

MANCHESTER, Oct. 17, 1830.

I, Oliver, being commanded of the Lord God, to go forth unto the Lamanites, to proclaim glad tidings of great joy unto them, by presenting unto them the fulness of the Gospel, of the only begotten son of God; and also, to rear up a pillar as a witness where the Temple of God shall be built, in the glorious New-Jerusalem; and having certain brothers with me, who are called of God to assist me, whose names are Parley, Peter and Ziba, do therefore most solemnly covenant before God, that I will walk humbly before him, and do this business, and this glorious work according as he shall direct me by the Holy Ghost; ever praying for mine and their prosperity, and deliverance from bonds, and from imprisonments, and whatsoever may befall us, with all patience and faith.—Amen.

OLIVER COWDERY.

We, the undersigned, being called and commanded of the Lord God, to accompany our Brother Oliver Cowdery, to go to the Lamanites, and to assist in the above mentioned glorious work and business. We do, therefore, most solemnly covenant before God, that we will assist him faithfully in this thing, by giving heed unto all his words and advice, which is, or shall be given him by the spirit of truth, ever praying with all prayer and supplication, for our and his prosperity, and our deliverance from bonds, and imprisonments, and whatsoever may come upon us, with all patience and faith.—Amen.

Signed in presence of

JOSEPH SMITH, Jun.
DAVID WHITMER,
P. P. PRATT,
ZIBA PETERSON,
PETER WHITMER.

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Light on the “Mission to the Lamanites”

The 1831 expulsion of Mormon missionaries from Indian territory and their subsequent proposal to establish territorial schools are documented in letters from the contending parties.

Leland H. Gentry

In September 1830, the Lord called Oliver Cowdery by revelation to “go unto the Lamanites and preach my gospel unto them” (D&C 28:8). The call came a few months after the United States Congress had passed the Indian Removal Bill, an act providing for the relocation of all tribes within United States borders to points beyond. Long a vigorous proponent of such an act, President Andrew Jackson had signed the bill into law on May 28, 1830.¹

In late September 1830, the second conference of the Church convened in Fayette, New York. Before Church leaders left that conference, Joseph Smith received a revelation instructing Peter Whitmer Jr. to accompany Oliver on this mission (D&C 30:5). News of these calls and of the missionaries’ imminent departure stirred the thoughts of a number of the elders, who realized “that the purposes of God were great” regarding the Lamanites and hoped “that the time had come when the promises of the Almighty in regard to them were about to be accomplished.”² They inquired of the Lord respecting the “propriety of increasing the number of Elders to go among them”³ and received a revelation calling Parley P. Pratt and Ziba Peterson to join the mission to the Lamanites (D&C 32:2-3). When the missionaries arrived in Kirtland, Ohio, Frederick G. Williams, a recent convert, was added to the list.⁴ Oliver Cowdery and Peter Whitmer Jr. were eyewitnesses to the existence of the golden plates, while the other missionaries had stories of conversion that they could relate.

The phrase “borders of the Lamanites” was uniquely Mormon and referred to the boundary line between the western edge of Missouri and present-day Kansas. The Shawnee and Delaware tribes of Ohio, foreseeing the inevitable, had reluctantly vacated their lands in 1828 and 1829 and resettled west of the confluence of the Missouri and Kansas rivers.⁵ The nearest white settlement was the newly platted village of Independence, Missouri, the seat of government for Jackson County.⁶

While this missionary call was welcome news to many members of the Church, no doubt those who shared the popular belief that Indians were thieves and murderers were apprehensive. However, faith in God and trust in the fulfillment of the positive promises he had made prevailed. The newly called missionaries set forth on their journey from New York to Missouri in October 1830.⁷

Following a journey of some fifteen hundred miles, much of it by foot through heavy snow, the missionaries arrived in Independence on January 13, 1831.⁸ “Two of our number now commenced work as tailors in the village of Independence,” wrote Parley P. Pratt, “while the others crossed the frontier line and commenced a mission among the Lamanites.” Following a brief visit to the Shawnees, the travelers “crossed the Kansas River and entered among the Delawares.”⁹

Here the missionaries enjoyed temporary success as well as a lengthy conversation with the chief, William Anderson.¹⁰ Precisely how long the visits continued is not known, but Richard W. Cummins,¹¹ the Indian agent, learned about the elders’ activities and ordered them to desist and leave at once.¹² Government regulations forbade work among the Indians without a special permit¹³ issued by the superintendent of Indian affairs, a regulation with which the elders had failed to comply. Parley Pratt later reported that Cummins was a “difficult man” who carried the law to its extreme and was “some what strenuous respecting our having liberty to visit our brethren the Lamanites.”¹⁴

The elders left as ordered but not before vowing to return. Elder Pratt attributed their eviction to “the jealousy and envy of the Indian agents and sectarian missionaries.”¹⁵ The likelihood that some warm discussion may have ensued between the missionaries and those opposed to their work is suggested by Parley when he

reports that the elders "were soon ordered out of the Indian country as disturbers of the peace; and even threatened with the military in case of non-compliance."¹⁶ The missionaries crossed the river into Missouri and commenced work among the whites. Here, according to Parley, "we were well received, and listened to by many; and some were baptized and added to the Church."¹⁷

On February 14, 1831, Oliver Cowdery wrote to General William Clark,¹⁸ the superintendent of Indian affairs in St. Louis, requesting permission to "have free intercourse with the several tribes" in order to establish schools and Christian instruction for Indian children, one of the principal enterprises being pursued among Indian tribes by many Christian denominations. The following day, Major Richard Cummins wrote a letter of his own explaining his reasons for evicting the men. Both letters represent the earliest written documentation of the Mormon missionaries' actual visit among the Delawares. After the letters' discovery in the Kansas State Historical Society in Topeka among the papers of General William Clark, the body of Major Cummins's letter and the main paragraph of Elder Cowdery's letter were published in the *Kansas Historical Quarterly* in 1971.¹⁹ To make them more accessible to those interested in Mormon history, we have printed them below in their entirety.

One of the chief historical values of these letters is their corroboration of the missionaries' claim that they did enter Shawnee and Delaware lands and did preach to the Indians. In addition, Cummins's letter contains the earliest written indication of the Latter-day Saints' interest in the Rocky Mountain region. His letter portrays five men determined to carry out a divinely appointed mission and an equally adamant Indian agent determined to comply with federal regulations. His letter explains the reasons for his refusal to permit the men to proceed, as well as his personal observation that they were "strange." Oliver Cowdery's letter is a simple plea for permission to proceed as planned. As far as is known, no answer to either letter was ever received.

Parley Pratt returned to Ohio, but the rest of the missionaries remained near Independence until the arrival of Joseph Smith and party the following July. In the meantime, the missionaries' interest in the Native Americans did not falter. In writing from Kaw

Township on the western border of Missouri on May 7, 1831, Oliver reported to his brethren in the East that he had recently learned "of another tribe of Lamanites" living about "three hundred miles west of Santa Fe, and are called Navashoes [Navajos]." Oliver indicated that he mentioned this tribe because "I feel under obligation to communicate to my brethren any information concerning the Lamanites that I meet with in my labors and travels."²⁰

After the missionaries' unsuccessful petition for a license to establish a school, Church leaders considered other possible avenues for extending contact to the Indians, but these efforts met with little success. A revelation received in July 1831 instructed Sidney Gilbert to "establish a store" and apply for a license to trade or "send goods also unto the Lamanites . . . and then the gospel may be preached unto them."²¹ An unpublished revelation given to Joseph Smith that same month expressed the will that the Saints "in time" should marry Indian women. According to apostate Ezra Booth, intermarriage was to enable Mormon missionaries to "gain a residence" in Indian country,²² but according to W. W. Phelps, its purpose was that the posterity of the Lamanites and Nephites "become white, delightsome and just."²³

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NOTES

¹Robert V. Remini, *Andrew Jackson and the Course of American Freedom, 1822-1832*, 3 vols. (New York: Harper and Row, 1981), 2:263.

²Joseph Smith Jr., *History of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, ed. B. H. Roberts, 2d ed., rev., 7 vols. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1971), 1:118 (hereafter cited as *History of the Church*).

³*History of the Church*, 1:118, n. *.

⁴*History of the Church*, 1:125.

⁵Ray Allen Billington, *Westward Expansion: A History of the American Frontier*, 3d ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1967), 470-71.

⁶Parley P. Pratt Jr., ed., *The Autobiography of Parley P. Pratt*, 4th ed. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1985), 53, 58; Lamar C. Berrett, "Independence, Missouri," in *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, ed. Daniel H. Ludlow, 5 vols. (New York: Macmillan, 1992), 2:679.

⁷*History of the Church*, 1:118-25; Pratt, *Autobiography*, 47, 52; and Andrew Jenson, *Journal History of the Church*, October 1830, 7-9, Archives Division, Historical Department, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City (hereafter cited as LDS Church Archives).

⁸Jenson, *Journal History of the Church*, January 29, 1831, 2, LDS Church Archives.

⁹Pratt, *Autobiography*, 53.

¹⁰Pratt, *Autobiography*, 53-57. William Anderson, a half-breed member of the Turkey clan of Delaware Indians whose Indian name was *Kikthawenung* (Creaking Boughs), became the principal chief of the Delaware Indians around 1805. Thomas Dean, a Quaker who visited Anderson in 1817, described him as "a plain but majestic looking old man." Anderson was a non-Christian. He moved to Kansas in the fall of 1830, only a few months before the missionaries arrived. He died in October 1831. C. A. Weslager, *The Delaware Indian Westward Migration* (Wallingford, Pa: Middle Atlantic, 1978), 51, 58, 62-63, 71, 217, 219.

¹¹In addition to his role as Indian agent, Cummins was actively involved in Missouri politics. He participated in the Missouri Constitutional Convention and in the Missouri State Senate in 1822. Warren A. Jennings, "The First Mormon Mission to the Indians," *Kansas Historical Quarterly*, 37 (August 1971): 297, n. 41.

¹²Pratt, *Autobiography*, 57.

¹³The Intercourse Act of 1802 did not specifically address missionary work. Christian missionaries operated dozens of schools among the Indians in the 1820s and 1830s. The act did, however, prohibit American citizens from entering Indian country "without a passport." The act provided, moreover, "that no such citizen, or other person, shall be permitted to reside at any of the towns, or hunting camps, of any of the Indian tribes as a trader, without a license under the hand and seal of the superintendent of the department." Congress by this act also authorized the military "to apprehend every person who shall, or may be found in the Indian country . . . in violation of any of the provisions or regulations of this act." The act was enforced on a selective basis. Wilcomb E. Washburn, *The American Indian and the United States: A Documentary History*, 4 vols. (New York: Random House, 1973), 3:2154-63; Francis Paul Prucha, *The Great Father: The United States Government and the American Indians*, 2 vols. (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1984), 1:89-98, 108-114, 151-54.

¹⁴*Messenger and Advocate*, October 1835.

¹⁵Pratt, *Autobiography*, 57.

¹⁶Pratt, *Autobiography*, 57.

¹⁷Pratt, *Autobiography*, 57.

¹⁸William Clark, best known for his involvement in the Lewis and Clark expedition, also served as Indian agent for Louisiana Territory and as governor for the territory of Missouri. Following his unsuccessful bid for the governorship of the new state of Missouri in 1820, Clark was appointed superintendent of Indian affairs, with headquarters in St. Louis. He held this position until he died in 1838. Jerome O. Steffen, *William Clark: Jeffersonian Man on the Frontier* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1977).

¹⁹Jennings, "First Mormon Mission to the Indians," 298.

²⁰*History of the Church*, 1:182.

²¹“Book of Commandments, Laws, and Covenants,” Book B, LDS Church Archives, and Joseph Smith’s Kirtland Revelation Book, verses 9b and 10, LDS Archives, quoted in Robert J. Woodford, “The Historical Development of the Doctrine and Covenants,” 3 vols. (Ph.D. diss., Brigham Young University, 1974), 2:728, 731.

²²*Ohio Star*, December 8, 1831, 1; David J. Whittaker, “Mormons and Native Americans: A Historical and Bibliographical Introduction,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 18 (winter 1985): 35.

²³W. W. Phelps to Brigham Young, report of Joseph Smith revelation, July 17, 1831, Revelations Collection, LDS Church Archives.

Letters to General William Clark, Superintendent of Indian Affairs

Independence, Jackson County
Missouri, Feb. 14, 1831

The Superintendent of Indian Affairs

Sir,

While I address your honour by this communication I do it with much pleasure understanding it pleasing your honour to countenance every exertion made by the philanthropist for the instruction of the Indian in the arts of civilized life which is a sure productive of the Gospel of Christ.

As I have been appointed by a society of Christians in the State of New York to superintend the establishing Missions among the Indians I doubt not but I shall have the approbation of your honour and a permit for myself and all who may be recommended to me by that Society to have free intercourse with the several tribes in establishing schools for the instruction of their children and also teaching them the Christian religion without intruding or interfering with any other Mission now established.

With much esteem I subscribe your honor's

Humble Servant

(Signed)

Oliver Cowdery

Delaware & Shawanee Agency

15th. February 1831

Genl. Wm. Clark
Superintendent
Indian Affairs

Sir,

A few days agoe three Men all Strangers to me went among the Indians Shawanees & Delawares, they say for the purpose of preaching to and Instructing them in Religious Matters, they say they are sent by God and must proceed, they have a new Revelation with them, as there Guide in teaching the Indians, which they say was shown to one of their Sects in a Miraculous way, and that an Angel from Heaven appeared to one of their Men and two others of their Sect, and shewed them that the work was from God, and much more &c. I have refused to let them stay or, go among the Indians unless they first obtain permission from you or, some of the officers of the Genl. Government who I am bound to obey. I am informed that they intend to apply to you for permission to go among the Indians, if you refuse, then they will go to the Rocky Mountains, but what they will be with the Indians. The Men act very strange; there came on five to this place, they say, four from the State of New York, and one from Ohio.

Respectfully Your
most Obdnt. Srvnt.

(Signed)

Richd. W. Cummins
Ind. Agent.