

# From the Pulpit

## A LESSON FROM THE PAST

*William L. Knecht*

*William L. Knecht practices law in Berkeley, California, on Telegraph Avenue. He is an avid history buff. The following sermon, which was delivered in the Oakland II Ward on July 13, 1969, won honorable mention in DIALOGUE's 1969 Silver Awards competition for religious literature.*

The year was 1856. Times were bad, economically, in Europe and particularly in England. In Utah, as in most developing economies, the need for human resources was high. Emigration committees were formed and funds collected and pooled to assist the poor in getting to Zion. Out of these efforts the handcart scheme was born.

It was the responsibility of church agents in Europe to charter ships. Other agents in St. Louis and Chicago were to buy lumber, iron and canvas, for shipment to Iowa City where carpenters and blacksmiths fashioned the materials into carts. But more emigrants came than were expected and fewer carpenters and fewer blacksmiths were available than were needed.

Because there wasn't enough money, Church agents had to skimp on the iron, and they bought green lumber instead of seasoned wood. Thus, the carts were not built in large enough quantities, nor soon enough, nor well enough, and large numbers of emigrants ended up waiting under the hot Iowa summer sun.

Some of the emigrants, as they got off the boats, thought it prudent to stop in Boston or in New York and find lodgings and jobs to recruit both their financial and physical strength, and postpone the trip across the plains for a year.

One such family, named Loader, consisting of a father, mother and two girls, stopped in New York. They wrote a letter to their son-in-law, who with his child and pregnant wife was still in Liverpool. The son-in-law, John Jaques, worked in the office of Elder Franklin D. Richards, who had charge of the emigration. John wrote a letter to his father-in-law:

My pleasure [upon receipt of your letter] changed to great pain and unfeigned sorrow when I read it. I have read the letter about half a dozen times. I could scarcely believe that you could have sent such a one. There is not one atom of the spirit of Zion in it, but the very spirit of apostacy. I felt to exclaim in my heart, "who has bewitched you, and with whom have you been taking counsel, that you should so soon forget the goodness of the Lord in delivering you from this part of Babylon, and opening up your way to Zion?" Jesus Christ wept over Jerusalem and said, "How often would I have gathered thy children together, even as a hen gathereth her chickens under her wings, and ye would not!" . . . And I truly felt to weep over you as Jesus did over the Jews. Here I have been praying and exerting my faith and influence with the Lord, and with you, to get you gathered to Zion, and now that He has been graciously pleased to open up your way, you turn around in His face, and ungratefully tell Him you cannot walk in it, but He must bring you a wagon to ride in! It is truly greivous to me, and I am sure it is to God and to His good spirit. If I were to turn aside on my way to Zion, for such trifling reasons as those in your letter, now that the Lord has so kindly given me the privilege of going, it seems to me that I ought to be damned, and I have no doubt that I should be.

You invited me and my family to stay awhile in New York, and you will get lodgings ready for us. We appreciate your kindness, and feel thankful for it. But you must allow us to decline the offer. I tell you plainly, that if you would get us lodgings, pay for them, clothe and feed us with the best that Babylon can offer, and give us 10,000 into the bargain, we would not stay with you in New York; no, not if fifty brothers and sisters or fathers or mothers were to ask us to stay. Brothers, sisters, fathers or mothers, when they put a stumblingblock in the way of my salvation, are nothing more to me than gentiles. As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord, and when we start we will go right up to Zion, if we go ragged and barefoot. Why do not you rise up as a man of God, and say that you and your house will serve the Lord, and will go up to Zion at all hazards? . . .<sup>1</sup>

The letter had its desired effect and the family from New York joined the writer and his family from Liverpool and together they left Iowa City.

The day after they left Council Bluffs, John's wife had her baby. The baby came without too much difficulty but the new mother was hardly prepared to start walking. Further, his sister-in-law had hurt a shoulder when a cart rushed down a ravine to a creek bed, and she had now developed a fever. The captain of the company offered the new mother a ride but would allow no one to accompany her, so the offer was refused. The two families laid over a day and a night, and then began their effort to catch up with the

<sup>1</sup>*LDS Millennial Star*, XVIII (June 14, 1856), 364 ff.

rest of the company. After an all day and all night exertion, they reached their friends but were told, because it was so late, that they could not put up a tent — that they could not build a fire. Imagine, an eighteen hour trip, with but one stop for food, and now they were forbidden a fire because it was against some rule!

They laid out on the ground and slept until morning. Too tired to rise for breakfast, they barely got underway with the company and were without food until noon!<sup>2</sup>

Another family — the McBrides — consisted of a father, mother, and a flock of little ones. Soon after leaving Iowa City, mother and father became so tired that they took turns riding, draped across the cart. The strongest of the two started off immediately after breakfast and walked until they could walk no more. The weakest of the two parents rode the cart until it caught up with the, now resting, other parent, and they changed places. That's a difficult way to travel.

One evening, after a particularly hard trip, coming into camp long after all others, they found the most desirable sites taken, and the easily gathered wood already collected, and so in the rain, the oldest boy, twelve years old, gathered some soggy twigs and started a fire to heat some gruel and tea for the family. Then came the call to prayers. All but the boy and his mother joined the rest of the company. The second-in-command, checking up to see who hadn't gone to prayers, found Sister McBride and her son Heber working over a smoking fire. He kicked out the fire, kicked over the soup, and said, "That'll teach you to stay away from prayers!"<sup>3</sup>

John Jaques wrote about those prayer meetings. He said: "In all the . . . daily routine the only serious mistake was the semi-daily obligatory public prayer meetings. . . . Harsh words were sometimes uttered and harsh measures were sometimes adopted to cause all men, women, and children, and even the sick, to attend these public prayer meetings, morning and evening."<sup>4</sup>

One other major problem was presented to the emigrants. At Council Bluffs, in August, they held a meeting to decide whether to stay over for the winter or go on to Utah. Many were tired. Some loved ones had already been buried. Food was short and the hoped for — the promised supplies — were not at hand. The emigrants were joined at this moment by certain apostles who had stayed in Iowa City to wind up affairs, and who were now hurrying to Utah.

Some of the people wanted to stay at Winter Quarters. Others pointed out that they didn't have much money to buy food for the winter and that they didn't have much with them — food, or shelter, or clothing. Besides, there were several other considerations. Some apostate Mormons had settled nearby and they were dangerous to the spiritual safety of the emigrating converts. There was equal danger from the gentiles who lived in the area and who would try to persuade the able-bodied emigrants to settle down and work.

<sup>2</sup>MSS Journal of Patience Archer Rosa Loder, Special Collections, BYU Library.

<sup>3</sup>Typescript Journal of Heber Robert McBride, Special Collections, BYU Library.

<sup>4</sup>John Jaques, *Salt Lake Daily Herald*, January 12, 1879.

A council meeting was called. The fears felt were spoken. Then one of the apostles spoke, He, "a prominent and sanguine gentleman[,] promised to eat all the snow the emigrants would find between the Missouri and Salt Lake"<sup>5</sup>

Another told the emigrants that they were the children of God, and promised them that they would go through safe and unharmed. "The Indians, the seasons, nay, the very elements, would be controlled for their benefit, and after they had gotten through, they would hear of storms on the left and on the right, of which they, in their traveling, would know nothing."<sup>6</sup>

That was late in August. It started snowing October 19th, when the emigrants were at the last crossing of the Platte River. Snow came earlier, stayed longer, and was piled deeper than ever before — and all that with 40 below zero temperatures

According to one who was with the company, fires, when they could be made, served three magnificent purposes. If you had any food — and the rations were now one-quarter of a pound of flour a day per person — you could cook it on the fire. And it made a warm — albeit perhaps muddy — spot to sleep. And in the morning, it made the task of digging a hole to bury a dozen or twenty dead people, easier.<sup>7</sup>

Old people died. Young people died. Men died. A few women died. Children were born. And still more snow. The emigrants were helpless. Their leadership disintegrated. Tempers became very short. But the apostles had gone ahead, and ten days later advance parties of a rescue company from Salt Lake City found the desperate remainder of the handcart companies sitting in the snow. It took five weeks to get the survivors out of the mountains and into Salt Lake City, but it was done.

In the meantime, the President of the Church, Brigham Young, preached a sermon. It was a magnificent sermon. A shorthand reporter took it down verbatim, which is fortunate, because we might not believe what was said that day if we had only the memory of his listeners to rely upon. Well-known people in the Church have said that Brigham Young would never have preached such a sermon. We know better, because Brigham Young read the transcript and directed the *Deseret News* to print parts of it.

If our elders in the east — the apostles — had sent our immigration in the season that they should have done, you and I could have kept our teams at home; we could have fenced our five and ten acre lots; we could have put in our fall wheat; could have gotten up wood for ourselves and for the poor that could not help themselves . . . whereas now our hands are tied.

This people are this day deprived of thousands of acres of wheat that would have been sowed by this time, had it not been for the misconduct of our immigration affairs this year. . . . Here is . . . [and he named the apostle] who has but little knowledge of business except what he has learned in the Church; he came into

<sup>5</sup>*Ibid*, December 1, 1878.

<sup>6</sup>T. B. H. Stenhouse, *The Rocky Mountain Saints* (New York, 1873).

<sup>7</sup>Jaques, *op cit*, January 5, 1879.

the Church as a boy, and all the public business he has been in is the little he has done while in Liverpool. . . . If at the Missouri River, . . . he had received a hint from any person on this earth, or if even a bird had chirped it in the ears of Brother . . . , he would have known better. . . . What is the cause of our immigration being so late this season? The ignorance and mismanagement of some who had to do with it. . . .<sup>8</sup>

Will you consider for a moment what you would have done had you been an emigrant on the banks of the Missouri? Would you have whispered in the ears of the apostles? Would you have stood up in the middle of the congregation and said, "Now look here, you say that this is the Lord's plan, and you are his servants, but you are being stupid servants, and we will not follow you"? You'd have been in big trouble, as the kids say, if you'd done that! Or would you have said, "Well, they are apostles, and whatever they say must be right; I don't have to think about it for myself"?

Lest I be misunderstood, let me state unequivocally, that I am not trying to foster a general spirit of dissension. Those who want to dissent, disagree, usually feel free enough to do so.

I recognize, I accept, I encourage the spirit of unity under authority that has made the Church a vehicle of strength to aid in the salvation, both temporal and spiritual, of millions of people. It is not an organization that has been, or is, or should be governed by consensus.

But often enough to be a problem is the quenching of the spirit of a member who feels strongly enough about an issue to voice an opinion different from the majority.

You see, some apostles would have been unhappy to have anyone disagree with their decisions. But in the case of the handcart company, the ultimate earthly authority wished that someone had whispered in the ears of the apostles. Brigham Young was so emphatic about the matter that he promised to cut off from the Church anyone who ever did anything so stupid again.

Consider the problem of the Saints of the handcart company. The call to prayer is sounded. *Must you go? Must you go, no matter what?* Consider, too, the problem of their leaders.

On the other hand, what would you do if you had hundreds of weary, tired emigrants in your charge, with winter fast approaching? Wouldn't you want to have as much prayer as possible? Don't you believe that if the emigrants just had *enough* faith and just prayed *hard* enough the Lord would have fulfilled the promises of his leaders?

The point, stated another way, is that you are responsible for your own salvation, both temporal and spiritual. I have only a peripheral responsibility for you, a primary responsibility for me. The bishop's responsibility for you is greater, but still only peripheral. He is to train you to get salvation, not to give it to you. Each of us has to bear the burden of our own salvation

---

<sup>8</sup>*Journal of Discourses*, 4:66, 68. The sermon was proofed and approved by Brigham Young and, under his direction, published in the *Deseret News* on November 12, 1856.



and with that responsibility we have the privilege of seeking facts, of seeking inspiration or revelation, and we have to decide for ourselves whether we'll stay at Winter Quarters or press on to the Valley. And we have to be willing for someone else to make the opposite decision, without our running off to the bishop, or stake president, or some apostle.

We are not likely, soon at least, to face the question faced by the Martin handcart company at Winter Quarters; our usual decisions are much more mundane. But it is practice in making decisions and living with them, that prepares us for large, fateful decisions. Someday each of us will have to make at least one important decision, important for our own salvation and important for other members of the Church. Every member should feel free, after careful examination of his inner strengths and the external facts, and an appeal to revelation, to voice, in proper place and time, his position.

Can you disagree with a Sunday school teacher, or a Sunday school manual, or a bishop, or even an apostle, without someone complaining about it? We need help in sustaining one another in our differences; one step is to study our past.

We should read history — when it is honest — in an effort to perceive problems and their solutions so that we can learn from the processes as well as from the results. In so doing, we will gain strength and wisdom. Then when the testing comes, we will be prepared to respond. We will not be dissenters for the sake of dissenting, but we will be able to exercise our free agency and to assume the responsibility for our own salvation.

Would, when the time comes, that we would have the wisdom and the strength and that extra something — a love for our fellow beings — to match that of Levi Savage, who, at Winter Quarters in 1856, counselled the Saints to wait over: "The tears rolled down his cheeks as he prophesied that if . . . [they] took the journey at that late season of the year, their bones would strew the way." But he added: "If you elect to go ahead, I will come and assist, though it cost me my life."<sup>9</sup>

---

<sup>9</sup>Stenhouse, 317. There is ample confirmation of this episode. See, for example, K. Carter (ed.) *Treasures of Pioneer History* (Salt Lake City, 1956), 252.