Phelps stayed in Far West. David and his family relocated to Richmond, Ray County. In the year following the expulsion of the dissenters from Caldwell County, most of the Latter Day Saints were themselves expelled from Missouri. A new Mormon gathering place was established in Nauvoo, Illinois, where Smith continued to lead his followers until his assassination in 1844. For the period from June 1838 to early 1846—a little more than seven years—David Whitmer stayed away from the main body of the church.

### David in the Aftermath of the Mormon Succession Crisis

In addition to David's father and mother, Peter and Mary, there were four close-knit Whitmer families in Missouri in 1846: Jacob (age 46) and Elizabeth Whitmer with six children; John (age 43) and Sarah Whitmer with two children; David (age 41) and Julia Ann Whitmer with two children; and brother-in-law Hiram Page (about 45 years old) and his wife Catherine Whitmer page with eight children. Although they were apart from the main body of the Saints, the Whitmers were also looking for a new leader after the untimely death of Joseph Smith.

In 1846, they received a pamphlet setting forth the claims of James J. Strang as the Lord's appointed prophet and seer. The sixteen page pamphlet was titled *A Defence of*

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 162-171.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 146-150.

<sup>17</sup> Far West, June, 1838. "To Oliver Cowdrey [sic], David Whitmer, John Whitmer, Wil[liam] W. Phelps and Lyman E. Johnson—Greeting." The complete document was printed in *Senate Document 189—The Testimony given before the judge of the fifth judicial circuit of the State of Missouri, on the trial of Joseph Smith, jr., and others, for high treason, and other crimes against that State* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1841), 6-9.

*the Claims of James J. Strang To the Authority now Usurped by The Twelve; And shewing him to be the True Successor of Joseph Smith, as First President of the High Priesthood.*<sup>18</sup> The pamphlet reprinted what characterized as a 18 June 1844 "letter of appointment" from Joseph Smith, relating to establishing a Stake of Zion in Voree, Wisconsin Territory. It further recounted that on 13 September 1845 four of Strang's followers dug up "three plates of brass," which Strang translated using urim and thummim five days later.<sup>19</sup> Finally, the pamphlet reported that at the moment of Joseph Smith's martyrdom, an angel appeared to Strang and designated him as the prophet's successor.

The Whitmers and Hiram Page communicated with each other and held a council respecting the contents of the pamphlet. John Whitmer, former church historian, recorded in his history the acceptance of James Strang:

God knowing all things prepared a man whom he visited by an angel of God and showed him where there were some ancient Record hid, and also put in his heart to desire of Smith to Grant him power to establish a stake of Zion in Wisconsin Territory, whose name is James J. Strang. Now at first Smith was unfavorably disposed to grant him this request, but being troubled in spirit and knowing from the things that were staring him in the face that his days must soon be closed therefore he enquired of the of the [sic] Lord and behold the Lord said, Appoint James J. Strang the Prophet, Seer & Revelator unto my church. . . Strangs Reigns in the place of Smith the author and proprietor of the Book of Mormon.<sup>20</sup>

(The words in the manuscript were crossed out about a year later when the Whitmers rejected Strang's claim.) Former Apostle William E. McLellin also briefly accepted Strang's claims and was reordained an apostle in Strang's church on 18 August 1846. In a strange series of events, McLellin then denied that Strang had ever ordained him. Instead, on 30 November, he said that he realized that David Whitmer was the proper successor to the late Joseph Smith.<sup>21</sup> McLellin wrote a letter to David imploring him to come forward and take his position as the Lord's Seer in Smith's stead. In his 2

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<sup>18</sup> The first twelve pages included a reprint of the four-page issue of the *Voree Herald* Vol. 1, No. 1 of January 1846 with four pages of new material on "Primitive Mormonism." This publication was evidently compiled by Reuben Miller in Keokuk, Iowa Territory in February 1846. Miller wrote to James J. Strang, "We have had your paper published [published] in pamphlet form with considerable additional matter (3,000 copies)" (Miller to Strang, 15-18 February 1845 [1846], James Jesse Strang Collection, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, New Haven, Connecticut).

<sup>19</sup> Statement of Aaron Smith, Jira[h] B. Wheelan, J[ames]. M. Van Nostrand, and Edward Whitcomb as cited in *Voree Herald* 1 (January 1846):1, 3-4, Voree, Wisconsin Territory.

<sup>20</sup> Westergren, *From Historian to Dissident*, 194-95. Angled brackets indicate what appeared above the line.

<sup>21</sup> "The Successor of Joseph, the Seer," *Ensign of Liberty, of the Church of Christ* 1 (March 1848):78, Kirtland, Ohio, editor William E. McLellin.

December 1846 letter, McLellin wrote:

I was visited by James J. Strang of Voree, Wisconsin. He laid siege to me in order to have me unite with him in his organization. I gave him some encouragement. . .The brethren here generally receive him as the Successor of Jos. Smith, according to his profession—He told me that all the witnesses to the Book of Mormon yet alive were with him, except Oliver. I think he told me he had a letter from Hiram Page. He said he expected you all at Voree soon.<sup>22</sup>

Without waiting for David's reply, McLellin organized a church in David's name in Kirtland. He then convinced Book of Mormon witness Martin Harris, recently returned from England on a mission for Strang, to be rebaptize and join the newly organized church.<sup>23</sup> It appears that the Whitmers and Hiram Page held onto their belief regarding Strang for one year, from about March 1846 to April 1847, before switched their allegiance to this new church. McLellin wrote again to the Whitmers on 4 May 1847 (no copy extant). Hiram Page responded writing, "Although I hold the office of High Priest, yet I dare not raise a finger to move the ark forward without a 'thus saith the Lord,' through the Lord's Seer" and gave his testimony of the Book of Mormon.<sup>24</sup>

William E. McLellin departed from Kirtland on 6 July, stopping first in Voree and then in Elkhorn, Wisconsin Territory where he talked with Oliver Cowdery. Shortly afterward Cowdery wrote a letter to David informing him of McLellin's visit and letting him know that McLellin planned to visit him.

Now whether the Lord will call us again publicly or not to work in his great cause, is not known to me; nor does it particularly matter: for when once the imputation is [']wiped away' our names will shine in his holy kingdom on earth, when that kingdom is once built up—whether we live to see it or not. On this great subject I want to see you much. True it is that our right gives us the head. It is no matter of pride with me, but an anxious desire to do all that the Lord may require of us. We may not live to see the day, but *we have the authority*, AND DO HOLD THE KEYS. It is important, should we not be permitted to act in that authority, that we confer them upon some man or men, whom God may appoint, that this priesthood be not taken again from the earth till the earth be sanctified. I want to see you much on this great matter.

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<sup>22</sup> McLellin to Whitmer, 2 December 1846 as cited in *Ensign of Liberty* 1 (April 1847):17. The *Voree Herald* mentioned that among those supporting Strang were members of the Joseph Smith family at Nauvoo and "all the living witnesses of the book of Mormon save one" (*Voree Herald* 1 [September 1846]:4. The one witness that did not support Strang was Oliver Cowdery.

<sup>23</sup> H. Michael Marquardt, "Martin Harris: The Kirtland Years, 1831-1870," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 35 (Fall 2002):25-28.

<sup>24</sup> Page to McLellin, 30 May 1847 as cited in *Ensign of Liberty* 1 (January 1848):63.

That our brother William [McLellin] has been directed and influenced in what he has been doing by the Holy Spirit, I need not say to you I fully believe. I do not say that *every thing* he has done has been done by inspiration—it would be strange if it were so. But that God has touched his heart, that he might begin to prepare the way, I have no doubt. In thus doing he has done well, and he will in no wise lose his reward."<sup>25</sup>

McLellin next traveled to Nauvoo, Illinois where he visited Emma Smith, widow of Joseph Smith. From Nauvoo McLellin went to Richmond, Missouri, arriving at David Whitmer's residence on 4 September. Here McLellin met with David and Jacob Whitmer and Hiram Page for the first time since 1839. The four men recounted their histories and then traveled to Far West to hold a two-day conference with John Whitmer. A revelation received by McLellin on 10 February was read and approved by the conference. The group also prayed and, with McLellin acting as scribe, recorded the words David dictated in four revelations or precepts. The first revelation commenced with the words, "Verily, verily thus saith the Lord unto you my servants David, and John, and William, and Jacob, and Hiram, it is for my name's sake saith the Lord God of hosts, that your sins are now forgiven, and that you shall have my word concerning you." Regarding the righteousness of the Church of Christ, the conference was told that the "church for a time did not dwell on the earth." Concerning McLellin came to the following:

Therefore I the Lord have dealt so marvelously with my servant William. Therefore I have poured out my spirit upon him from time to time, that the 'man of sin' might be revealed through him. To him I have given my Holy Spirit. I have inspired his heart to discern the true principles of my kingdom, that he may again build up my church as from the beginning. Therefore I have inspired him to build it up according to my law. Therefore he shall continue to do all things according to the pattern that I have shown to him. Now I say unto you my servant William, that you may not err, be meek and humble before me, and you shall always know by my spirit the correct principles of my kingdom.

McLellin was told to "write concerning the downfall of those who once composed my church, and set forth to the world by the light and power of my spirit, why I the Lord did not prosper them." David Whitmer and his associates were told to remain in Missouri:

therefore my servant David if thou should'st leave this land, and those of thy brethren who have remained with thee, then you shall forfeit your right and make the word of God of none effect. For I have said unto you in days past and gone, that but few should remain to receive their inheritances. Therefore a commandment I give unto you my servant David, and also my

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<sup>25</sup> Cowdery to David Whitmer, 28 July 1847 as cited in "Important Letters," *Ensign of Liberty* 1 (May 1848):92, emphasis retained. The mention by Cowdery of "we have the authority, and do hold the keys" may refer to Oliver's ordination as assistant president on 5 December 1834.

servants John, and Hiram, and Jacob, that you must remain until I command you, and then you shall only be permitted to visit the faithful in my kingdom.

McLellin by contrast, was instructed "to build up my church in Kirtland, to be a standard and a light to the inhabitants of the earth, that they may know that the church of Christ is established here on earth." The next day McLellin baptized and confirmed the four men at Far West. McLellin then retraced his path, stopping in Nauvoo and Voree and returning to Kirtland on 2 November. From Kirtland, McLellin published an account of the Far West conference in the new church's newspaper, the *Ensign of Liberty*:

And then (as directed) I ordained H[iram]. Page to the office of High Priest, in the holy priesthood which is after the order of the Son of God. And we two ordained Jacob Whitmer to the same office. Then we all laid hands on John Whitmer and re-ordained him to the priesthood, and to be counsellor to David in the first presidency of the church. And then with the most solemn feelings which I ever experienced, we stepped forward and all laid hands upon David and re-ordained him to all the gifts and callings to which he had been appointed through Joseph Smith, in the general assembly of the inhabitants of Zion, in July 1834.<sup>26</sup>

After the conference with McLellin, John Whitmer made another addition to his manuscript history of the church. Recalling the 1834 conference where he and David has [had] been called to the Missouri presidency, John wrote, "On his [Joseph Smith's] way to Mo. or Zion he was frequently heard to say that he had a duty to perform and that was [that] he had to appoint another in his stead to Wit David Whitmer. . . . Here at the same time he ordained David Whitmer Prophet Seer Revelator & translator."<sup>27</sup>

Meanwhile, David wrote to Oliver Cowdery telling him of the building up of the church:

Far West, Mo. Sept. 8, 1847

Dear brother Oliver:—I write in answer to your last. We have held a council in Caldwell county, at brother John's. For particulars I refer you to bro. W.E. McLellin, after which you will be able to form ideas that will be of service to you, in your future time.

Now I say *it is your duty* to prepare so fast as God will open the way before you to *cut loose from the world*—and lay hold of the work of God, and assist in building up the church, even the church of Christ. I would give you a detail of the whole matter but have only time to say that we have established, or commenced to establish the church of Christ again, by laying aside our dead works, and being re-ordained to our former offices of President and Counsellor, as formerly—and it is the will of God

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<sup>26</sup> "Our Tour West in 1847," *Ensign of Liberty* 1 (August 1849):104.

<sup>27</sup> Westergren, *From Historian to Dissident*, 195.

that you be one of my counsellors in the presidency of the church. Jacob and Hiram have been ordained High Priests, and W.E. McLellin President, to stand in relation to me as you stood to Joseph, &c. &c. Now you behold that THE TIME HAS COME, to clear away the old rubbish, and build again those principles which constitute the church of Christ. Brother McLellin has still to continue his work in exposing the man of sin, &c. &c.

I am your brother in the new Covenant,

DAVID WHITMER.<sup>28</sup>

A second letter to Oliver from the Whitmers discussed the plans to build up the church further. It included an apparent revelation which commanded, “ye shall wipe out the consecration law which they claim to be a law unto my church; and my church should be built up according to the laws contained in the bible book of Mormon and the church covenants.”<sup>29</sup> In the letter, David conceded, “Brother Oliver I am neither a prophet nor the son of a prophet,” but he argued, “I am ordained to that order and when the time cometh that the Lord will see fit to bestow the means as he did in the beginning then israel shall be led as in days of old; then the saying shall be fulfilled old things shall become new.”<sup>30</sup>

Back in Kirtland, McLellin printed a “Testimony of Three Witnesses” to David Whitmer's July 1834 ordination as “Joseph Smith’s successor”:

#### TESTIMONY OF THREE WITNESSES.

We cheerfully certify, to all whom it may concern, that we attended a general conference, called at the instance of Joseph Smith, in Clay county, Mo., on the 8th of July, 1834, at the residence of Elder Lyman Wight. And while the conference was in session, Joseph Smith presiding, he arose and said that the time had come when he must appoint his Successor in office. Some have supposed that it would be Oliver Cowdery; but, said he, Oliver has lost that privilege in consequence of transgression. The Lord has made it known to me that David Whitmer is the man. David was then called forward, and Joseph and his counsellors laid hands upon him, and ordained him to his station, to succeed him. Joseph then gave David a

<sup>28</sup> David Whitmer to Oliver Cowdery, 8 September 1847, as cited in *Ensign of Liberty* 1 (May 1848):93, emphasis retained.

<sup>30</sup> Here “church covenants” means the Articles and Covenants of the Church of Christ (June 1830). See Book of Commandments chapter 24; revised version in LDS D&C 20; RLDS D&C 17.

<sup>30</sup> Retained copy of letter to Oliver Cowdery, 2 October 1847, no name at end of letter, photocopy and transcription in Community of Christ Library-Archives, Independence, Missouri. The copy appears to have been written by Hiram Page for David Whitmer. Because Hiram Page's letters contain many spelling errors the text of the letters has been standardized for easier reading. Page, in a letter to William E. McLellin, 2 February 1848 (page 6), wrote, “I will tell why David signed or caused his name to be signed to a sentence in his letter which you said astonished you; I am neither a prophet nor the son of a prophet.”

charge, in the hearing of the whole assembly. Joseph then seemed to rejoice that that work was done, and said, now brethren, if any thing should befall me, the work of God will roll on with more power than it has hitherto done. Then, brethren, you will have a man who can lead you as well as I can. He will be Prophet, Seer, Revelator, and Translator before God.

MARTIN HARRIS,  
LEONARD RICH,  
CALVIN BEEBE.<sup>31</sup>

A copy of the statement printed by McLellin made its way to James J. Strang. Because Strang had received communications from the Missouri group through Hiram Page, he doubted that David would come forward and claim to be Smith's successor. In January 1848, Strang published a response to McLellin which read:

The positive evidence that he does not make any such pretensions, is this: early in 1846 the tract reprint of the first number of the Voree Herald, containing evidence of my calling and authority, strayed into upper Missouri. Immediately I received a letter from Hiram Page, one of the witnesses of the Book of Mormon, and a neighbor and friend to the Whitmers', informing me that he had received that tract and read it with joy and gladness, and went on to tell at length of reading it to the two Whitmers' who lived near him, and that they rejoiced with exceeding joy that God had raised up one to stand in place of Joseph, and was so much overjoyed that they could not rest till they had gone and communicated the glad news to their brother who lived at some distance. He goes on to say that all the witnesses of the Book of Mormon living in that region received the news with gladness, and finally that they held a council in which David and John Whitmer and this Hiram Page were the principle actors; and being at a loss what they ought to do about coming to Voree, sent up to me as a Prophet of God to tell them what to do.

Then James Strang mentioned Hiram Page writing to him again asking him to come and receive records that they had in their keeping:

This letter I answered shortly after receiving it, and last April (1847) I received another letter from the same Hiram Page, acknowledging the receipt of mine and of many papers from me, and giving me the acts of another council of himself and the Whitmers', in which, among other things, they invite me to come to their residence in Missouri and receive from them, David and John Whitmer, church records, and manuscript revelations, which they had kept in their possession from the time that they were active members of the church. These documents they speak of

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<sup>31</sup> "The Successor of Joseph, the Seer," *Ensign of Liberty* 1 (December 1847):43-44, testimony not dated.

as of great importance to the church, and offer them to me as the true shepherd who has a right to them, and were anxious that I should come and receive them in person because they were too much importance to be trusted in the mails. It is very true that these letters were not written by David Whitmer, but they were written by Hiram Page as the common epistle of himself and the Whitmers'.<sup>32</sup>

Strang was correct that the Whitmers had recently been impressed with his claims, but McLellin was correct to say that they had moved on. What McLellin did not know was that the Whitmers were already moving on from his Church of Christ as well. Although we do not have all the correspondence between McLellin and the Whitmers, there are copies of a few of the letters written on their behalf from Hiram Page. The topics discussed in Page's letters show that not only were the Whitmers moving away from McLellin's church but they were deconstructing church history and discarding a number of Latter Day Saint priesthood offices and practices. In one lengthy epistle, Page lists some of Joseph Smith's "errors," including the loss of 116 manuscript pages of the early part of the Book of Mormon. Convening the Canadian copyright revelation, Page wrote:

Joseph heard that there was a chance to sell a copyright in Canada for any useful book that was used in the states. Joseph thought this would be a good opportunity to get a handsom[e] sum of money which was to be (after the expenses were taken out) for th[e] exclusive benefit of the Smith family and was to be at the disposal of Joseph accordingly Oliver Cowdrey. Joseph Knights. Hiram Page and Joseah Stoel [Josiah Stowell] were chosen ([as I understoo]d by revelation) to do the business; we were [living from] 30 to 100 miles apart the necessary preparation was [made] (by them) in a sly manor [manner] So as to keep Martin Harris from dra[w]ing a s[hare] of the money, it was told me we were to go by revelation but when we had assembled at father Smiths; the[re was] no revelation for us to go but we were all anxious to get a revelation to go; and when it came we were to go to Kingston where we were to sell if they would not harden their hearts; but when [we] got their [there]; there was n[o] purchaser neither were they authorized at Kingston to buy rights for the province; but Little York was the place where such business had to be done; we were to get 8000 dollars [we] were treated with the best of respects by all we met with in Kingston - - by the above we may learn how a revelation may be received and the person receiving it not be benefitted

Just four months after being re-ordained high priests, Page and the Whitmers started questioning the necessity of that office in the church: "in consequence of errors we find that many false principles were introduced into the Church, which brought distraction; one of its great evils was the introduction of the high priesthood into the

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<sup>32</sup> *Gospel Herald* 2 (January 20, 1848):206, emphasis omitted.

church of Christ<sup>33</sup>. . .we can not find in the church of Christ that there was ever a high priest in the church of Christ since our great high priest (Jesus Christ) ascended into heaven there to make intercession for those who come to God by him."

In Page's view, Smith's most important errors included the original Lamanite mission,<sup>34</sup> the law of consecration, and changed to the revelations published in the Doctrine and Covenants. He wrote, "I think there is enough to wipe out the consecration law" and that McLellin should "know what to do with the Book of Covenants;<sup>35</sup> after you see this [letter] you will see that you are to let it rest." According to Page, Joseph Smith erred in many things, "till his transgressions became so abominable that the Lord could not suffer him to hold the keys any longer; and made him confer those keys upon David with legal authority." Page's reconstruction of these errors and his recollection of David's ordination led him to conclude that:

When we speak of David as prophet we do not speak of him as mere prophet; but as prophet, seer, and revelator, the three terms being combined in one becaus[e] this was the way which he was ordained. . .he was appointed at the head of the church legally as well as Joseph (cov. 7 verse)<sup>36</sup> David Claims that office he holds that office. . .David is the man whom the Lord has appointed to fill this office; that is; to be the head of the church in all spiritual matters as a man possessed of all the necessary gifts for the church of Christ at this time

Page ended his epistle to McLellin, saying, "we think it advisable that the brethren not partake of the sacrament till you receive the next letter."<sup>37</sup>

In the next letter to McLellin in March, Page continued his correspondence and mentioned a revelation given to David at the September 1847 council: "our hearts is pained and our bowels yearn for those who will not receive truth and true wisdom who want to be led by revelation instead of taking the Bible [and] Book of Mormon and the church covenants" and the precepts given at Far West. He continued:

...in one of those precepts<sup>38</sup> received at Far West Sept. 7<sup>th</sup>— 1847 it was said of his servant Wm I inspired his heart to discern the true principles of my kingdom that he may build up my church as at the beginning (see cov

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33 At a church conference held on 3 June 1831 in Kirtland, Ohio.

34 "We will find the first gross erro[r] to be when the revelation came for Oliver & Peter & Ziba & Parley to go to the Lamanites in Sept. and Oct. 1830 for the fulness of the gospel was not to go to the Lamanites untill it was taken from the gentiles."

35 This would be the Doctrine and Covenants first published at Kirtland, Ohio in the fall of 1835.

36 See A Book of Commandments, for the Government of the Church of Christ (Zion [Independence, Missouri]: Published by W. W. Phelps & Co., 1833), 24:7.

37 Retained copy of letter dated 2 February 1848, Community of Christ Library-Archives. The date of the letter is probably in error and may have been written about 22 February after the Whitmer council on the thirteenth.

38 See "Our Tour West in 1847," *Ensign of Liberty* 1 (August 1849):102.

not with high priests but with elders) therefore I have inspired him to build it up according to my law; in the beginning we find the first ordinations were by Peter James and John they ordained Joseph and Oliver; to what priesthood were they ordained; the answer must be to the Holy priesthood or the office of an elder or an apostle which is an additional grace added to the office of an elder these offices Oliver received from those holy messengers before the 6<sup>th</sup> of April 1830; an elder can ordain a deacon, teacher priest or elder but he can not ordain a high priest but by special commandment and in the beginning there was no high priests; then we see that the highest officer in the church is an elder and what is done by the authority the high priest in the church of Christ is not acceptable with God for his servant Wm was to build up the church as at the beginning

Hiram Page ended this letter by writing, "as to the Book of Covenants we say that it is no rule to go by; it has been worked over and revised untill [sic] it is corrupt even that which was pure."<sup>39</sup>

In June, Page again wrote to McLellin and commented that they had received the May 1848 issue of the *Ensign of Liberty*: "you want David to lead the church and to act in his office as he was ordained at Wight's in Clay county but he will not lead Israel untill Israel is to be led." Page requested no more issues of the paper be sent to Richmond.<sup>40</sup> In an August letter to McLellin, Page returned to the question of high priests in the church:

we know that there was elders, priests, teachers and deacons in the beginning but no high priests and if there was high priests shown you at that time it was shown from some other source to establish a different order from that which was in the beginning; but you was to build up the church as from the beginning and its official members was elders priests teachers and deacons, having one elder with them who had been legally authorized to receive the word of the Lord when it was necessary; again, it says you are to continue to do all things according to the patron [pattern] which the Lord has shown you; you commenced right by baptizing and confirming by laying on of hands &c, and you are to continue that same order that was established at the beginning on the 6<sup>th</sup> of April 1830 your letter says David was never consecrated in any but in the high priesthood but in David's consecration there was nothing said about what priesthood he was consecrated in; in 1830 David was authorized by a revelation through Joseph to enquire and get the mind and will of the Lord; independent of Joseph the Seer, and in 1831 there was a special revelation given for David to come to this land that he might stand in his place on the land of Zion; all of these things transpired before he was ordained a high priest but he held the office of an elder; and we say that if a man was

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<sup>39</sup> Retained copy of letter of Hiram Page to William E. McLellin, 4 March 1848.

<sup>40</sup> Retained copy of letter of Hiram Page to William E. McLellin, 6 June 1848.

ordained an elder and afterwards was ordained a high priest the last ordination does not destroy his authority as an elder<sup>41</sup>

In the meantime, Oliver Cowdery seemed to be renewing connections with the Saints migrating west under the leadership of Brigham Young and the majority of the Twelve. In February 1848, Cowdery wrote his brother-in-law Phineas H. Young, who was camped at Winter Quarters in what is now Nebraska. The letter informed Phineas that Cowdery had written to David Whitmer advising him "by all means to be at Winter Quarters on the sixth of April."<sup>42</sup> In November of that year, Cowdery and his family arrived in Winter Quarters and Oliver was rebaptized by apostle Orson Hyde.

In January 1849, the Cowderys returned to Missouri and arrived at David's home in Richmond. Oliver remained there for a year, recovering from sickness and discussing religious matters with the Whitmers. During that year, Hiram Page wrote a letter on 24 June 1849 describing the Whitmer group's beliefs "To all the saints scattered abroad."<sup>43</sup>

Page explained "there are yet so many that run not after strange flesh, as some have done who know that it is not in accordance with the doctrine of Christ, and they do it too by the *pretended authority of a priesthood*." Page recounted his interpretation of recent events. "In 1847 brother William [E. McLellin] commenced vindicating our characters as honest men; in that he done well." Page argued that although it was true that McLellin had persuaded the Whitmers to organize in a church capacity, "we had not as yet come to an understanding, but consented to the organization after *three days successive intreaties* [entreaties]. Now we acknowledge that the organization *was not in accordance* with the order of the Gospel Church."

Page asserted that their understanding was now codified under six categories: First, "That the office of High Priest does not belong to the church of Christ under the gospel dispensation, and that all offices filled exclusively by High Priests are null and void." Second, "The office of a Seer is not, nor never has been the means by which the Lord intended his church should be govern." Third, "That the gathering dispensation has not come." Fourth, "That the manner of the teaching to the world should be to teach the plain, simple doctrine of the gospel of salvation, showing that men are placed here on earth to form characters for another state of existence; showing the different degrees of glory." Fifth, "That a reorganization of the church of Christ in this generation, contrary to that of April 6, 1830, is inconsistent with the attributes of Him who holds the destiny of all men in his own hands...When a man receives authority of God by ordination, his authority remains with him until death or translation, unless he denies the faith or defiles the priesthood." And finally, sixth, "That any Elder of the church who has not lost his authority upon the principles of injustice, according to the order set forth in the Holy Scriptures, has a perfect right to organize and build up according to that order, laid down by the Apostles at Jerusalem, the order among the Nephites upon this land, and the order

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<sup>41</sup> Retained copy of letter of Hiram Page to William E. McLellin, 13 August 1848.

<sup>42</sup> Cowdery to Brigham Young, 27 February 1848 as cited in Stanley R. Gunn, *Oliver Cowdery: Second Elder and Scribe* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1962), 194, 268.

<sup>43</sup> Hiram Page to Alfred Bonny, Isaac N. Aldrich, and M. C. Ishem, 24 June 1849, as cited in *The Olive Branch, or Herald of Peace and Truth to all Saints* 2 (August 1849):27-29, emphasis retained, Springfield, Illinois.

of the church as established on the 6th of April, 1830, and he can ordain others." Oliver Cowdery died in David Whitmer's home on 3 March 1850. Although it is often asserted that Oliver died a supporter of Brigham Young's leadership claims, a strong case can be made that Oliver died supporting the leadership claims of David Whitmer.

Seventeen days after Oliver's death, Hiram Page wrote a letter to Oliver's brother, Warren Cowdery. Written at Oliver's request, the letter is the closest we come to a contemporary record of Oliver's views regarding the various factions of the church that he and Joseph Smith had restored.

He [Oliver] did frequently express his opinion of those different factions pretending to hold the authority of the primitive Church of Christ, who do not cleave to the standard of truth. Of those he said they are either deceivers, or deceived; but he said there are many among them who are honest and will receive the truth when they hear it; and any organization that does not agree with the order laid down in the Bible and Book of Mormon in the gospel dispensation, is to be rejected; knowing that for us to support such errors would be opposing the order of God, and would be worshipping the man of sin. Among his last words, was to reaffirm his testimony to the Book of Mormon.<sup>44</sup>

After Oliver's death, David Whitmer was given possession of the Printer's Manuscript of the Book of Mormon. Later, the seer stone kept by Oliver Cowdery was obtained by Phineas H. Young.<sup>45</sup>

In the decades that followed, the Whitmer family remained in the Richmond area except for John who continued to reside in Far West. David for many years operated a livery and feed stable business.<sup>46</sup> Hiram Page died in 1852. David's father Peter died in 1854. His mother Mary and brother Jacob died in 1856. The next generation of the Whitmers married and started their own families.

For a time, members of the Whitmer family may have attended the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). David, however, continued to believe in personal revelation. His grandson, George Schweich, recalled that during the US Civil War, before David "took any position or gave any advice he went to Far West to his Brother John Whitmer, and they asked God to guide their course, throwing their will to that of the All-wise." Schweich said that in response, "a road was mapped out to pursue, that his [David's] fellow citizens, both north and south, now live to praise.<sup>47</sup> The revelation which Schweich referred to was received by John Whitmer on 26 July 1861. In it, the Lord said that the inhabitants of the earth were ripe for destruction and that:

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<sup>44</sup> Page to Warren A. Cowdery, 20 March 1850, in *Saints' Herald* 33 (6 February 1886):83.

<sup>45</sup> Maria L. Cowdery Johnson (daughter of Oliver Cowdery) to David Whitmer, January 1887, Community of Christ Library-Archives.

<sup>46</sup> Richard L. Anderson, *Investigating the Book of Mormon Witnesses* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1981), 66, 71-72.

<sup>47</sup> "The Position of David Whitmer," *The Return* 3 (December 1892):4, Richmond, Missouri, editor Geo. W. L. Schweich.

I have sought that they might repent. But they would not. I have given unto them laws, that they might enjoy equal rights, and all the blessings that God could bestow upon the inhabitants of this Earth. And behold I say unto you, as a nation they have abused all those blessings, that I the Lord could bestow upon a people.

Nevertheless, the revelation concluded that the Lord would preserve those who "uphold the laws which are right and just according to the Constitution."<sup>48</sup>

### David and the Church of Christ (Whitmerite), 1875-88

In 1869, William McLellin made another visit to David Whitmer and wrote of this meeting, "he still firmly holds to his appointment under the hands of Joseph Smith. He thinks the time soon at hand when he must be *Active*." According to McLellin, David once again "laid his hands upon me, and reordained or confirmed upon me all the Authority which I ever held legally in the 'church of Christ.'"<sup>49</sup>

On 15 September 1875, David baptized his forty-year-old nephew, John C. Whitmer, the son of David's brother Jacob. John C. had not been a member of any Latter Day Saint church. On 28 January 1876, David ordained John C. an Elder and the same month, John C. was designated the "First Elder" of the church.<sup>50</sup> That same month, three more people were baptized. After lying dormant for twenty-five years, David Whitmer had begun to organize a new Church of Christ. Recalling these actions in 1877, David wrote, "a few years ago I was moved upon to ordain Elders for the purpose of being prepared to administer in all the Holy ordinances of the house of God which I did."<sup>51</sup> Besides David and his brother John, four other individuals were ordained elders: John C., Philander A. Page (son of Hiram Page), John Short, and William W. Warner.

William E. McLellin was not included in the new organization. In June 1877, McLellin again visited David and found out that members of the Church of Christ at Richmond believed in the seeric powers—especially of eleven-year-old John Gant Whitmer, son of John C. Whitmer, who received inspiration through a peep stone or seer stone. Although David believed this gift was inspired by God, McLellin disagreed. In a

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<sup>48</sup> "A Revelation Received Far West July 26, 1861," in Lorene E. Pollard and Rebecca Woods, *Whitmer Memoirs 1793-2003* (n.p.: privately printed, 2003), 30-31. The original manuscript is in the Mark Holden Collection, New York City, New York.

<sup>49</sup> William E. McLellin, letter fragment circa May 1869, Community of Christ Library-Archives, emphasis retained. See also McLellin to Davis H. Bays, 23 November 1869, in *Saints' Herald* 17 (May 1870):291.

<sup>50</sup> Andrew Jenson, Edward Stevenson, and Joseph S. Black, "Historical Landmarks," *Deseret News* 37 (26 September 1888):579. See also *Saints' Herald* 35 (13 October 1888):651 and "David Whitmer and the Church of Christ," *Return* 3 (October 1892):4, Richmond, Missouri. John C. Whitmer died 8 August 1894 and the next First Elder was Philander A. Page who served from 1894-1907.

<sup>51</sup> Copy of letter of David Whitmer Sr. to J. B. Price, 9 July 1882, Community of Christ Library-Archives.

letter about his visit, written to John L. Traughber Jr.,<sup>52</sup> McLellin said that he had gone to Richmond on Friday, 1 June and stayed there until Monday morning, fasting and praying. He recalled that "on Saturday [9 June] I received light, and that was that that peep-stone by which they professed to receive communications by John Whitmer's little son of ten years old, was not of God." On 16 June, McLellin told David, "I knew that peep-stone seeing was not of God. He [David] said he knew it was: so our Knowledge clashed."<sup>53</sup> During a visit with McLellin in 1878, Joseph F. Smith wrote that the seer was George Schweich.<sup>54</sup> It is not certain if the identification is a mistake or whether Schweich also used a seer stone to divine sacred records. The conflict ultimately led McLellin to reevaluate his beliefs and reject David's July 1834 ordination.<sup>55</sup>

David continued to be active in the new Church of Christ. On 19 March 1881, he issued a leaflet titled *A Proclamation* that reiterated his firm testimony of the Book of Mormon and the original organization of the Church of Christ while strongly condemning polygamy and other innovations. David urged:

And that no one may be deceived or misled by this statement, I wish here to state: that I do not indorse polygamy or spiritual wifeism. It is a great evil, shocking to the moral sense, and the more so, because practiced in the name of religion. It is of man and not of God, and is especially forbidden in the BOOK OF MORMON itself.

I do not indorse the change of the name of the Church, for as the wife takes the name of her husband so should the Church of the Lamb of God, take the name of its head, even Christ himself. It is the Church of Christ.

As to the High Priesthood, Jesus Christ himself is the Last Great High Priest, this too after the order of Melchisedec, as I understand the Holy Scriptures.

Finally—I do not indorse any of the teachings of the so-called Mormons, or Latter-day Saints, which are in conflict with the Gospel of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, as taught in the Bible and Book of

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<sup>52</sup> John L. Traughber, Jr. (1854-1908) at the age of eighteen was baptized into the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints on 13 July 1873. He and his parents John and Ellen "embraced the faith of the Saints" (James Caffall to "Editors Herald," 21 August 1874 in *Saints' Herald* 21 [15 September 1874]:563). John withdrew from the RLDS Church about 1879 and associated with the Church of Christ (Whitmerite) for a short time before leaving it.

<sup>53</sup> McLellin to John L. Traughber, Jr., 22 June 1877, extract in "David Whitmer, 'The Last Witness' of The Book of Mormon," 22, John L. Traughber Collection, Manuscripts Division, J. Willard Marriott Library, University of Utah, Salt Lake City. John Gant Whitmer (1867-1949), was the son of John Christian Whitmer (1835-1894), and the grandson of Jacob Whitmer (1800-1856).

<sup>54</sup> Joseph Fielding Smith, comp., *Life of Joseph F. Smith: Sixth President of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News Press, 1938), 239.

<sup>55</sup> McLellin to John L. Traughber, Jr., 1 October 1879, extract in "Some Statements by Dr. W. E. McLellan," John L. Traughber Collection, University of Utah.

Mormon; for the same gospel is plainly taught in both of these books as I understand the word of God.<sup>56</sup>

Three months later, the *Kansas City Daily Journal* published an interview with David. In answer to the question of when the church was first established, David contended "our church was not regularly organized until after the book was printed in the winter of 1829-30." He went on to discuss items of interest, including the temple to be built in Jackson County, problems in that county, and the Danites in Caldwell County.<sup>57</sup>

During the next years, David's recollections and beliefs continued to evolve. After talking to David Whitmer on 13 April 1882 Matthias Cowley wrote, "During his remarks he said in substance that the Book of Mormon contained all that is necessary to guide us till the Savior comes. I was impressed with the idea, or fact, that he stood in the same position relative to the Book of Mormon that the sectarian world did relative to the Bible."<sup>58</sup>

On 9 July 1882, David wrote a letter [to] J. B. Price of Oakland, California, in which he still argued that "the Original Church as organized on the 6th of April 1830 was according to the ancient order under the Gospel Dispensation [Dispensation] with the proper Authority" and that "I was one of the first Elders ordained under the Call then made."<sup>59</sup> Nevertheless, David was slowly moving away from belief in the 1834 ordination he received under the hands of Joseph Smith. In January 1885, Zenas H. Gurley, Jr. interviewed David at his home:

Q[uestion]. Did Joseph Smith ordain you as his Successor?

Ans[wer]—Yes he did, in Clay county, Mo -1834. upon condition that he was kil[led] or any mishap befell him. I regard my authority as an elder for Christ given me of God before that time as superior to any honor which Joseph could bestow upon me by any such ordination.<sup>60</sup>

Another question Gurley asked David Whitmer was, "Do you know how the first Twelve was chosen?" The manuscript page of the interview is damaged with the proposed reading in brackets. Whitmer answered: "Yes. Cowdery and myself were appointed a com[mittee to choose] the Twelve but Jose[ph Smith] insisted that his brother

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<sup>56</sup> David Whitmer, *A Proclamation* [n.p., n.d.], circa March 1881. See also "David Whitmer, Sen.," *Saints' Herald* 28 (1 June 1881):168.

<sup>57</sup> "Mormonism. Authentic Account of the Origin of This Sect from One of the Patriarchs," *Kansas City Daily Journal* 24 (5 June 1881):1.

<sup>58</sup> Matthias F. Cowley Diary Excerpts, entry of 13 April 1882, LDS Archives; Cook, *David Whitmer Interviews*, 91.

<sup>59</sup> Copy of letter of David Whitmer, Sr. to J. B. Price, 9 July 1882, Community of Christ Library-Archives. In a letter to S. T. Mouch it was explained that David "tried to give a true statement to the best of my recollection in regard to all matters which I have attempted to Explain" (Retained copy of letter of David Whitmer to S. T. Mouch, 18 November 1882, Community of Christ Library-Archives).

<sup>60</sup> Interview of David Whitmer by Zenas H. Gurley, 14 January 1885, LDS Archives; Cook, *David Whitmer Interviews*, 157.

William Smith should be put in as it was the only way by which he could be saved, otherwise we would not have chosen him."<sup>61</sup>

The next year the *Chicago-Inter Ocean* published an interview of David Whitmer in its 17 October 1886 issue. The *Saints' Herald* printed the interview with some comments on the article.<sup>62</sup> Criticisms of Whitmer's interview brought forth correspondence from David himself as he sought to correct mistakes in the newspaper article and now in the *Saints' Herald*.

David Whitmer wrote in response to an editorial in the *Saints' Herald*: "The Spirit of God has never moved upon me until recently to publish to the world many truths which are not generally known." David believed that the Latter Day Saints had been led into error by their leaders. He now called them back "to the plain and simple teachings of Christ in the new covenant of the Book of Mormon." According to David, the words of Christ in that portion of the book alone should be "our *only* guide on all *doctrinal* points,—the *order of offices* in the church, etc."<sup>63</sup>

In 1886, David wrote a letter to Joseph Smith's eldest son, Joseph Smith III, who had become the prophet of the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (RLDS) in 1860. Not being satisfied with the treatment he was receiving in the RLDS church's periodical, David said "I must send forth my testimony to the world," David wrote, "stating many truths which have never been published."<sup>64</sup> The following year, David published an eight-page tract entitled, *An Address to Believers in the Book of Mormon*.<sup>65</sup> In it he stated that "in 1849 the Lord saw fit to manifest unto John Whitmer, Oliver Cowdery and myself nearly all the remaining errors in doctrine into which we had been led by the heads of the old church." David went on to emphasize his rejection of the changes to the revelations of Joseph Smith made in the Book of Doctrine and Covenants. He argued that the Book of Commandments was "finished complete" and said he had received his copy "before the press was destroyed by the mob."<sup>66</sup>

In 1886, a former member of the Reorganized church named John J. Snyder became associated with David. Snyder had been baptized on 29 April 1885 by RLDS apostle William W. Blair, but was excommunicated the following year on 5 June. Snyder

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid., See also Oliver Cowdery to "Dear Brigham" [Young], 27 February 1848, as cited in Gunn, *Oliver Cowdery: Second Elder and Scribe*, 268.

<sup>62</sup> "David Whitmer Reviewed," *Saints' Herald* 33 (13 November 1886):705-708; (20 November 1886):721-24.

<sup>63</sup> Whitmer to "Dear Brethren," 20 November 1886, in "Communications from Elder D. Whitmer," *Saints' Herald* 33 (4 December 1886):764-65, emphasis retained.

<sup>64</sup> Whitmer to "Bro. Joseph" [Smith III], 9 December 1886, in *Saints' Herald* 34 (5 February 1887):89.

<sup>65</sup> Whitmer, *An Address to Believers in the Book of Mormon by David Whitmer* (Richmond, Missouri: David Whitmer, 1887). Dated 1 April 1887.

<sup>66</sup> While Whitmer insisted that the printing of the Book of Commandments in Independence was finished it is evident that this was not the case. David was in Jackson County at the time and may not have known the arrangement made at the press for the book. In fact some of the surviving manuscript for the Book of Commandments, in the handwriting of his brother John, was in possession of the Whitmer family. They showed that addition revelatory messages were to be added to the Book of Commandments.

joined David's Church of Christ early in 1886. Shortly afterward, Snyder began to act as David's scribe, writing out David's letters to the *Saints' Herald*. Snyder also helped David prepare his 75-page booklet entitled, *An Address to All Believers in Christ*.<sup>67</sup> Concerning his experience, Snyder wrote:

The address was produced by David Whitmer dictating; to me notes as we proceeded, and I would go to my room and write out from his notes on the subject he was on, and return to his home and read it to him, and by constant changing (on my part) and reading and rereading to him, I would finally get it to suit him. I was at Richmond about a year doing that work for him.<sup>68</sup>

*An Address to All Believers in Christ* diverges significantly from David's earlier views and recollections from the 1840s, and represents the culmination of his thinking of Joseph Smith and the restoration. The address was broken into two parts.

The first part consisted of two chapters for non-believers in Book of Mormon. For these readers, David sought to get at the root of the problem when he wrote: "It is also a stumbling-block to those who desire to investigate as to the truth of the Book of Mormon, to see the believers in that book divided; but the divisions have been brought about by the revelations of Joseph Smith." Nevertheless, David argued that "To all who are without prejudice, the Book of Mormon is the key to the understanding of the Bible."<sup>69</sup>

David reprinted the four points that he had previously stressed [in] *A Proclamation*: (1) He was against polygamy; (2) he was against the change of the name of church; (3) he was against the High Priesthood or office of High Priest; and (4) he believed that the fullness of the gospel was found in the Bible and Book of Mormon. Regarding the Book of Mormon he wrote, "I have in my possession the original manuscript of the Book of Mormon, in the handwriting of Oliver Cowdery and others."<sup>70</sup> He also rehearsed his understanding of the translation of the Book of Mormon, explaining that Joseph Smith put a seer stone into a hat and put his face to the opening of the hat and read the interpretation to his scribe, Oliver Cowdery. "Thus the Book of Mormon was translated by the gift and power of God, and not by any power of man."<sup>71</sup>

The second part of the address consisted of ten chapters and was written for Latter

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<sup>67</sup> *An Address to All Believers in Christ. By a Witness to the Divine Authenticity of the Book of Mormon.* (Richmond, Missouri: David Whitmer, 1887). Dated 1 April 1887.

<sup>68</sup> John J. Snyder to Paul M. Hanson, 31 January 1923, Paul M. Hanson Papers, Community of Christ Library-Archives. After many years supporting the church David Whitmer founded Snyder joined the Church of Christ (Temple Lot) in 1925 ("J. J. Snyder Joins Us," *Zion's Advocate* 2 [15 July 1925]:2).

<sup>69</sup> Whitmer, *An Address to All Believers in Christ*, 4-5.

<sup>70</sup> Whitmer, *An Address to All Believers in Christ*, 11. David was incorrect when he thought the manuscript he obtained from Oliver was the original manuscript dictated by Joseph Smith. Whitmer may have misinterpreted Cowdery regarding the Book of Mormon manuscript. It was the manuscript used to set type for the majority of the 1830 book.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

Day Saints who were already believers in the Book of Mormon. David asserted that "the Spirit of God is moving upon the Elders of the Church of Christ to go forth unto all the believers in the Book of Mormon, and unto all other people, crying repentance, and calling on them to [give] heed to the teachings of Christ."<sup>72</sup> These teachings were contained in the Book of Mormon and the New Testament. So emphatic was David in his message that his direct approach to Book of Mormon believers was his claim that God spoke to him forty-eight years earlier:

If you believe my testimony to the Book of Mormon; if you believe that God spake to us three witnesses by his own voice, then I tell you that in June, 1838, God spake to me again by his own voice from the heavens, and told me to "separate myself from among the Latter Day Saints, for as they sought to do unto me, should it be done unto them." In the spring of 1838, the heads of the church and many of the members had gone deep into error and blindness. I had been striving with them for a long time to show them the errors into which they were drifting, and for my labors I received only persecutions.

To reinforce his special calling Whitmer further wrote, "as I rode on horseback out of Far West, in June, 1838, the voice of God from heaven spake to me as I have stated above. I was called out to hold the authority which God gave to me."<sup>73</sup> David wrote that after Smith's death many came and asked him to be their leader "but I refused."<sup>74</sup> While David does not mention his experience with William E. McLellin he did say, "It is since 1847 that I have been shown all the errors into which I had followed the heads of the church."<sup>75</sup> Concerning the relationship of the Bible and Book of Mormon, David explained, "The angel who declared unto us that the Book of Mormon was true, also declared unto us that the Bible was true."<sup>76</sup>

In the fourth chapter addressed to Latter Day Saints, David recounted the Canadian copyright story. When Hiram Page and Oliver Cowdery went to Canada and returned with no sale, he remembered that Joseph Smith asked the Lord through the stone why the revelation failed. The response was "*Some revelations are of God: some revelations are of men: and some revelations are of the devil.*"<sup>77</sup>

In narrating early Latter Day Saint history, David claimed that in June 1829 he was the third individual baptized into the church. He listed himself among the six elders ordained. His list also included Samuel and Hyrum Smith,<sup>78</sup> but his recollection in this regard is faulty since the minutes of the first church conference record that Hyrum was a priest. The minutes further indicate that it was not until the same conference that Samuel

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<sup>72</sup> Ibid., 25.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid., 27-28, see also 29.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid., 28, see also 55.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid., 28.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid., 29.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid., 31, emphasis retained.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid., 32.

was ordained an elder by Oliver Cowdery.<sup>79</sup> Concerning the formal organization of the Church, David recalled:

Now, when April 6, 1830, had come, we had then established three branches of the "Church of Christ," in which three branches were about seventy members: One branch was at Fayette, N.Y.; one at Manchester, N.Y., and one at Colesville, Pa. [sic; New York] It is all a mistake about the church being *organized* on April 6, 1830, as I will show. We were as fully *organized*—spiritually—before April 6th as we were on that day. The reason why we met on that day was this; the world had been telling us that we were not a regularly organized church, and we had no right to officiate in the ordinance of marriage, hold church property, etc., and that we should organize according to the laws of the land. On this account we met at my father's house in Fayette, N.Y., on April 6, 1830, to attend to this matter of organizing according to the laws of the land; you can see this from Sec. 17 Doctrine and Covenants: the church was organized on April 6th "*agreeable to the laws of our country.*"<sup>80</sup>

These recollections were somewhat garbled. For example, David remembered that there were "about seventy members" before 6 April, but it appears that he may have been thinking about the conference held in Fayette near the end of September 1830. This later conference would have been the first opportunity for members of the Colesville, New York branch to attend. The minutes record only twenty-seven members at the time of the first conference, while the membership as of the September conference [was] sixty-two.<sup>81</sup>

David's memory of six elders at the time of the 6 April organization is also problematic.<sup>82</sup> The only time there could have been six elders was after the founding of the Fayette branch. The first two elders were Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery, who ordained each other at Manchester on 6 April. The other four elders—Peter Whitmer, David Whitmer, John Whitmer, and Ziba Peterson—all from Fayette, were evidently ordained in April and received their licenses at the June conference in Fayette. It was at

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<sup>79</sup> Cannon and Cook, *Far West Record*, 1.

<sup>80</sup> Whitmer, *An Address to All Believers in Christ*, 33, emphasis retained. The reference to section 17 is to RLDS D&C 17; LDS D&C 20.

<sup>81</sup> Cannon and Cook, *Far West Record*, 3. The minutes state: "No. of the several members uniting to this Church since the last Conference, thirty-five, making in whole now belonging to this Church sixty-two." These minutes were copied from the original in 1838.

<sup>82</sup> Edward Stevenson recorded an interview with David Whitmer in January 1887 in which Whitmer told him, "on the 6th of April 1830, 6 Elders were at Peter Whitmers Davids Fathers 2 Rooms were filled with members about 20 from Colesville, 15 from Manchester Church and about 20 from aro[u]nd about Father Whitmers about 50 members & the 6 Elders were presant [present]." Edward Stevenson Journal, entry of 2 January 1887, LDS Archives. Also in Cook, *David Whitmer Interviews*, 214.

this same June conference that Samuel H. Smith became the seventh elder of the church.<sup>83</sup>

Another indication that David was conflating a later meeting with the 6 April meeting comes from an interview he conducted with Jonas W. Chatburn in the early 1880s. Chatburn recorded that David "said that he baptized fourteen in Seneca Lake, a few days before the Church was organized." Chatburn then asked David's wife, Julia Ann Jolly Whitmer, "if she was present when the Church was organized on April 6th, 1830. She replied, Yes; and was a baptized member at that time."<sup>84</sup> The manuscript history of the Church lists eleven individuals baptized on 9 June by David, including his future wife Julia Jolly.<sup>85</sup>

In the address, David attempted to downplay the significance of the formal organizational of the church by stating that it was done for legal purposes so the church could hold property and officiate in marriages. However, no record of incorporation has been found.<sup>86</sup> In fact, it was at the 9 June 1830 conference held at Fayette where the "Articles and Covenants" of the new Church was read and approved by the congregation.

It is clear that the actual 6 April 1830 meeting was held in Manchester Township, Ontario County. The Smith family, Martin Harris, Sarah Rockwell, and Joseph Knight, Sr. were in attendance and baptisms were performed in the creek near the Smith home. It does not appear that David attended this meeting.<sup>87</sup> Regardless, David now believed that error first crept into the church on 6 April 1830:

I consider that on that day the first error was introduced into the Church of Christ, and that error was Brother Joseph being ordained as "Prophet[.]

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<sup>83</sup> Cannon and Cook, *Far West Record*, 1. An article published in 1833 tells about the early expansion of the Church. "Soon after the book of Mormon came forth, containing the fulness of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the church was organized on the sixth day of April, in Manchester; soon after, a branch was established in Fayette, and the June following, another in Colesville, New York....Twenty more were added to the church in Manchester and Fayette, in the month of April; and on the 28th of June, thirteen were baptized in Colesville....In October, (1830) the number of disciples had increased to between seventy and eighty." "Rise and Progress of the Church of Christ," *The Evening and the Morning Star* 1 (April 1833):4 [p. 84], Independence, Missouri.

<sup>84</sup> *Saints' Herald* 29 (15 June 1882):189. Also in Dan Vogel, *Early Mormon Documents* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2003), 5:94.

<sup>85</sup> Manuscript History A-1:42, LDS Archives; Dean C. Jessee, ed, *The Papers of Joseph Smith: Autobiographical and Historical Writings* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1989), 1:309. The names of Julia Anne Jolly and Harriet Jolly were omitted when the history was published in 1842. See *Times and Seasons* 4 (1 December 1842):23, Nauvoo, Illinois. The history mentions that David Whitmer performed a baptism in May 1830.

<sup>86</sup> Correspondence from the Department of State, State of New York, Albany, 6 October 1986 and 23 February 1987 to H. Michael Marquardt; research trip to New York in October 1986.

<sup>87</sup> There is no evidence that David Whitmer was in Manchester on 6 April 1830. It was not until about 1858 that his name appears on a list as being present. David's name is not on Brigham Young's 1843 list or William E. McLellin's 1847 list.

Seer and Revelator" to the church.<sup>88</sup>

Whitmer spent some time writing on polygamy though he had no firsthand knowledge of its practice in Nauvoo or Utah Territory. David argued that "the commandment to receive Brother Joseph's words as if from God's own mouth was false." He recalled that Smith had previously received a revelation "through the stone" in March of 1829, which stated that God would grant Smith "no other gift but to translate the Book of Mormon."<sup>89</sup> David went on to explain his views on Smith's revelations in general:

The revelations in the Book of Commandments [Commandments] up to June, 1829, were given through the "stone," through which the Book of Mormon was translated. These are the only revelations that can be relied upon, and they are not law.<sup>90</sup>

David wrote that he objected to the printing of the Joseph Smith's revelations. He now recalled when their publication had first been proposed, he had prophesied to Smith and Sidney Rigdon "that if they sent those revelations to Independence to be published in a book, the people would come upon them and tear down the printing press, and the church would be driven out of Jackson county."<sup>91</sup>

Nevertheless, David recalled, "that Brother Joseph and myself still loved each other as brethren after this." Recounting his ordination, David said, "I will tell you that he had so much confidence in me that in July, 1834, he ordained me his successor as 'Prophet[,] Seer and Revelator' to the Church. He did this of his own free will and not at any solicitation whatever on my part. I did not know what he was going to do until he laid his hands upon me and ordained me." Although from 1847 through the early 1880s, David had believed this ordination was valid, his views had now changed. In the address he wrote:

Now, bear in mind, brethren, that I am not claiming this office; as I have told you, I do not believe in any such office in the church. I was then in error in believing that there was such an office in the Church of Christ. I suppose this is news to many of you—that Brother Joseph ordained me his successor—but it is in your records, and there are men now living who were present in that council of elders when he did it, in the camp of Zion, on Fishing River, Missouri, July, 1834.<sup>92</sup>

Though David had been ordained a high priest in the early church in October 1831 by Oliver Cowdery, he wrote in the address that he was now against having that office in the Church. "High Priests were only in the church before Christ," he argued, "you cannot find in the New Testament part of the Bible or Book of Mormon where one

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<sup>88</sup> Whitmer, *Address to All Believers in Christ*, 33.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, 41; See Marquardt, *Joseph Smith Revelations*, 26-31; LDS and RLDS D&C 5.

<sup>90</sup> Whitmer, *Address to All Believers in Christ*, 53.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, 55.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.* See Westergren, *From Historian to Dissident*, 195.

single high priest was ever in the Church of Christ."<sup>93</sup>

David used his brother John's manuscript history to explain his view that the ordination of high priests was a grievous error, admitting that he had been mistaken about it for many years. His wrote:

In Kirtland, Ohio, in June, 1831, at a conference of the church, the first High Priests were ordained into the church. Brother Joseph ordained Lyman Wight, John Murdock, Harvey Whitlock, Hyrum Smith, Reynolds Cahoon and others to the office of a High Priest. When they were ordained, right there at the time, the devil caught and bound Harvey Whitlock so he could not speak, his face being twisted into demon-like shape. Also John Murdock and others were caught by the devil in a similar manner. Now brethren, do you not see that the displeasure of the Lord was upon their proceedings in ordaining High Priests? Of course it was. These facts were recorded in the History of the Church - written by my brother, John Whitmer, who was the regularly appointed church historian. I was not at that conference, being then in Hiram, which is near Kirtland, Ohio.<sup>94</sup>

Despite David's recollection, the minutes his brother kept do list David as present.<sup>95</sup> David also referred to a prophecy given by Lyman Wight at the conference meeting, which David predicted "will prove to be a false prophecy." According to John Whitmer's history, Wight said "there were some in this congregation that should live until the Savior shou[.]d descend from heaven, with a Shout, with all the holy angels with him."<sup>96</sup> David wrote, "The early future will determine as to whether this prophecy was true or false."<sup>97</sup>

In a final set of doctrinal revisions in the address, David criticized the rush to build the New Jerusalem in Jackson County in the 1830s<sup>98</sup> and he expressed his belief that Smith was not the "chosen seer" prophesied in the Book of Mormon.<sup>99</sup>

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<sup>93</sup> Whitmer, *Address to All Believers in Christ*, 62.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*, 64-65. According to David Whitmer, "The next grievous error which crept into the church was in ordaining high priests in June, 1831." He believed Sidney Rigdon persuaded Joseph Smith to ordain men to the office of high priest (35). See Westergren, *From Historian to Dissident*, 69-71.

<sup>95</sup> Whether he was present all the time is not known. David Whitmer was ordained to the high priesthood (a high priest) at the general conference held on 25 October 1831. Levi Hancock, also attending the conference, recalled that after the meeting, "we went to [Sidney] Gilberts and Solomon [Hancock] sang some and we talk with brother Whitmer [Whitmer] and told him what hap[p]en[e]d at the conference[.] He asked me if what Joseph had said was fulfilled about Some one seeing the Lord[.] I told him I considered it so[.] do you[.] said he[.] yes sir[.] said I[.] was you not there I understood him no[t]." Brother Whitmer may have been David Whitmer who was not ordained to the High Priesthood at this conference. Life of Levi W. Hancock, LDS archives.

<sup>96</sup> Westergren, *From Historian to Dissident*, 70.

<sup>97</sup> Whitmer, *An Address to All Believers in Christ*, 65.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*, 71.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*, 67-70.

## Conclusions

By the end of his life, David had become fully active again as a believer in the restored Church of Christ and the Book of Mormon. As the years went on, Whitmer pushed his views about the pure church further and further back. By the time he dictated his final address, David had ceased to consider his seven years of faithful Church service in Ohio and Missouri worthwhile. Instead, he looked back to his experience in New York prior to 6 April 1830, as a type of standard to follow. Initially David believer in Joseph Smith's mission up through 1838—the time of David's separation from the main body of the Latter Day Saints. Gradually David shed beliefs that to him appeared to contradict his faith in the Book of Mormon and the Bible.

In setting up his Whitmerite Church of Christ in 1876, David first relied on the period when he was baptized in June 1829, including what he considered to be the pattern of 6 April 1830. But in his final testimonial he produced a startling response to those who claimed to be the original 6 April 1830 church by claiming that the ordination of Joseph Smith as prophet, seer, and revelator was itself in error.

Throughout his life, David reinterpreted the past by presenting the many problems he perceived and then emphasizing what he viewed as the essentials of the Bible and Book of Mormon. Initially, David accepted the Doctrine and Covenants, but he had rejected it already by the 1840s. He continued to believe in the Book of Commandments for a time. By the end of his life, however, David remembered his opposition even to any publication of Smith's revelations. Ultimately, David would accept the fifteen revelations received while Smith looked at the stone in a hat—and these only when they agreed with David's own interpretation of the Bible and Mormon.<sup>100</sup> Whitmer rejected all the revelations given after June 1829, because he claimed that they were erroneously given through Joseph Smith as mouthpiece and not through a seer stone.<sup>101</sup> While David eventually rejected what he considered false teachings of Joseph Smith, he retained as very sacred a prophetic blessing given by Smith soon after his 1835 New York mission. The blessing contained the information that the Lord had appointed David "to be captain of his host." It concluded, "There shall not be spot upon his character while he lives, neither upon his seed after him unto the latest posterity: he shall not be forsaken nor his seed found begging bread."<sup>102</sup> The manuscript of this blessing was kept sacred by the

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<sup>100</sup> David rejected the Canandian copyright revelation (which had been received by the stone) so his position would be that he accepted the stone revelations, but not as law; only if they agreed with the two books of scriptures.

<sup>101</sup> There was a revelation received for Orson Pratt in November 1830 that was received by Smith through a stone in a hat. See James R. B. Vancleave to Joseph Smith III, 29 September 1878, "Miscellaneous Letters and Papers," Community of Christ Library-Archives. See also Cook, *David Whitmer Interviews*, 239-40.

<sup>102</sup> Patriarchal Blessing Book 1:13-14, LDS Archives. The blessing was given by vision to Joseph Smith, Jr. on 22 September 1835 and recorded on 2 October 1835. John L. Traugher, Jr. wrote that he saw David's copy of the blessing on 30 May 1878 and again on 2 September 1879 ("David Whitmer's Blessing," *Return* 2 [February 1890]:212-13, Davis City, Iowa; Cook, *David Whitmer Interviews*, 261-62. See also J[ohn]. C. Whitmer and John J. Snyder to "Dear Brethren," 3 February 1888, in *Return* 1 (January 1889):5.

Whitmer family.

Many independent Latter Day Saint individuals like William E. McLellin and Martin Harris went from group to group through the years. For these Saints, finding a spiritual home in one of the many organizations which emerged after 1844 was more than a competition over interpretations. Many were trying to find a place where they felt comfortable and where others could agree with their own understanding. Except for his brief experience with McLellin in 1847, David kept to himself and his relatives. The church he founded, often called the “Church of Christ (Whitmerite),” had about 100 members at the time of David’s death in January 1888.<sup>103</sup> The church functioned for nearly fifty years. Its last member, David’s grand niece, died in 1961.<sup>104</sup>

Believers in the witnesses of the Book of Mormon cite David Whitmer as an example of one who maintained his testimony to his last dying breath, but they rarely look at the evolution of his beliefs and recollections. Whitmer’s publication *An Address to All Believers in Christ* has been used by various churches of the Latter Day Saint movement to indicate the nature of the early church. But, as we have seen, this work contains many historical errors relating, which decrease our appreciation of David’s recollections of the foundational years. Ebbie L. V. Richardson wrote concerning the address, “It can be said that this work represented the thinking and beliefs of David Whitmer at the time of his death, though they are sometimes at variance with his attitude at various stages of his disaffection from the Church of his early manhood.”<sup>105</sup> In the end, David’s address is more important as a theological statement by one of the Latter Day Saint movement’s key founders. As David sorted through his memories and decided which revelations were correct, his ultimate position was to de-emphasize his belief in Joseph Smith and focus his belief on Jesus Christ.

No matter how many times the aging Book of Mormon witness may be mistaken in his historical recollections of the early years of the Restoration, David still remained true to his published testimony. Three days before his death, David said to those gathered around him:

Now, you must all be faithful in Christ. I want to say to you all, the Bible and the Record of the Nephites [Book of Mormon] are true; so you can say that you have heard me bear my testimony on my death bed. All be faithful in Christ and your reward will be according to your works. God bless you all. My trust is in Christ forever, world without end. Amen.<sup>106</sup>

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<sup>103</sup> Andrew Jenson, Edward Stevenson, and Joseph S. Black, “Historical Landmarks,” *Deseret News* 37 (26 September 1888):579. See also *Saints’ Herald* 35 (13 October 1888):651.

<sup>104</sup> See Erin B. Jennings, “Whitmer Family Beliefs and their Church of Christ” in this volume. [*Scattering of the Saints: Schism within Mormonism*, 44-45.]

<sup>105</sup> Ebbie L. Richardson, “David Whitmer, A Witness to the Divine Authenticity of the Book of Mormon,” (M.A. thesis, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah, 1952), 134.

<sup>106</sup> Whitmer and Snyder to “Dear Brethren,” 3 February 1888, in *The Return* 1(January 1889):6. David Whitmer died on 25 January 1888. The Church of Christ (Whitmerite) later published its own edition of the Book of Mormon under the title, “The Record of the Nephites.”

Ultimately, David Whitmer's disaffection from Joseph Smith and his quest for a pristine pre-1830 type of Mormonism underscores the ever-changing nature of Mormon doctrine and practice as promoted by Mormonism founder. David's interactions with Latter Day Saints of various persuasions dramatize the extent of the movement's fragmentation after 1844. Finally, it appears that David's beliefs as reflected in his 1887 *An Address to All Believers in Christ* could have very well influenced and inspired various other Restoration churches, in particular, the emerging Church of Christ (Temple Lot) as well as churches with the Elijah Message—a subject worthy of future study. Indeed, several important beliefs manifested by these churches appear remarkably similar to the primitive restoration vision promoted by David Whitmer—this most vocal of the three witnesses to the Book of Mormon.