

“The devil has great power to deceive; he will so transform things as to make one gape at those who are doing the will of God.”

(Joseph Smith addressing the Relief Society April 28, 1842) (*Scriptural Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, arranged by Joseph Fielding Smith and annotated by Richard C. Galbraith (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1993), p. 256.)

Introduction

Deception was a reoccurring problem among the members of the early church. Between July 1830 through June 1831 the Lord gave at least five major sections of the Doctrine & Covenants to correct misunderstanding, false prophets, false leaders, false revelations and false spirits so that the members would not be deceived. In most of these situations the sincere, faithful seekers found security in the Lord as he answered their vexing concerns. For those that fell prey to the deceptions of Satan the Lord rebuked them sharply and then returned to them with increased love and compassion. In some cases false spirits or disturbing spiritual manifestations were rebuked by Joseph Smith, who then taught by inspiration from God various keys to discern the truth. In this article we will review the historical context of these various situations as a way to more fully appreciate the sections assigned to this lesson (D&C 26, 28, 43, 50 and 52) and integrate the revealed principles into our lives.

The Questions Begin—D&C 26

In July 1830 Oliver Cowdery traveled from the home of Joseph and Emma Smith in Harmony, Pennsylvania nearly 100 miles to the home of Peter Whitmer, Sr. in Fayette, New York. ((The Whitmer home was the site of the organization of the church on April 6, 1830. The church was still in its infancy at this stage (3 months young) when Oliver returned to Fayette.)) Upon arrival in Fayette, Oliver took up the task to copy and arrange the revelations Joseph had received. (*History of the Church* 1:104.) While engaged in this labor Oliver believed that he had discovered an error in one of the commandments, ((The passage in question is found in D&C 20:37.)) which reads, “and truly manifest by their works that they have received of the Spirit of Christ unto a remission of their sins.” Oliver then wrote an authoritarian letter to Joseph demanding that he correct the error, saying, “I command you in the name of God to erase those words, that no priestcraft be amongst us!” (*History of the Church* 1:105.) So convinced that the verse was in error that Oliver succeeded to persuade the Whitmer family as well to believe it was in error. This sudden incident and division perplexed Joseph greatly. He left from Harmony and traveled to Fayette with the intent to resolve the many problems and questions highlighted by this incident—the problem of inciting division in the church, the problem of adding to or diminishing from the word of God, the question of the correctness of a revelation, the question of who is to receive revelation for the Church and the question of who is to speak in the name of the Lord unto the Church. With great patience and perseverance Joseph helped Oliver and the Whitmers understand that the disputed phrase accorded with revealed doctrine. Joseph understood the tutoring nature of this incident,

And thus was this error rooted out, which having its rise in presumption and rash judgment, was the more particularly calculated (when once fairly understood) to teach each and all of us the necessity of humility and meekness before the Lord, that He might teach us of His ways, that we might walk in His paths, and live by every word that proceedeth forth from his mouth. (*History of the Church* 1:105.)

It is interesting to note that this incident occurred only a few weeks after Joseph and Oliver had received D&C 26, which states, “And all things shall be done by common consent in the church, by much prayer and faith, for all things you shall receive by faith. Amen.” As we shall momentarily see, this lesson was to be repeated several more times for individual members and for the church in general.

Questions of Order Continue—D&C 28

Joseph and Emma moved to Fayette in late August 1830 at the invitation of Peter Whitmer, Sr., who knew of the persecutions and difficulties facing Joseph in Harmony Pennsylvania. ((The Prophet records in *History of the Church* 1:108 that a prominent minister from Harmony, Pennsylvania spoke lies and falsehoods about Joseph to Isaac Hale, Joseph’s father-in-law. From this time forward, Mr. Hale could no longer promise protection for the Prophet. “Joseph had at this time just completed a house, which he had built on a small farm that he had purchased of his father-in-law; however, he locked up his house with his furniture in it, and repaired with Emma immediately to Manchester (NY)” Quote in *The Revised and Enhanced History of Joseph Smith by His Mother*, edited by Scot Facer Proctor & Maurine Jensen Proctor (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1996), p. 234.)) Unfortunately, not many more days passed before another trying incident arose in the Church over who was to receive revelations in the name of the Lord. Again, the predicament occurred in Fayette, New York involving the same parties as before, namely the Whitmers and Oliver Cowdery, but this time Hiram Page instigated the problem.

Hiram Page had arrived in Fayette in the mid 1820’s after receiving education as a medical doctor and traveling throughout Canada and New York practicing his profession. In November 1825 he married Catherine Whitmer, the daughter of Peter Whitmer, Sr. and Mary Musselman Whitmer. ((Lyndon W. Cook, *The Revelations of the Prophet Joseph Smith: A Historical and Biographical Commentary of the Doctrine and Covenants* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1985), p. 40.)) In June 1829 Hiram Page was among the eight who signed their names as witnesses unto the world that the Book of Mormon is true. Oliver Cowdery baptized Hiram and his wife Catherine on Sunday, April 11, 1830 about one week after the organization of the Church of Jesus Christ. ((*History of the Church* 1:81. The formation of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints was on Tuesday, April 6, 1830.))

According to the primary sources Hiram Page had a stone through which he claimed to receive revelations from God. Joseph Smith elaborated upon the situation in the *History of the Church*:

We soon found that Satan had been lying in wait to deceive, and seeking whom he might devour. Brother Hiram Page had in his possession a certain stone, by which he had obtained certain “revelations” concerning the upbuilding of Zion, the order of the Church, etc., all of which were entirely at variance with the order of God’s house, as laid down in the New Testament, as well as in our late revelations. ((See D&C 26:1-2 given to Joseph Smith, Oliver Cowdery and John Whitmer in July 1830. Ironically, this was the second incident in as many months after receiving D&C 26 that Oliver Cowdery was involved with the Whitmers in ecclesiastical controversy.)) As a conference meeting had been appointed for the 26th day of September [1830], I thought it wisdom not do much more than to converse with the brethren on the subject, until the conference should meet. Finding, however, that many, especially the Whitmer family and Oliver Cowdery, ((It is important to remember that the Whitmer Family and Oliver Cowdery comprised some of the most prominent and important members of the young church at this time.)) were believing much in the things set forth by this stone, we thought best to inquire of the Lord concerning so important a matter... ((*History of the Church* 1:109-110.))

Newel Knight, who had aided Joseph and Emma by bringing them to Fayette from Harmony in his wagon, spent the night with Joseph when news of Hiram Page’s seerstone surfaced. In his personal diary Brother Knight records,

[Page] had managed to get up some discussions of feeling among the brethren by giving revelations concerning the government of the Church and other matters, which he claimed to have received through the medium of a stone he possessed. . . . Even Oliver Cowdery and the Whitmer family had given heed to them. . . . Joseph was perplexed and scarcely knew how to meet this new exigency. That night I occupied the same room that he did and the greater part of the night was spent in prayer and supplication. After much labor with these brethren they were convinced of their error, and confessed the same, renouncing [Page’s] revelations as not being of God. ((As quoted in Cook’s *The Revelations of the Prophet Joseph Smith: A Historical and Biographical Commentary of the Doctrine and Covenants*, p. 39.))

The Lord Reproves and then Loves more Tenderly—D&C 28-29

It is appropriate that this revelation was directed towards Oliver Cowdery. The Lord even repeated the same admonition he had given Oliver in D&C 26:2, namely, “For all things must be done in order, and by common consent in the church, by the prayer of faith” (D&C 28:13). The Lord urged Oliver in this revelation to help settle the matter by talking with Hiram Page in private and to exhort Hiram to leave those things alone for “Satan deceiveth him” (D&C 28:11).

Clearly, the early saints struggled as they grew and progressed in their knowledge of the truth. In this weak state Satan sought to take advantage of their souls, while a loving God counseled and corrected those who erred, even repeatedly. We can all have mercy on Oliver as we come to more fully understand the Lord’s school of tutoring and teaching. Certainly Oliver needed to learn a lesson about order in the kingdom, but it was not Oliver alone that needed to learn these lessons. The church was not even yet six months old at that time period and all of the members were young in their knowledge of the doctrines and organization of the Restored Gospel. It is a credit to each of them that they repented of their mistakes and moved forward in building the kingdom of God.

Indeed, a few days later the Lord stated in a revelation directed towards Oliver and several others who had been deceived by Hiram Page, “Behold, verily, verily, I say unto you, that at this time your sins are forgiven you, therefore ye receive these things; but remember to sin no more, lest perils shall come upon you” (D&C 29:3). ((It is important to note that this revelation was received in the home of Peter Whitmer, Sr. and among those who were in attendance when Joseph received this revelation were many of those who had recently been deceived by the so-called ‘seerstone’ of Hiram page, such as Oliver Cowdery, David Whitmer, John Whitmer and Peter Whitmer.)) It is clear that the Lord had forgiven Oliver Cowdery of his mistakes for the Lord also revealed in D&C 28:8 that Oliver Cowdery was to accomplish a great mission unto the Lamanites who lived on the western confines of the United States (what was then Missouri). This Oliver did faithfully and at great sacrifice together with Peter Whitmer, Ziba Peterson and Parley Pratt. These brethren endured great hardships and privations from November 1830 - February 1831 as they sacrificed to make the 1000 mile trek to western Missouri. They lived far away from family, friends, home and brotherly associations in the church until an appointed Mormon migration of the Colesville saints brought a large number of members to the regions of western Missouri in July 1831 some 8 months after Oliver and his companions had left the main body of saints behind to complete their divinely inspired mission.

Hiram Page Deception Resolved at General Conference

Sections 28 and 29 of the Doctrine and Covenants were received about the time the September 1830 general conference was held. Joseph Smith said of this time:

At length our conference assembled. The subject of the stone previously mentioned was discussed, and after considerable investigation, Brother Page, as well as the whole Church who were present, renounced the said stone, and all things connected therewith, much to our mutual satisfaction and happiness. We now partook of the Sacrament, confirmed and ordained many, and attended to a great variety of Church business on the first and the two following days of the conference, during which time we had much of the power of God manifested amongst us; the Holy Ghost came upon us, and filled us with joy unspeakable; and peace, and faith, and hope and charity abounded in our midst. ((*History of the Church* 1:115.))

Marvelous Church Growth in Ohio

We mentioned just a moment ago that Oliver Cowdery accompanied Parley Pratt and two other brethren on a mission to the Lamanites. In the course of their travels they passed through Mentor, Ohio in November 1830. ((Mentor, Ohio is about 3 miles to the north of Kirtland, Ohio.)) There they met and shared the gospel with Sidney Rigdon, the respected and influential leader of a large congregation of “Disciples of Christ.” ((The “Disciples of Christ” were also known as the “Campbellites” a group founded by Alexander Campbell. He was “deeply influenced by John Locke and Scottish Common Sense Realism, [and] he taught that a rational study of the biblical text revealed the essential facts of primitive Christian faith.” *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, edited by F.L. Cross (Oxford: University Press, 1997), 3rd edition, p. 273. These ideas led to a belief that the true Christian church needed to be patterned after the primitive Christian church, which ultimately influenced Sidney and others of his congregation to readily accept the Gospel message that the truth had been restored together with the order of the primitive Christian church.)) Let us take a moment to learn of the important connection Parley Pratt had with Sidney Rigdon and the powerful role that connection played in the growth of the church.

Parley began living in Ohio around 1825 and he joined Brother Rigdon’s congregation in late 1829. In August of 1830 Parley felt deep stirrings to share the gospel with others so he packed his bags and headed to eastern New York to visit and share with his family. Parley’s righteous desire would forever change his life. En route the spirit impressed upon him to stop in the region of Rochester, New York. ((It is important to remember that Rochester, New York was less than 30 miles from Palmyra, New York where the Book of Mormon had recently been published. *The Autobiography of Parley P. Pratt, Revised and Enhanced Edition*, edited by Scot Facer Proctor & Maurine Jensen Proctor (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2000), pp. 27-28.)) By September 1830 Parley had found a copy of the Book of Mormon, read through it entirely, came to know by the power of the Spirit that it was true and was baptized in Seneca Lake by Oliver Cowdery. Six weeks later Joseph Smith called him on a mission to the Lamanites on the western border of Missouri. It was natural for Parley to want to stop along the way in Mentor, Ohio to share with his former associates among the “Disciples of Christ.” Many accepted the message of truth, including such stalwarts as Edward Partridge, Sidney Rigdon, Isaac Morley, John Murdock and Lyman Wight. ((*The Autobiography of Parley P. Pratt, Revised and Enhanced Edition*, p. 52.)) Within a few weeks more than one hundred converts had joined the church due to the preaching of Parley, Oliver and their companions. ((*The Autobiography of Parley P. Pratt, Revised and Enhanced Edition*, p. 52.)) Three months later in February 1831, the New England and New York saints moved from to the new church headquarters

in Kirtland, Ohio to join with this large group of recent converts. This increase in membership among the Ohio residents occasioned the opportunity for lessons once taught to the New England/New York saints to be repeated again for the benefit of all.

Truth Worth Repeating—D&C 43

As the church grew in numbers the Lord saw the necessity to repeat truths and doctrines previously revealed as new converts grappled with similar issues that had once troubled other members when they were yet neophytes. Let’s listen to Joseph’s brief description of his first impression of the Ohio saints:

The latter part of January [1831], in company with Brothers Sidney Rigdon and Edward Partridge, I started with my wife for Kirtland, Ohio, where we arrived about the first of February, and we were kindly received and welcomed into the house of Brother Newel K. Whitney...

The branch of the Church in this part of the Lord’s vineyard...[was] striving to do the will of God, so far as they knew it, though some strange notions and false spirits had crept in among them. With a little caution and some wisdom, I soon assisted the brethren and sisters to overcome them. (*History of the Church* 1:145-146.)

Not many days after Joseph’s joined the saints in Kirtland, Ohio a woman by the name of Hubble came among them.

She professed to be a prophetess of the Lord, and professed to have many revelations, and knew the Book of Mormon was true, and that she should become a teacher in the church of Christ. She appeared to be very sanctimonious and deceived some who were not able to detect her in her hypocrisy; others, however had the spirit of discernment and her follies and abominations were manifest. (*History of the Church* note on 1:154.)

As on so many other occasions when a situation or question vexed the mind of Joseph he turned to God for light and truth. He explains that

A woman came making great pretensions of revealing commandments, laws and other curious matters; and as almost every person has advocates for both theory and practice, in the various notions and projects of the age, it became necessary to inquiry of the Lord... (*History of the Church* 1:154.)

In response to his request the Lord revealed D&C 43. In this section God first aroused the attention of the elders by commanding them to “hearken” and “give ear to the words” that he was about to share. Then the Lord reminded the elders that they had already received the law concerning situations involving those claiming to speak in the name of the Lord and claiming they receive revelations from God for the Church. The law mentioned in D&C 43:2 refers to the commandments given just a few days prior (now published as D&C 42). The Lord continues to clarify the truth by explaining,

Ye have received a commandment for a law unto my church, through him whom I have

appointed unto you to receive commandments and revelations from my hand. And this ye shall know assuredly—there is none other appointed unto you to receive commandments and revelations until he be taken...and this shall be a law unto you that ye receive not the teaching of any that shall come before you as revelations or commandments; and this I give unto you that you may not be deceived, that you may know they are not of me. (D&C 43:2-3, 5)

Trouble Continues to Disturb the Young Church—D&C 50

Parley Pratt returned in March 1831 from the Lamanite mission in Missouri to church headquarters in Kirtland, Ohio. During April and May of 1831 he accompanied other Elders of the church in visiting the various branches throughout Ohio to nurture, instruct and watch over the church. But all was not well in Zion. Parley describes the unsettling situation in the following way:

As I went forth among the different branches, some very strange spiritual operations were manifested, which were disgusting, rather than edifying. Some persons would seem to swoon away, and make unseemly gestures, and be drawn or disfigured in their countenances. Others would fall into ecstasies, and be drawn into contortions, cramp, fits, etc. Others would seem to have visions and revelations, which were not edifying, and which were not genial to the doctrine and the spirit of the gospel. In short, a false and lying spirit seemed to be creeping into the Church.

Feeling our weakness and inexperience, and lest we should err in judgment concerning these spiritual phenomena, myself, John Murdock, and several other Elders, went to Joseph Smith, and asked him to inquire of the Lord concerning these spirits or manifestations.

After we had joined prayer in his translating room, ((Joseph’s room where he worked on the translation of the Bible (a project he had commenced in the summer of 1830) was probably located at the prophet’s residence on the Morley farm or in a room at the schoolhouse to the northwest of the Morley home. *The Autobiography of Parley P. Pratt, Revised and Enhanced Edition*, p. 74, fn. 17.)) he dictated in our presence [D&C 50]. ((At this point in his autobiography Parley Pratt described in precise detail how Joseph received and recorded revelation. “Each sentence was uttered slowly and very distinctly, and with a pause between each, sufficiently long for it to be recorded, by an ordinary writer, in long hand. This was the manner in which all his written revelations were dictated and written. There was never any hesitation, reviewing, or reading back, in order to keep the run of the subject; neither did any of these communications undergo revisions, interlinings, or corrections. As he dictated them so they stood, so far as I have witnessed; and I was present to witness the dictation of several communications of several pages each.” *The Autobiography of Parley P. Pratt, Revised and Enhanced Edition*, pp. 70-72. This description is a priceless treasure.))

Even though the Lord had instructed the saints in D&C 46 concerning the various uses and ministrations of the Gifts of the Spirit several week prior to giving D&C 50, he did not withhold revelations from his faithful children who meekly and earnestly desired to know the truth. Thus D&C 50 was offered unto the diligent seekers.

A Pattern in All Things—D&C 52

Let us consider one final example from early church history where the Lord rebuked the powers of the Satan when he sought to deceive and lead the faithful astray. On June 3, 1831 the 4th general conference of the church convened at church headquarters in Kirtland, Ohio. Well over two thousand members were in attendance during the three days of meetings. Once again, we turn to the eyewitness account of Parley Pratt to describe the proceedings of the general conference:

In this conference much instruction was given by President Smith, who spake in great power, as he was moved by the Holy Ghost; and the spirit of power and of testimony rested down upon the Elder in a marvelous manner. Here also were some strange manifestations of false spirits, which were immediately rebuked. (*The Autobiography of Parley P. Pratt, Revised and Enhanced Edition*, p. 82.)

The day after this general conference section 52 was received where the Lord outlined a pattern by which the faithful saints could discern between those things that came from God and those things that came from Satan. In closing, let us ponder upon the Lord’s pattern that he has established so that we might learn together with the early saints of this church not to be deceived:

And again, I will give unto you a pattern in all things, that ye may not be deceived; for Satan is abroad in the land, and he goeth forth deceiving the nations—wherefore he that prayeth, whose spirit is contrite, the same is accepted of me if he obey mine ordinances. He that speaketh, whose spirit is contrite, whose language is meek and edifieth, the same is of God if he obey mine ordinances. And again, he that trembleth under my power shall be made strong, and shall bring forth fruits of praise and wisdom, according to the revelations and truths which I have given you. And again, he that is overcome and bringeth not forth fruits, even according to this pattern, is not of me. Wherefore, by this pattern ye shall know the spirits in all cases under the whole heavens. (D&C 52:14-19)