

THE CONVERSION OF SIDNEY RIGDON TO MORMONISM

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Late in October 1830, four tired Mormon missionaries reached the village of Mentor, Ohio. Their leader, Parley P. Pratt, had persuaded them to walk two hundred miles out of their way to bring the message of the Book of Mormon to his friend, Sidney Rigdon. It was to be a most opportune meeting for both Rigdon and the representatives of the infant Mormon movement. The Book of Mormon gave Rigdon answers to questions which he had been asking for years. The Mormon movement was to him the end of his quest for the fullness of the gospel as Jesus had taught it in New Testament times. Mormonism found in Rigdon a mighty spokesman and dedicated leader.

Rigdon was one of the best known and respected revivalists in the Western Reserve. He had been an important leader among the Mahoning Baptist Association and then the Disciples of Christ. However, in the spring of 1830 Rigdon had separated himself and his Mentor congregation from the Campbellite fellowship. When the Mormon missionaries visited him, Rigdon was desperately searching for a religious organization which contained the fullness of the New Testament gospel. Pratt and his companions brought to Rigdon and his congregation the claims of a latter-day prophet, a new

religion, and a new Scripture. "They professed to be special messengers of the Living God, sent to preach the Gospel in its purity, as it was anciently preached by the Apostles."¹ This claim greatly excited Rigdon, as he had constantly tried and failed to establish the "ancient order of things" in Alexander Campbell's religious movement. Rigdon was nevertheless very skeptical of Mormonism because "they had with them a new revelation, which they said had been translated from certain gold plates that had been deposited in a hill" (Corrill, p. 7). Pratt offered to debate the matter, but Rigdon refused; he preferred to learn about Joseph Smith, who claimed to be a prophet, and to read the Book of Mormon. He believed that if this religious body really contained the New Testament gospel in its purity he would know it through inspiration. Rigdon fervently hoped that this new movement would give the solution to his search for religious truth.

Rigdon's consuming passion for the truth and his pursuit of knowledge began when he was a boy on his father's farm near St. Clair Township, Allegheny County, Pennsylvania. Sidney's brother, Loammi, was unable to earn a living by farming because some undescribed illness made him unfit to work in the fields. "It was the rule in the country, that when a boy was too feeble to work on a farm they would send him to school to give him an education." Loammi's parents sent him to Transylvania Medical School at Lexington, Kentucky. William Rigdon, Sidney's father, believed that he could afford higher education for one of his sons if compelled by necessity, but not for more than one. "Sidney Rigdon wanted to go to school and pleaded with his father and mother to let him go with his brother . . . , but they would not consent to let him go, saying to him, he was able to work on the farm."²

Sidney Rigdon had learned to read at a log schoolhouse near his home. A rudimentary education was generally considered sufficient; as late as 1816 fewer than one quarter of the school-age children in the neighboring area of Pittsburgh were receiving any formal education.³ When he was not allowed to accompany his brother to medical school, Sidney rebelled against his father's authority. He told his parents that "he would have as good an education as his brother got and they could not prevent it" (Rigdon, p. 3). He read all the books he could borrow from his neighbors. His particular interests were history and the Bible and these two sources of information became the underpinnings of his intellectual life.

William Rigdon, a stern Baptist farmer who had no tolerance for idleness, believed that a young man with a sound body should not waste time

¹John Corrill, *Brief History of the Church of Christ of Latter Day Saints (Commonly Called Mormons) Including an Account of Their Doctrine and Discipline with the Reasons of the Author for Leaving the Church* (St. Louis, 1839), p. 7. Hereafter cited as Corrill.

²John W. Rigdon, "Lecture on Early Mormon Church," delivered at Salt Lake City in 1906 (holograph manuscript on deposit at the Washington State Historical Society Library). Hereafter cited as Rigdon.

³Richard C. Wade, *The Urban Frontier: The Rise of Western Cities, 1770-1830* (Cambridge, 1959), p. 136.

reading books. He would not allow Sidney a candle by which to read at night, so the boy gathered hickory bark, which was plentiful around the farm. "He used to get it [the bark] and at night throw it on the old fire-place and then lay with his face headed towards the fire and read history till near morning unless his parents got up and drove him to bed before that time."

History and the Bible became one for Sidney Rigdon. The Bible told the history of a so-called "chosen people," and Rigdon interpreted the history of the world since New Testament times in terms of biblical prophecy. He did not share the interests of the other farm youths in his neighborhood. "He was never known to play with the boys; reading books was the greatest pleasure he could get" (Rigdon, p. 3).

In 1817 Rigdon professed to have had a conversion experience. His pastor, the Reverend David Phillips of the Peter Creek Church, encouraged him to become a Baptist minister. After his father died in 1819, Sidney supported his mother on the family farm. During this time he continued to read constantly. He taught himself English grammar, which made his language very precise. At the age of twenty-six, Sidney set out to find a new life for himself, and his mother went to live with her daughter, Lacy Boyer. Rigdon's knowledge of the Bible and history and his excellent command of English greatly aided his career when he chose to become a minister of the gospel. He spent the winter of 1818-19 with the Reverend Andrew Clark of Beaver County, Pennsylvania. Rigdon read the Bible with Clark and received a license to preach to a Baptist congregation.

Sidney Rigdon soon acquired a reputation as a powerful preacher and an effective minister. He was "an orator of no inconsiderable abilities," according to a contemporary, and "his personal influence with an audience was very great." He was of "full medium height, rotund of form, or countenance, while speaking, open and winning, with a little cast of melancholy." His actions were graceful, "his language copious, fluent in utterance, with articulation clear and musical."⁴ He was five feet, nine and a half inches in height and weighed around 215 pounds. His hair and beard framed a fine-featured face which mirrored his emotions. His countenance was both handsome and striking. His personal manner and friendliness won him many lasting friendships. He loved to meet the members of a congregation, shake their hands, and tell them his personal testimony. He was an excellent conversationalist and took a genuine interest in the lives of the people he met. He believed it was his mission to urge all to repent and accept the gospel which he preached. Rigdon looked, acted, and sounded like a religious leader.

In May 1819, Sidney Rigdon left the Reverend Andrew Clark's home in order to work with Adamson Bentley, the popular Baptist minister of Warren, Ohio, about fourteen miles northwest of Youngstown. Through Bentley he met Miss Phebe Brooks, Mrs. Bentley's sister, and on June 12, 1820, Rigdon

⁴Amos S. Hayden, *Early History of the Disciples in the Western Reserve, Ohio: With Biographic Sketches of the Principal Agents in Their Religious Movement* (Cincinnati, 1876), pp. 103-04. Hereafter cited as Hayden.

and Miss Brooks were married. Adamson Bentley was one of the founders of the Mahoning Baptist Association. Baptists on the frontier often organized several congregations into an association in order to protect their group against heresy, to devise better ways to spread the gospel, and to encourage fellowship among the ministers. Both Bentley and Rigdon were active in the Mahoning Association; Rigdon enjoyed a reputation as a great orator among his fellow ministers, and Bentley was elected three times as moderator, the highest office of the Association.⁵

In the spring of 1821 Rigdon and Bentley read a pamphlet by Alexander Campbell and decided to question him about his beliefs. For almost a decade after that time the careers of Rigdon and Bentley were to be linked with Alexander Campbell. Rigdon and Bentley visited Campbell at his home, where they discussed the Bible. Campbell explained that with the aid of his father and their followers he was trying to establish the so-called "ancient order of things," or the restoration of Christ's church as it was in New Testament times. Campbell told his visitors that he believed doctrine had to have its origin in the New Testament in order to be essential to salvation; the idea of a difference in authority between the Old and New Testaments struck Rigdon favorably.

The conversation was lengthy. Campbell commented, "After tea in the evening, we commenced and prolonged our discourse till the next morning." Rigdon's conversation with Campbell marked a turning point in his life and he became a biblical literalist. According to Campbell, "On parting the next day, Sidney Rigdon, with all apparent candor, said, if he had within the last year taught and promulgated from the pulpit one error, he had a thousand." Campbell happily accepted both Rigdon and Bentley as converts to his cause of reformation, but he worried about Rigdon's compulsive nature: "Fearing they might undo their influence with the people, I felt constrained to restrain rather than to urge them on in the work."⁶ Rigdon adopted Campbell's goal of the restoration of the "ancient order of things" as his own.

Campbell induced Rigdon to accept a position as pastor of the First Baptist Church at Pittsburgh, a member of the Redstone Baptist Association. Rigdon had considerable success at Pittsburgh and his congregation soon became one of the most respected in the city. He possessed a "great fluency and a lively fancy which gave him great popularity as an orator (Campbell 2:44-45).

When Campbell was driven from the Redstone Association because of what some of the members regarded as heretical ideas, ministers who considered Rigdon to be Campbell's outspoken disciple were determined to drive him out of Pittsburgh as well. While Rigdon's so-called "peculiar style of

⁵Minutes of meetings of the Mahoning Baptist Association on August 31, 1825, August 25, 1826, and August 23, 1827, quoted in Mary A. M. Smith, "A History of the Mahoning Baptist Association" (Master's thesis, University of West Virginia, 1943), Appendix, p. 28.

⁶Alexander Campbell, *Memoirs of Alexander Campbell Embracing a View of the Origin, Progress and Principles of the Religious Reformation Which He Advocated*, Robert Richardson, ed. (2 vols., Philadelphia, 1868), 2:44-45. Hereafter cited as Campbell.

preaching" had filled the church, certain influential members of the congregation saw in it cause for alarm. When the Redstone Association met in 1824, the ministers who comprised it brought charges against Rigdon for not being sound in the faith, that is, for being a follower of Campbell. The ministers who tried him "denied him the liberty of speaking in self-defense." Rigdon resigned his pastorate and "declared a non-fellowship with them."⁷

Because Rigdon had a wife and three daughters to support, he took a job working as a journeyman tanner for his wife's brother. He obtained permission to preach in the courthouse on Sundays, and continued to proclaim Campbell's ideas about the restoration of the "ancient order of things." His meetings were attended by a portion of his former Pittsburgh congregation who followed him into religious exile. In 1826 Rigdon left Pennsylvania to accept a pastorate at Mentor, Ohio. Then Mentor congregation was in the Mahoning Baptist Association, in which his friend Alexander Campbell and his brother-in-law Adamson Bentley had become influential ministers.

Sidney Rigdon's reputation as a reform Baptist preacher spread throughout the Western Reserve as a result of the revival meetings he held in Mentor and neighboring communities. In 1827 he held a series of preaching services at New Lisbon and Mantua, Ohio, at which he declared the gospel of the restoration. He was so successful in March of 1828 that Amos S. Hayden, his associate and the Campbellite historian, described his efforts as "the great religious awakening in Mentor" (Hayden, p. 204). In the following year, Rigdon held revivals in Kirtland, Perry, and Pleasant Hills, as well as again in Mentor.

By 1830 Sidney Rigdon had developed a personal theology which, although following the teachings of Alexander Campbell in many respects, rejected some of Campbell's ideas. Both Rigdon and Campbell accepted baptism by immersion as the biblical form by which Christ was baptized and which all men should follow. Rigdon disagreed with Campbell over whether the so-called "manifestations of Spiritual Gifts" and miracles had a place in the restoration. The gifts of the Spirit were the speaking and interpretation of foreign tongues, prophecy, visions, spiritual dreams, and the ability to discern evil spirits. Campbell declared that the miraculous work of the Holy Ghost was "confined to the apostolic age, and to only a portion of the saints who lived in that age."⁸ Rigdon, however, sought "to convince influential persons that, along with the primitive gospel, supernatural gifts and miracles ought to be restored" (Campbell, 2:346). Rigdon wanted to incorporate into Campbell's restoration every belief or practice which was a part of the New Testament church. He also differed from Campbell over the issue of a communal society. Rigdon wanted to establish a community in which all

⁷Sworn statement by Carvel Rigdon and Peter Boyer dated January 27, 1843, quoted in Daryl Chase, "Sidney Rigdon - Early Mormon" (Master's thesis, University of Chicago, 1931), p. 14.

⁸Alexander Campbell is quoted in Joseph W. White, "The Influence of Sidney Rigdon upon the Theology of Mormonism" (Master's thesis, University of Southern California, 1947), p. 127.

property was held in common, which he believed to be the practice of the early Jerusalem church. "And all that believed were together, and had all things common; and sold their possessions and goods, and parted them to all men, as every man had need" (Acts 2:44-45). Campbell wanted no economic experiments which involved communal life within his religious sect.

Rigdon's and Campbell's theological differences caused friction which grew steadily more abrasive until a complete break occurred in 1830, when Rigdon withdrew his Mentor congregation from the Mahoning Baptist Association. The group was thus not affiliated with any religious body when the missionaries arrived with the news of the Book of Mormon. Rigdon sought evidence which would substantiate Pratt's claim that the Book of Mormon contained the fullness of the New Testament gospel for which he had been searching since 1821. He judged the Book of Mormon the same way he evaluated all material which purported to contain religious truth, that is, by prayerfully comparing it with the Bible.

To Rigdon, the doctrine which he found in the Book of Mormon compared most favorably with that in the Bible. Indeed, he found in his new Scripture answers he had been seeking for years. If the Mormon movement embraced the doctrines contained in the Book of Mormon, then he had found the true restoration gospel. The prophet Moroni asked the question which had plagued Rigdon as a disciple of Campbell, that is, whether miracles ceased because Christ had ascended to heaven. Moroni answered his own question by declaring that "angels [have not] ceased to minister unto the children of men" (Moroni 7:29). The Book of Mormon also contained the idea that one must be baptized by immersion for the remission of sins, which Rigdon believed to be the true form of baptism. Moroni told of the gifts of the Spirit, which were wisdom, knowledge, healing, miracles, prophecy, speaking and interpretation of tongues, and the discernment of spirits. Rigdon had been unhappy because these things were not manifested among the followers of Campbell. Rigdon believed in the literal return of the Jews to their homeland, as was prophesied in II Nephi 9:2: "And it shall come to pass that my people, which are of the house of Israel, shall be gathered home unto the lands of their possession."⁹ The Book of Mormon also bore witness that Jesus was the Christ and that he established a church in the New World with twelve disciples who were to carry on the work of the gospel after He ascended to heaven.

When Rigdon finished reading the Book of Mormon, he claimed that Mormonism was truly the apostolic church divinely restored to the earth. Realizing that this religious change might bring about economic hardships, as had his removal from the First Baptist Church in Pittsburgh in 1824, he asked his wife, "My dear, you have followed me once into poverty, are you willing to do the same?" (Jaques, p. 586.) Phebe Rigdon replied, "I have weighed the matter, I have counted the cost, and I am perfectly satisfied to

⁹John Jaques, "Life and Labors of Sidney Rigdon," *Improvement Era*, 3 (1899-1900), 100. Hereafter cited as Jaques.

follow you; it is my desire to do the will of God, come life or come death."¹⁰ There was no indication at this time that Mormonism would be acceptable to his congregation, who were in the act of building Rigdon a new house. Rigdon's life-long quest for the fullness of the gospel compelled him on several occasions to abandon positions of prestige, power, and financial security. Joseph Smith captured the essence of Rigdon's long and difficult quest when he stated, "Truth was his pursuit, and for truth he was prepared to make every sacrifice in his power."¹¹

Sheriff John Barr, a non-Mormon of Cuyahoga County, was present when Rigdon informed his congregation of his decision to embrace Mormonism, and he recorded the incident. Rigdon told them that "he had not been satisfied in his religious yearnings until now." Previously, "at night he had often been unable to sleep, walking and praying for more light and comfort in religion." While in the midst of this soul-searching, "he heard of the revelation of Joe Smith . . . under this his soul suddenly found peace." The Mormon message "filled all his aspirations." According to Sheriff Barr, the congregation was much affected by Rigdon's testimony that he had found religious truth (Mather, pp. 206-07). Rigdon's congregation at Mentor followed his leadership once again; this time they embraced Mormonism.

Although some members of traditional religious denominations bitterly opposed the principles which the Mormons taught, the missionaries had an opportunity to preach their new gospel in the towns of Medina, Kirtland, Painesville, and Mayfield, where Rigdon had previously held revival meetings. Pratt, who was spreading the word of Rigdon's conversion to the Book of Mormon, declared that "the interest and excitement now became general in Kirtland, and in the region round about." Mormon missionary activity in the Western Reserve was such a great success that, according to Pratt, "in two or three weeks from our arrival in the neighborhood with the news, we had baptized one hundred an twenty-seven souls, and this number soon increased to one thousand."¹² Rigdon's conversion and the missionary effort which followed transformed Mormonism from a New York-based sect with about a hundred members into one which was a major threat to Protestantism in the Western Reserve.

In December of 1830, Rigdon traveled to New York to meet the founder of the Mormon movement. Rigdon believed that Joseph Smith was chosen to be God's prophet in the last days. A revelation given through Smith revealed to Rigdon that he had been called to be Smith's counselor, scribe and spokesman: "Behold, verily, verily, I say unto my servant Sidney, I have looked upon thee and thy work. I have heard thy prayers, and prepared thee for a greater work. Thou are blessed, for thou shalt do great things. Behold

¹⁰Frederic G. Mather, "The Early Days of Mormonism," *Lippincotts Magazine of Popular Literature and Science*, 26 (August 1880), 206-7. Hereafter cited as Mather.

¹¹*Journal of History* (Lamoni, Iowa), 3, no. 1 (1910), 7-8.

¹²Parley P. Pratt, *The Autobiography of Parley Parker Pratt, One of the Twelve Apostles of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, Embracing His Life, Ministry and Travels, with Extracts in Prose and Verse from His Miscellaneous Writings* (New York, 1876), pp. 65-66.

thou wast sent forth, even as John, to prepare the way before me" (D & C 11:2). Rigdon thus believed that God had called him to become a latter-day John the Baptist, a voice crying in the wilderness, to proclaim the establishment of the Kingdom of God and the second coming of Christ.

Rigdon acquired a well-earned reputation for being a mighty spokesman for the Lord. Sheriff John Barr described one of Rigdon's baptismal services near Kirtland, Ohio, which he attended with Vernem J. Card, a lawyer, who "was apparently the most stoical of men — of a clear, unexcitable temperament, with unorthodox and vague religious ideas." Rigdon inquired of his audience whether anyone desired to come forward and be immersed in the Chagrin River. The only respondent was "an aged 'dead-beat' by the name of Cahoon, who occasionally joined the Shakers and lived on the country generally." The baptismal service was set for two o'clock in the afternoon, but long before that time the spot was surrounded by as many people as could have a clear view. After Cahoon was baptized, Rigdon, who was still standing in the water, "gave one of his most powerful exhortations." He called for any others who desired salvation to step forward. "They came through the crowd in rapid succession to the number of thirty, and were immersed with no intermission of the discourse on the part of Rigdon (Mather, pp. 206–07).

Suddenly Vernem Card seized the Sheriff's arm, pleading, "take me away." Steadying his friend, Barr saw that "his face was so pale that he seemed to be about to faint," and they rode almost a mile before a word was uttered. Card finally gained control of himself and said, "Mr. Barr, if you had not been there I certainly should have gone into the water," because "the impulse was irresistible" (Mather, pp. 206–07).

Besides being an effective preacher of Mormonism, Rigdon was intimately involved with Joseph Smith in directing every major endeavor of the Mormon Church during the first decade of its official existence. He did not share in originating Mormon theology, but the "Hiram Page Affair" illustrated that the infant Mormon movement did not need another prophet. Rigdon became Smith's strong right arm and spokesman. They blended their energies, abilities, ideas, and dreams for the future to become an exceedingly dynamic and successful leadership team. Rigdon's tremendous contributions came when Mormonism needed them most critically.

In the early 1840's new developments in Mormonism were seen by Rigdon as straying from the essentials of Christ's church, and in 1844, after the death of Joseph Smith, he was defeated in his attempt to redirect the course of Mormonism. Rigdon then formed a schismatic sect, called the Church of Jesus Christ, which sought unsuccessfully to reestablish Mormonism in its former purity; after the failure of this religious group, he believed that no church on earth represented Christ's New Testament teachings. The last thirty years of Rigdon's life were years of religious isolation during which he refused to associate with a Mormonism which practiced polygamy. Yet Sidney Rigdon remained faithful to the early concepts of Mormonism which Pratt and his companions had introduced at Mentor, Ohio, that October morning in 1830.