

Book of Commandments and Book of Doctrine and Covenants

THE LATE PRESIDENT JOSEPH SMITH

A good deal of unnecessary distrust is thrown upon the Book of Doctrine and Covenants by ill-advised persons, who, if they were better informed would neither distress themselves, nor disturb others, by giving undue prominence to the Book of Commandments.

The Book of Commandments was a small work which Elder W. W. Phelps began to print at Independence in 1833. It was unfinished at the time the press was destroyed by a mob in July, 1833, and remained unfinished, the last form going no further than the 47th paragraph of the 65th section; a revelation dated Kirtland, Ohio, September, 1831. It was a long ways in those days from Kirtland to Independence, times were troublous, and the methods of doing all sorts of business were less pronounced and accurate than now. The originals of the revelations were at Kirtland in the custody of the Presidents of the church; printing at Independence being done from transcribed copies. (See Footnote A.)

FOOTNOTE-A

In an effort to prove that the Book of Commandments was completed and published. it is claimed that the book was copyrighted. Argument is then made that in securing a copyright two complete copies must be filed with the office. Citation is made to a modern popular law book for proof. But that proves nothing. The law was quite different in 1833. At that time it was only necessary to file copy of the title, and a copy of the text need not be filed with the clerk until three months after date of publication. This was according to the act of February 3, 1831. By the Act of August 10, 1846, the delivery of one copy to the Smithsonian Institution and one to the Librarian of Congress was made necessary within three months from date of publication. (See Corpus Juris, p. 1072 under heading "Copyright and Literary Property," published by (American Law Book Company.) At the time when the Book of Commandments was copyrighted in 1833, it was necessary to file the title as a preliminary step to secure a copyright. Evidently that was all that was done. No evidence has yet been produced that the text of the Book of Commandments was ever filed. Joseph Gambel, clerk of the United States District Court, is quoted as follows:

"Be it remembered that on this thirteenth day of February in the year of our Lord, one thousand eight hundred and thirty three, W. W. Phelps & Co., have deposited in the office of the United States District Court for the Missouri District, the title of a book, the right thereof, then claim as authors and proprietors in the words and figures following, to-wit:

"A Book of Commandments for the government of the Church of Christ organized according to law on the sixth day of April, 1830. 'Zion's Advocate,' Vol. 2, No 6, p. 6."

A certificate is associated with this copy, signed by H. G. Geisberg, Edwin R. Durham, clerk, saying:

"I, Edwin R. Durham,...do hereby certify that the foregoing is a full, true and correct copy of the copyright of the book therein mentioned, as the same remains on record in my office. 'Zion's Advocate,' Vol. 2, No. 6, pp, 6, 7."

The foregoing proves only that the title was filed. And even had it appeared that the entire text now composing the Book of Commandments had been filed for copyright, that would not have insured the correctness of the text.

A council was held at Independence, Missouri, May 1st, 1832, Joseph Smith being present; at which council it was decided that William W. Phelps, Oliver Cowdery, and John Whitmer, should review and prepare such revelations as were deemed proper for publication, and that W. W. Phelps and company should publish the book. This Phelps and company undertook to do; which work was stopped in 1833 as already stated.

Nothing further was done in the way of attempting to publish the revelations in compiled form until September 24, 1834, something over a year after the destruction of the press at Independence. There was no official copy of the Book of Commandments in existence. Some of the brethren who were in the town when the press was destroyed, the type and paper, including the printed sheets of the Book of Commandments, thrown into the street and scattered, picked up what they wanted, and had them bound; some even binding them in paper covers themselves. These fragmentary copies thus picked up are the ones over which there has been and is so much caviling. (See Footnote B.)

At a General Assembly held at Kirtland, September 24, 1834, the matter was again taken under advisement and a new committee consisting of Joseph Smith, Jr., Oliver Cowdery, Sidney Rigdon and Frederick G. Williams, was appointed. The minutes of that meeting show the following:

The Assembly being duly organized, and after transacting certain business of the church, proceeded to appoint a committee to arrange the items of doctrine of Jesus Christ, for the government of the Church of Latter Day Saints, which church was organized and commenced its rise on the 6th of April, 1830. These items are to be taken from the Bible, Book of Mormon, and the revelations which have been given to said church up to this date, or shall be until such arrangement is made.

FOOTNOTE-B

David Whitmer is quoted as saying that the Book of Commandments was complete and that he had a complete copy bound in paper. And be it remembered, however, that David Whitmer testified on this point more than fifty years after event. The fact that his copy was paper bound would indicate that it was temporary, an arrangement of pages so far as the printers had gone when the mob interrupted their work.

Oliver Cowdery was one of the committee appointed in May, 1832, whose duty was to "review and prepare" the revelations, etc.; he was one of the clerks at the meeting of September 24th, 1834, and was one of the committee then appointed to "arrange the items of doctrine," etc., from the Bible, Book of Mormon, and the revelations then given, and those that might be given during the time that the committee were doing their work. See *Messenger and Advocate*, vol.1, no.11; also *Times and Seasons*, vol.5, no.16, p.625.

Those who are disturbing themselves and others treat of the Book of Commandments of 1833, as if it were of a more sacred and infallible character than the Doctrine and Covenants of 1835. That the men engaged in the work of preparing the matter and publishing both books did not think so is clear. In the

eighth number of the *Messenger and Advocate*, for May, 1835, Oliver Cowdery himself being the editor, there appears the following editorial in regard to the then forthcoming book:

These lectures [Lectures on Faith-Editor] are being compiled and arranged with other documents of instruction and regulation for the church, titled "Doctrine and Covenants of the Church of Latter Day Saints," etc. it may be well, for the information of the churches abroad, to say, that this book will contain the important revelations on doctrine and church government now extant, and will, we trust, give them a perfect understanding of the doctrine believed by this society. Such a work has long been called for, and if we are prospered a few weeks, shall have this volume ready for distribution. A full detail of its contents will be given hereafter.

In the reprint of the *Evening and Morning Star*, published at Kirtland, Ohio, and of which Oliver Cowdery was editor, in the first number of volume two, page 196, prefacing an extract from the Book of Mormon, the editor says:

We have again inserted the articles and covenants according to our promise in a previous number, for the benefit of our brethren abroad who have not the first number of the first volume. As there were some errors which got into them by transcribing, we have since obtained the original copy and made the necessary corrections.

No one could know whether there were errors in the first publication of the Commandments better than Oliver Cowdery who was a member of both the first and the second committees on their preparation and compilation.

In the prospectus for the second volume of the *Evening and Morning Star* it is stated in reference to the revelations and commandments as given in the *Star* before:

It is also proper for us to say, that in the first fourteen numbers, in the revelations, are many errors, typographical, and others, occasioned by transcribing manuscript, but as we shall have access to originals, we shall endeavor to make proper corrections.

On August 17th, 1835, two years after the destruction of the press, at Independence, and one after the appointment of the compiling committee of which we have given the names, the church met at Kirtland, to bear and act upon the report of the committee.

John Whitmer, Oliver Cowdery and W. W. Phelps, all of the members of the first committee were present, Oliver Cowdery and Sidney Rigdon presiding, W. W. Phelps and John Whitmer, acting as presidents of the High Council.

After the assembly was organized and had met after the noon recess, the committee, through Oliver Cowdery made their report, and the compilation of Articles of Faith, revelations and commandments, under the title of the "Book of Doctrine and Covenants" was introduced for consideration, acceptance or rejection.

Joseph Smith and F. G. Williams were absent, and Sidney Rigdon for the committee stated the manner in which it was proposed to "obtain the voice of the assembly for or against said book."

W. W. Phelps, the man who printed the Book of Commandments in 1833, at Independence was the first one to testify that the book was true; John Whitmer, one of the first committee, was the second one that testified that the book was true; thus verifying the action of the last appointed committee in making the corrections, which so much has been said about. The book as an entirety, and as presented to the assembly by Oliver Cowdery, on the part of the committee, was then properly voted upon and unanimously adopted and ordered printed. The articles on marriage and governments, were then presented and also adopted by the unanimous vote of the assembly, and also ordered to be printed in the Book of Covenants.

It will be noticed that Joseph Smith and F. G. Williams, two of the last committee on preparation and compilation, were not present, but all of the first committee were; and all had a first and prominent part in setting the completed compilation, with the corrections made in the unfinished Book of Commandments of 1833 in it, before the people; Oliver Cowdery presenting it, W. W. Phelps and John Whitmer both testifying that it was true.

With this in view, it must either be supposed that these three men were quite satisfied that there were imperfections in their work of two years before which should be corrected as the last committee did correct them, and to the truth of which they testified; or they were great moral cowards, and did not dare to call attention to the impropriety of such corrections before the committee, nor oppose them when the book was brought up for final action. The latter is an improper and unsafe proposition; for the reason that if the moral courage and integrity of those men are attacked, little, or no value can properly attach to their testimony in regard to the work in any of its phases. It was an easy matter for mistakes to be made, and errors to occur, in transcribing for the printer, and in proofreading; as it is even now an easy thing. Such mistakes and errors would not in any sense affect the integrity of either of the men; but to charge them with being moral cowards, and parties to a deliberate changing of the revelations by Joseph Smith, or Sidney Rigdon, would seriously damage them in the estimation of right thinking people.

In an address to the patrons of the *Messenger and Advocate* for March, 1836, John Whitmer, among other things stated by him, bears the following stirring testimony to the work of the Lord:

Therefore I desire to testify to all that will come to the knowledge of this address; that I have most assuredly seen the plates from whence the Book of Mormon is translated, and that I have handled these plates, and know of a surety that Joseph Smith, Jr., has translated the Book of Mormon by the gift and power of God, and in this thing the wisdom of the wise most assuredly has perished. . . .

The revelations and commandments given to us, are, in my estimation, equally true with the Book of Mormon, and equally necessary for salvation, it is necessary to live by every word that proceedeth from the mouth of God; and I know that the Bible, Book of Mormon, and Book of Doctrine and Covenants of the Church of Christ of Latter Day Saints, contain the revealed will of heaven. --*Messenger and Advocate*, vol.2, no.6, p.286, 287.

This address was written upon the occasion of Elder John Whitmer leaving the editorial charge of the paper to be succeeded by Elder O. Cowdery.

This endorsement of the Book of Covenants three years after the attempt to publish the commandments at Independence, Missouri, by one of the committee, and in such strong terms, is striking proof of the correctness of the published work of 1835. (See Footnote C.)

FOOTNOTE-C

Granville Hedrick, President of the "Church of Christ," seems to have recognized the superior claims of the Book of Doctrine and Covenants and in many places defended it. As for example:

"Here, then, we have it proved positively that the Bible, and Book of Mormon, and Doctrine and Covenants are the things referred to containing the foundations of the new and everlasting covenant. Blessed be God, for them" ;--Spiritual Wife system proven false; and the True Order of Church Discipline, p. 33.

"Read the Bible, Book of Mormon, and Book of Covenants, and obey the Lord Jesus Christ, according to the things that are written in these three inspired books, and as many as will do these things, shall enjoy the Spirit of Jesus Christ the Son of God, and be saved in his everlasting Kingdom."--Pages 89, 90.

"In these three inspired books, we have heaven's plan, God's will to fallen man."--Page 17.

"These three above named inspired volumes were received by the whole church of Christ, as established anew again by Joseph Smith, to be the rock, and pillar, and ground-work of their faith and doctrine in Jesus Christ, in the first days and years of this identical church of Jesus Christ; hence we have the foundation of the church before us, of which I profess to be a member."--Pages 19, 20.

Both the "Church of Christ" and the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints in the Articles of Agreement adopted by their respective conferences in 1918 approved the 1835 edition of the Book of Doctrine and Covenants.

Upon the proposition that the first committee was chosen and acted by inspiration in their work of "reviewing and preparing" the revelations, and for that reason the intercepted work was of more excellent quality and more reliable than the work of the second committee, the action of the same members of the first committee in testifying to the correctness and truth of the book when the work of the second committee was reported for action at the Assembly of August, 1835, is not easily explainable. The second committee is entitled to the same consideration and credit for fairness, ability, reliability, and inspiration that the first one was; especially so, as Oliver Cowdery was on both committees, and can not be supposed to be any more inspired while acting with the first than he was with the second. The fact seems to be clearly apparent that the men engaged in the work of publishing the revelations to the church, the items agreed upon as doctrine and the belief and position of the ministry on subjects of grave importance to the church and the world for whose salvation the gospel was again revealed, did their work conscientiously, honestly and fearlessly; and this must be true of all of them.

Another thing is equally true, the Book of Commandments was never received and issued authoritatively by the church, the Book of Doctrine and Covenants, was. The last comes to us having the sanction of the church obtained in solemn assembly; the first does not.

In view of what is heretofore written we see no plausible reason why we should consent to correct the perfected work of the committee of 1834, and the assembly of 1835, by the incomplete and unfinished the work of the committee of 1832-3 and W. W. Phelps & Company, publishers; especially when we

have the unbroken, unchallenged endorsement of the whole of the first committee for the work of the last.-THE SAINTS' HERALD, January 23, 1892, vol. 39, no.4, p.50.

[The footnotes in this pamphlet were not written by President Joseph Smith. They were inserted when the article was prepared for publication in pamphlet form.]