
A Nineteenth Century Prophet and His Work

What do you know of one of the most remarkable movements originating in the United States? I mean the work and movement of Joseph Smith.

There is much that is vague gathered from gossip, lectures, articles in newspapers and magazines, and books nearly all frankly antagonistic to the man and the movement. As a matter of fact, Joseph Smith and the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints is a most important feature of American life, which up to the present has not had patient or dignified consideration, to say nothing of justice or fair play. It would seem that the same truculent prejudice which caused his assassination, making a very unpleasant chapter in our public history, has persisted in dishonoring him in death.

The public acquaintance with this subject is based very generally upon this hostile bibliography, and also the notorious history of Utah Mormonism which, through the spectacular career of Brigham Young and the annoyance of polygamy, has obscured Joseph Smith and his work.

Seldom, if ever, is it made clear that Utah Mormonism and polygamy were distortions developed after the death of Smith in 1844. And that the "Mormon" Church with its theology, morals, practices, and ideals has been repudiated in the United States Courts as not being the continuation of and successor to "the original work of Joseph Smith," and declared to be an "apostate and secessionist body not entitled to the rights and properties of the original church."

This being the case, it is clear that the man and his work must be judged quite apart from Mormonism and what Mormonism popularly stands for.

It is also singularly suggestive that nearly all of the writers of the many exposés of Joseph Smith and his movement rely almost exclusively upon slanderous and even ridiculous stories of the ignorance, immorality, and general worthlessness of his character. Did you ever consider that this process has invariably been adopted in all ages and by all peoples against men and movements which were unpopular?

There is not a church, a reformer, nor a great leader of any time or country but what has been subjected to similar treatment, which is now meted out to Joseph Smith. For instance, the primitive church with its Founder who was "altogether lovely," and "full of grace and truth," the Roman pontiffs, the leaders of the Reformation, the founder of Methodism, Roger Williams, and others of the Baptists, the Campbells of the Christian Church, General Booth of the Salvation Army, and Mary Baker Eddy of the Christian Scientist Church.

The following quotation from Emerson is significant: "Pythagoras was misunderstood, and Socrates, and Jesus, and Luther, and Copernicus, and Galileo, and Newton, and every pure and wise spirit that ever took flesh. To be great is to be misunderstood."

It is very hard to explain how it is that men, claiming to represent Christ and his ethics, can do such a thing.

Despite the fact that Joseph Smith's personal character has been severely scrutinized and vindicated, his ancestry traced to the band of Pilgrim pioneers which came over to America in 1638, the recognized fountain of those traits of national character of which we are justly proud, and that his posterity is now among the honored citizenry of the great Republic, the popular judgment of the man and his work is still based upon a foundation which, if applied to any other man or movement, would instantly be repudiated as unfair, unjust, and unChristian.

What are the outstanding features of the

message and mission of Joseph Smith, who, whatever his faults and defects may have been, was one of the rare founders of a church originating in America.

First. He alleged that the popular forms and interpretations of the teachings of Jesus Christ were wrong and consequently ineffective for the purpose which Christ had in view.

Surely, if this were offensive and just ground for the man's condemnation then who, religiously at least, can be exonerated? From Socrates down every improvement in the affairs of men has been prefaced by a similar assertion.

Second. He claimed that God spoke to him, giving advice and direction touching the restoration of the original Christian church in doctrine, rites, institutions, and organization.

In this, a critical study of any work in comparative religion, and such a work as James's "Varieties of Religious Experience," will show that Smith was quite in harmony with his predecessors, contemporaries, and even successors in his efforts to reform the religious sentiment and practice of his times.

Third. Joseph Smith claimed that the religion of Jesus Christ must have more than a merely personal end in view, that it is not enough for a person to "save" himself, but his religion must have a communicable value, and "personal salvation" must be socialized; therefore he revived the Bible ideal of "Zion" and of a literal "kingdom of God" upon the earth.

By this he meant that all who became converted to Christ and indorsed his code of teachings naturally would congregate together; and those people so congregating would make their religion the dynamic force of the whole communal life; in a singular way anticipating modern developments in religious, economic, and social philosophy. A community which would unite in making the Christian ethic the basis of their corre-

lated activities, having the glory of God and the increasing of mutual happiness, with the consequent decrease of injustice, inequality, and competitive struggle as the paramount objective, would be Zion.

These were the outstanding features of Joseph Smith's teachings and work; all else is merely subsidiary thereto.

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints which is represented in the Reorganized Church with headquarters at Lamoni, Iowa, and Independence, Missouri, stands for the supremacy of Jesus Christ, and believes that only in so far as men succeed in identifying themselves with him in motives, methods, and ends, can they secure the salvation of which he is the Author.

This church advocates the practice of the simple doctrine and ritual of the New Testament: Faith, repentance, baptism (immersion), the laying on of hands in confirmation, the blessing of children, ordination to the ministry, and the healing of the sick.

This church is the pioneer in modern times of the what is popularly known as "faith healing," believing that God is both able and willing to "help our infirmities"; practicing the admonition, "Is any sick among you? let him call for the elders of the church; and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord: and the prayer of faith shall save the sick" (James 5: 15), and that the power of God in the lives of the people can and does produce the same results which gladdened the hearts of the early Christians as outlined in 1 Corinthians 12, also in Mark 16: 16-20.

This church also believes that the Spirit of God in the life of man will result in the casting out of evil, the speaking with new tongues, the power of prophecy in which God's mind will be revealed—all making for the development of the kingdom of heaven.

In organization this church accords to the provisions of the New Testament, viz: "Apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, and

teachers," which Christ's superior wisdom had devised.

In the application of the teachings of Christ to everyday life, touching the sociological problems particularly in the alleviating of the hardships of the poor, more than charitology is in view. The system of tithing the basis of the church's revenue, which means the voluntary payment of one tenth of the net income to begin with, and thereafter the increase; this is supplemented by consecrations and freewill offerings.

Out of this fund the expenses of the church executives, stipends to the officers and ministry, which are according to needs rather than position or ability, and aid and assistance to those in need, are met. It is the purpose to employ the means of the church to create opportunities for the people to help themselves, thus making it possible for them to become producers, by which they not only maintain themselves, but can enjoy the peculiar pleasure and dignity which comes to everyone who can and does contribute to the well-being and happiness of others.

The objective of the church is to actualize the Old Testament "Zion" and the New Testament "kingdom" by developing a community in the life of which there shall be allegiance to Christ, obedience to his principles and laws, especially those contained in the Sermon on the Mount; and the ordering and developing of every department in the social activities according to the will of God. Thus preparation is made for the realization of the millennial reign as prophesied in the scriptures, fulfilling the apocalyptic vision—"the tabernacle of God is with men."

This program we submit as worthy of intelligent consideration, and justifying a more patient and dignified study of the philosophy of the latter-day work than many have been disposed to give to it.

It is also well to remember the caution of Herbert Spencer: "No heresy is believed in

for its falsities, but for the truth it contains which its devotees see and believe.”

Walter Rauschenbusch reminds us: “The fact of religion is still the biggest thing in the world.”

Religion must mean at least the response of man’s inner life to God, and all that which is involved in this term, and the socializing of that life so that the “whole” is benefited thereby.

This program gives practical interpretation to the fundamental principles declared by Christ to be the basis of all morality and revelation: “Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, soul, mind, and strength; and thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself.”