
Christian Restoration

Part 5: Campbellites and Mormons Intersect

As Narrated by Denver C. Snuffer, Jr.

Because both Campbellites and Mormons shared the ideal of restoring a pure religion, they were destined to intersect. Campbellite ministers Parley Pratt and Sidney Rigdon began the contact. Rigdon was a dynamic preacher and trusted follower of Alexander Campbell. Rigdon met the first Mormon missionaries as they passed through Ohio and was impressed enough with their message and the Book of Mormon to investigate the claims.

He traveled to New York met Joseph Smith and was entirely satisfied. He not only joined the movement, but quickly became one of the leaders of the new Mormon movement.

By the time Rigdon returned to Ohio, he was as fervent a Mormon as he had previously been a Campbellite. His charisma and eloquence quickly multiplied converts. The center of Mormonism moved from upper New York to Kirtland, Ohio.

Mormon success in Ohio came at the expense of the Campbellites, and provoked Alexander Campbell.

The Mormon-Campbellite intersection turned into an outright collision: Alexander Campbell wrote one of the earliest, and most scathing reviews of the Book of Mormon in 1831, titled *An analysis of the book of Mormon with an examination of its internal and external evidences, and a refutation of its pretenses to divine authority*. Campbell's attack was written the year after the Book of Mormon was first printed. He wrote: "Smith, its real author, as ignorant and impudent a knave as ever wrote a book, betrays the cloven foot in basing his whole book upon a false fact, or a pretended fact, which makes God a liar." He claimed both Smith and his followers were deluded by false spirits.

Joseph Smith responded, “while he is breathing out scurrility he is effectually showing the honest, the motives and principles by which he is governed, and often causes men to investigate and embrace the book of Mormon, who might otherwise never have perused it.” Smith continued: “I wish to inform him further, that as he has, for a length of time, smitten me upon one cheek, and I have offered no resistance, I have turned the other also, to obey the commandment of our Savior; and am content to sit awhile longer in silence and see the great work of God roll on, amid the opposition of this world in the face of every scandal and falsehood which may be invented and put in circulation.”

Mormonism benefitted from the attention Campbell brought it. It did “roll on amid the opposition” and grew throughout Joseph Smith’s lifetime. Mormon converts came from Canada, the United Kingdom and Europe during Smith’s lifetime.

Early Campbellite converts greatly influenced Joseph Smith. Rigdon’s leadership changed Mormonism. When it began, Mormonism was modeled after the Book of Mormon. Rigdon changed the priority to recovering the New Testament Church. Mormonism became preoccupied with organizational structure and administrative control. Even while Joseph Smith was still alive, his teachings and revelations became secondary and the church structure became primary. With Presidents, Apostles, Seventies, Bishops, Elders, Priests, Teachers and Deacons, Mormons began to hold rank and position with titles and governing prerogatives that came to define the religion. Authority in Mormonism, like in Roman Catholicism, became so central that revelation and God’s voice grew increasingly distant. A central hierarchy would doom Mormonism to the same destiny as Catholicism.