

Brigham Young and the Mission of Mormonism

Jed Woodworth

For the most part, Brigham Young chose to ignore his critics, but on occasion he personally responded to them. The letter printed below contains Brigham Young's 1869 answer to a newspaper editor's question, "What is the mission of the Mormons?" Mormonism's fruits, Brigham attested, substantiated its faith claims.

This letter's context is rooted in social and economic change. In 1865, Brigham Young became a director of the Union Pacific Railroad Company. With this act, his desire to see a transcontinental railroad completed became public knowledge, giving unofficial notice to eastern financiers that he wanted Utah connected with the outside world. Brigham saw in the railroad an efficient way of transporting missionaries and immigrant converts. This purpose was largely lost on outsiders, many of whom saw in the railroad an opportunity to make money as well as a way to topple the Mormon kingdom.¹ "Mormonism Doomed," predicted the *Chicago Republican*. Elsewhere the naysayers' forecast was the same. Once completed, the railroad would intermingle peoples and interests sure to "crush the vile thing," Mormonism, by introducing a democratic civilization that would rid the nation of a "foul blot."² The editors had the plot scripted for the American reading public: relishing a freer world than they had ever known, the Saints would identify the shackles that held them down, rise up in disgust, and throw off the Mormon priesthood.

Brigham did not take these threats lightly. A guardian for the kingdom, he introduced a series of programs designed to protect the Saints against the coming days. Among these was a boycott of gentile merchants deemed hostile to the faith. Dissatisfied with the results, President Young intensified his efforts in October 1868 by inaugurating an ambitious system of cooperative merchandising. Every Mormon community, he announced, was to establish wholesale stores in which goods grown and manufactured by the Saints were to be sold. With this step, trading with outside merchants would be kept to a minimum, and the dependent economies that had stifled Mormon settlements in Ohio and Missouri could be avoided.³

Outside reaction to this new economic policy was predictable. Newspapers expressed displeasure in no uncertain terms. They saw the Saints, who had welcomed the railroad by offering their own labor, as now rejecting everything the railroad offered. Brigham Young never repudiated his

desire to see the road completed, but that mattered little to public perception. He was called “selfish,” and his followers were compared to minions of the “Grand Pasha of Turkey.” Long proclaiming themselves to be the persecuted, the Saints were now accused of being the persecutors.⁴

To correct these misimpressions, Brigham Young initiated a public relations campaign. While George A. Smith published answers to frequently asked questions, President Young explored ways to lay his own views before eastern readers.⁵ When the *Religio-Philosophical Journal*, a spiritualist publication in Chicago, printed an editorial comparing LDS and RLDS traditions, President Young snatched the opportunity to respond. Except for minor punctuation changes, his letter was published as it was dictated.⁶

Brigham Young’s letter proclaims “peace and good will” to be Mormonism’s mission. By no means enemies to outsiders, the Saints sought to “unite the world in all that is good and praiseworthy.” Implicitly countering accusations that Mormonism suppressed the ignorant masses, Brigham described a “happy, contented and united people,” diverse in language and traditions but one in “hopes, desires and aims.” What more could a religion offer? Mormonism’s results, Brigham affirmed, attested to its inspiration: “by their fruits ye shall know them.” For Brigham Young, the unity that critics decried was actually evidence of Mormonism’s divine origins.

1. Brigham Young’s desire to see a transcontinental railroad completed was known to a limited number before this time. See Leonard J. Arrington, *Great Basin Kingdom: An Economic History of the Latter-day Saints, 1830–1900* (1958; Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1966), 236–37; “The Mormons,” *Salt Lake Weekly Telegraph*, April 29, 1869.

2. As quoted in Ronald W. Walker, *Wayward Saints: The Godbeites and Brigham Young* (Urbana: University of Illinois, 1998), 98; and Arrington, *Great Basin Kingdom*, 239.

3. Walker, *Wayward Saints*, 92–127; and Leonard J. Arrington, Feramorz Y. Fox, and Dean L. May, *Building the City of God: Community and Cooperation among the Mormons*, 2d ed. (1976; Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1992), 79–91.

4. Journal History of the Church, November 12, 19, 29, 30, December 1, 1868, microfilm, copy in Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University, Provo.

5. George A. Smith’s “answers to questions” were published as *Deseret News* installments beginning November 10, 1868, and compiled in George A. Smith, *The Rise, Progress, and Travels of The Church . . .* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News Press, 1869).

6. Brigham Young’s letter was published as “Voices from the People,” *Religio-Philosophical Journal* 5 (January 30, 1869): 3. A copy of the original letter can be found in Brigham Young Letter Books, 11:283–86, Brigham Young Office Files, Church Archives, Family and Church History Department, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City.

Brigham Young's January 7, 1869, Letter

EDITOR OF THE RELIGIO-PHILOSOPHICAL JOURNAL—DEAR SIR:—A few days ago, a stray number of your interesting JOURNAL chanced to fall in my way. In its editorial columns, I noticed an article headed, “*The true Latter-day Saint's Herald*,” which closed with the enquiry, “What is the mission of the Mormons is the question. Who will answer?” I now desire, with your permission, as a Mormon, and from a Mormon stand point, to state what we esteem to be our mission, and that of our holy religion.

The mission of Mormonism is distinctively one of peace and good will to the world. Its object is man's salvation; its basis is truth. All truth emanates from God, and is gauged by his word. The scripture says, “Thy word is truth.” We not only regard all improvements marked in man's history as the result of inspiration, but also that all true religion is based upon continued divine direction. Those truths which more especially belong to man's religious nature, are generally termed the Gospel. The Gospel is God's plan for man's salvation. It teaches the perfect fatherhood of God, and the perfect brotherhood of man—that we all are the children of God, all the subjects of His care. It teaches us that as in Adam all die, so in Christ shall all be made alive, and that through the grace of God, all by obedience to His word, can become inheritors to His promises, and that all His laws are in perfect harmony with man's nature, as he was created in the beginning and pronounced by the Creator, “very good.” Further, that these laws teach men to be truthful, honest, chaste, sober, industrious, frugal and to love and practice every good word and work, consequently they elevate and ennoble man. Not only is man's spiritual part regarded by the Gospel, but his temporal nature also. He who called into existence the spirit of man organized his body also, and the laws of the Gospel, if fully obeyed, bring health and strength to the body, clearness to the perceptions, power to the reasoning faculties as well as salvation to the soul.

This is the Mission of “Mormonism;” what have the Mormons done to fulfill it?

It is now not quite thirty-nine years since our Church was established by revelation from heaven to Joseph Smith. The church then numbered six members. Since that time it has continued to grow and spread, notwithstanding the floods of persecution that have time after time threatened to overwhelm it. At last, driven from Illinois amidst untold privations and sorrows, the “Mormons” journeyed to the Great Salt Lake Valley, then one of the most desolate and barren portions of the great American desert. By industry and frugality, they have caused this desert to blossom as the rose; have filled its valleys with thriving towns and villages for hundreds of miles, and brought into cultivation the most feasible portions of the land.

This, of itself, difficult as the task has been, is not by any means our greatest labor or our chief success. A people possessing great enterprise, industry and frugality; might have brought about these same results, the most conspicuous of our toil; but when we turn to other phases of our mission and prove that "Mormonism" has sent forth its teachers to the ends of the earth, has gathered people of almost every tongue and creed under heaven, of the most varied educations and the most opposite traditions, and welded them into one harmonious whole, one in faith and in practice, with the same hopes, desires and aims, it is then we see the results that prove its divine inspiration, and its affinity to the Gospel taught by Jesus and his Apostles. A creed that can take the heterogeneous masses of mankind, and make of them a happy, contented and united people, has a power within it, that the nations know little of. That power is the power of God.

This labor to unite the world in all that is good and praiseworthy is the mission of the Latter-day Saints, and with the help of the Lord they intend to continue their labors until the knowledge of God shall cover the earth as the waters now cover the mighty deep, and His name shall be one in all the earth.

Such is our mission, and God will give us strength to fulfill it.

Very respectfully yours,

Brigham Young.

Salt Lake City, Utah Ter. January 7th, 1869.