

John Taylor's Religious Preparation

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In the spring of 1836 when John Taylor was baptized in Toronto by Parley P. Pratt, he had completed a quest for religious certainty. His search had taken him from Methodism to Christian Primitivism and had involved a period of fascination with the restorationism of the now little-known Catholic Apostolic Church. Taylor, who would become the third president of the LDS Church in 1880, had been converted to Methodism in his early teens in England and was appointed a Methodist exhorter at age seventeen (Roberts 1892, 28). But when Taylor emigrated to Canada in 1832 at age twenty-four, though he acted as preacher and class leader in York (as Toronto was known until 1834), he was not fully content in his faith.

This discontent was perhaps first shown in January 1833 when Taylor married Leonora Cannon, a member of his class. Officiating at the ceremony was the Reverend Samuel J. I. Lockhart, chaplain to the Right Reverend C. J. Stewart, Anglican Bishop of Quebec, and connected with the Church of England-sponsored Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts.¹ The Marriage Act of 1830 (actually passed in 1829) had given Methodist ministers in Upper Canada the right to perform marriages (Riddell 1921, 239), and for Methodists not to take advantage of this was unusual. Thus, even if Lockhart's services were originally proposed by Cannon's employer, the wife of the private secretary to the Governor General, Taylor's consent to an Anglican wedding was probably a sign of his disaffection.²

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¹ Lockhart claimed SPG affiliation on Taylor's marriage record, but he is not listed as a missionary in SPG records in the USPG Archives in London.

² Possibly the decision was an impulsive one. Lockhart and Stewart were only briefly in York, to offer public prayers of thanksgiving for the passing of a cholera epidemic (Millman 1953, 148; SPG 1835, 150).

Be that as it may, within that year, Taylor gave a clear sign of his dissatisfaction with Methodism by joining a Bible study and prayer group with Christian primitivist leanings. It met under the leadership of William Poyntz Patrick, a wealthy young man, a licensed preacher, and a member of the York Methodist establishment (Clark 1948, 307). Its members agreed — at first, at least — “to reject every man’s opinion and work, and to search the scriptures alone” (J. Taylor, 269).

According to Joseph Fielding, who began meeting with them in 1835, those who associated with Patrick were convinced that the Christian church was apostate and laid great emphasis upon the doctrines of the resurrection, the judgment, and Christ’s millennial reign (Fielding 1841, 50). But according to Taylor himself, in a personal history he wrote in Utah as an LDS apostle, their conclusions were even more radical:

We believed in the apostasy of all the Christian churches and in their departure from the true faith. We believed in the gathering of Israel, in the restoration of the Ten Tribes, in the personal reign of Christ, in the power of God that should be manifested at the restoration of pure principles and a true church on the earth. We believed that there ought to be Apostles and Prophets, Pastors, Teachers and Evangelists, that men had not the gift of the Holy Ghost, as in former days; or the world would be guided into truth, and know of things to come. We believed in the gift of tongues, the gift of healing, miracles, prophecy, faith, discerning of spirits and in all the gifts and blessings as experienced in former days; but we had them not, we believed also that no man had a right to preach nor administer in ordinances without he was called of God by prophecy and ordained by proper authority as formerly; we believed that no such authority existed on the earth, or if it did we did not know of it (J. Taylor, 269).

These were the beliefs of 1835, however — what Taylor was thinking just before Pratt’s arrival — and not his milder thoughts of two years before.

In 1833 Taylor and the others (Patrick included) were still serving in Methodist church positions — some of them as ordained ministers — and it is unlikely that any of them brought to their first meetings any more than a nagging sense that the purity and grace of the primitive church had been lost. It took reading, prayerful discussion, and — most importantly — a catalyst to transform this vague yearning for a New Testament Christianity into a systematic indictment of the contemporary church. Perhaps not surprisingly, Taylor, anxious to highlight his conversion to Mormonism and stress the providential nature of his preparation for Pratt’s message, made little mention of the study, debate, and prayer, and completely ignored the catalyst — the Catholic Apostolic Church. Nevertheless, it was Irvingism which turned Taylor into a restorationist and prepared him for Pratt’s ministry.

The Patrick group was introduced to the teachings of the Catholic Apostolic Church by the conversion of the Reverend George Ryerson. Ryerson, a friend of Patrick and a member of a leading Methodist family in York, had gone to England in 1831 to help raise money for Methodist Indian missions and to petition Parliament on behalf of the non-Anglicans of Upper Canada. He had stayed on to settle details of the estate of his first wife’s mother and, disillusioned by what he saw of British Wesleyanism and horrified by the godlessness of London, had been attracted by the preaching of Reverend Edward Irving and

joined the Catholic Apostolic Church. Irving had been dismissed from the Church of Scotland ministry by his home presbytery of Annan because he had argued in *The Doctrine of the Incarnation Opened* (1828) that Christ's human nature was sinful. Ryerson was untroubled by this and uninterested in Irving's Christology. Instead he was impressed by the Scot's emphasis on ritual (Ryerson had wanted to enter the Anglican ministry but had been refused) and excited by his millennialism. Irving called for the elect to gather out of the churches to await Christ's return and afterwards rule with Christ during the millennium. He considered the gifts of the Spirit which his congregation at Regent Square enjoyed — prophecy, tongues, and healing — as signs of divine approval and a confirmation that the Parousia was at hand. The Catholic Apostolic Church, in which Irving held minor office, was largely the creation of Henry Drummond, but it drew heavily on Irving's ideas as well as Drummond's own, and was popularly known as the "Irvingite" church (Shaw 1946; Davenport 1970).

Ryerson was to devote the rest of his life to Irvingism and, following his return to Upper Canada in 1836, served as "angel" (CAC minister) in Toronto. In 1834 he asked for missionaries to be sent to Upper Canada and urged the two men assigned to go — William Renny Caird and William Hastings Cuthbert — to make the Patrick home their first call ("Canada" 1953, 9; Dougall 1982, 797; Shaw 1946, 112). Ryerson's reasons for directing them to Patrick are unknown, though it is possible he had learned of the group after talking with his brother, Egerton Ryerson, who had visited London the previous year. It is also not impossible that Patrick had been among the friends who had written to ask why he had left the Methodist Episcopal Church. But however arrived at, Ryerson's conclusions were sound. Patrick was indeed looking for some such message as that brought by Caird and Cuthbert — and so were the rest of his group. They had been praying for guidance and either a restoration of gospel power or a messenger from "a true church."³

The missionaries arrived in May (Burwell 1835, 24). They were well received by the Patrick group, but the leaders of conference summoned Patrick and others, including Taylor, before a disciplinary committee (Shaw 1946, 114; Roberts 1892, 33; Fielding 1841, 51). There were no conversions from the Patrick group that year, and Caird and Cuthbert returned to England at the end of the summer (Caird 1863, 36), deeply disappointed that their only successes had come from their preaching in Kington and Toronto (Sanderson 1908, 348). Possibly the appointments to preach had been made by Patrick ("Canada" 1953, 9). Nevertheless their mission should not be considered a failure. Those like Patrick who had been deprived of church office for their advocacy of Irvingite ideas were only temporarily chastened. When Fielding started meeting with the group in 1835, it was studying the Bible in the light of the teachings of Edward Ewing, a Scotch minister in London (Fielding, personal history, before his 1837 diary). When Caird made a second trip to the

³ Taylor reports fasting and prayers for "a true church" as occurring just prior to Pratt's arrival (J. Taylor, 269), but it seems probable that they would have started much earlier.

province the following year, Patrick led a small number into the CAC fold (Sissons 1937, 1:369).

Caird's influence is not, of course, shown only in the number of his converts. Many in the Patrick group adopted Irvingite ideas without ever joining the Catholic Apostolic Church. Taylor, for example, had become Mormon by the time Caird returned, but he had once been very interested in Irvingism and if some allowance is made for his anachronistic Mormon phrasing, each one of his pre-LDS criticisms of contemporary Christianity can be found in the preaching of Caird.

Granted, Caird's message survives only in summaries which appeared in the Methodist press, and *The Doctrines of the Holy Spirit* (1835), a book written by Adam Hood Burwell, under Caird's influence, with the hope of introducing Irvingism to Upper Canada.⁴ Nevertheless there is sufficient evidence to show that Caird had a view of the gospel that paralleled, and no doubt shaped and clarified, Taylor's own. While Taylor could well have arrived at some of his conclusions unaided (or at least before the CAC missionaries arrived), the similarities between his thinking and Caird's preaching seem to be beyond coincidence, especially in view of Taylor's enthusiasm over Caird.

Christendom was under condemnation for apostasy, Caird taught (Shaw 1946, 114; cf. Sissons 1937, 1:360); the reformation had been incomplete and Protestantism, the Catholic Apostolic Church excepted, was living "under the direct agency of most grievous errors" (Burwell 1835, iii). Further, the offices of the primitive church had fallen into abeyance and the gifts of the Spirit were neglected. What was needed — and what Irvingites had — was a church led by apostles and blessed with the New Testament gifts of healing, tongues, and, most importantly, prophecy (Burwell 1835, 26–28). Caird had been sent to Canada by prophecy, Burwell triumphantly noted (1835, 24, 116). Such a church would gather the elect to await Christ's return and then supply "the civil and ecclesiastical government" of his millennial reign (Shaw 1946, 114; the phrasing is Egerton Ryerson's). When the kingdom of God had thus come on earth "by a mighty act of the Lord Jesus" (Burwell 1835, 119), Israel would be restored to her inheritance, and the world would be renewed. (See Shaw 1946, 114 for Egerton Ryerson's amusement at Caird's vivid descriptions of "an Elysian Canaan and an earthly heaven.")

By April 1836 when Pratt arrived in Toronto, Taylor was beginning to doubt the authority of Irvingism and was once again praying to learn which church was true. But he still believed in the scenario of apostasy, restoration, and second coming that — since March 1834 — he and the other members of the Patrick group had studied, discussed, and searched the scriptures to prove. It is no wonder that Pratt thought him prepared for Mormonism and *its* message of apostasy, restoration, and the imminence of Christ's return (Pratt 1888,

⁴ Burwell was the Anglican incumbent of Bytown (later Ottawa), "a responsible and deserving minister" who had overcome the handicap of an irregular education (Stewart 1832), but who was probably discouraged by the conflicts precipitated by the attempt to complete the Bytown church (SPG 1835, 152). He joined the Catholic Apostolic Church in 1836 and served as "angel" in Kingston.

146). Nor is it remarkable that Taylor was not at first interested in Pratt's message. He had, after all, heard much of it before.

Pratt's breakthrough came by preaching. When he addressed the Patrick group (he had been invited to attend by a third party), Taylor thought that the force and conviction with which he spoke was of God and shortly thereafter agreed to be baptized. No doubt Taylor had, before then, recognized the logic of Pratt's Christian primitivism, but had felt no need to accept any of Mormonism's special claims. When Pratt had arrived, armed with a letter of introduction from Moses C. Nickerson, a merchant with whom Taylor had a "very slight acquaintance" (J. Taylor, 270), Taylor had been unimpressed by both Pratt's message and Nickerson's letter.⁵ When Pratt had converted Isabella Walton, one of Taylor's neighbors, and healed one of her friends, Taylor was not convinced that anything extraordinary had occurred. He needed to recognize the authority of Pratt's ministry before he could see the Church of Christ (as the LDS Church was then known) as "a true church" — and want to join.

Perhaps not too much should be made of this. Had Taylor not already been longing for a restoration of primitive Christianity when he heard Pratt preach, the Mormon elder might well have spoken in vain. Still, Taylor would have first noticed the great similarities between much of Mormonism and what he already believed some time before, when he and Pratt first met. These similarities did not seem significant then, nor would they ever have done, one might venture, had Taylor not been convinced that the Spirit validated what Pratt had to say.⁶

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⁵ Nickerson had been converted in 1833 by Joseph Smith's testimony of having enjoyed the ministry of angels (Jessee 1984, 304), and since then had witnessed the gifts of speaking and singing in tongues (Nickerson 1834, 134); possibly his letter to Taylor had touched on this.

⁶ See Alexander 1976, 57–59, for Wilford Woodruff's similar conversion after a period of schooling in Christian primitivism.