

Church Beginnings in China

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On August 28 and 29, 1852, a special conference of the Church was called by President Brigham Young. This meeting, called specifically for the purpose of sending out 108 missionaries, was an extra meeting in the yearly schedule of Church conferences. Nine of the 108 missionaries chosen were to go to India at Calcutta, four were to go to Siam, and four were selected to go to China. The four men chosen to fill missions to China were Hosea Stout, James Lewis, Walter Thompson and Chapman Duncan. The conference was held early so that the missionaries could reach their fields with greater ease before winter. Although this was primarily a missionary conference, it is remembered today because it was this conference, on August 29, 1852, that the Church officially announced the doctrine of Plural Marriage.¹

It will be remembered that Great Salt Lake City, as it was then called, had been founded in the summer of 1847, and a mere five years had passed since that time; yet Hosea Stout accepted his call with these words: "I feel well pleased with the mission allotted me and feel in the name of my Master to fill it to the honor and glory of God."²

The next two months found the potential missionaries busy in preparation. All of the missionaries met several times with the leaders of the Church and were given instructions and strengthened in their testimonies. They also discussed problems that had to do with their missions and made several decisions—among them, to travel in wagons, and each group to carry its own food, bedding, and equipment. On October 16 the missionaries were set apart and given blessings. They reported that the spirit of the Lord was strongly felt on this day and on the next few days to follow. Many blessings were given to the brethren by the presiding authorities of the Church.³

The group that left Salt Lake Valley during those days of late October consisted of thirty-eight missionaries called to Calcutta, India, Siam, the Sandwich Islands, China, and Australia. All of the groups gathered at Peteetnot Creek (Payson, Utah) on October 24 and organized the camp. Hosea Stout was made captain; Nathaniel Vary Jones, chaplain; Burr Frost, sergeant of the guard; and Amos Milton Musser, clerk of the company. As they renewed their journey, they followed a route which lay roughly over the present U.S. Highway 91. They traveled by the Iron Mines (near Cedar City, Utah), through Mountain Meadows, which a few years later was to be the scene of the infamous massacre, and on down the steep gully to Santa Clara Creek. For sixteen miles the company bumped down the Santa Clara

on a road “amazingly rough and sandy.”⁴ They moved ever westward; on November 12 they were joined by a group of emigrants going to California to dig gold. The next three days they followed the Rio Virgin and then began the ascent to the top of Mormon Mesa. They were a full day getting the fourteen wagons up the last steep incline with

twenty men on the lead and four horses behind them, with two men to roll the hind wheels. A slight accident might precipitate wagons and animals into the abyss on either side of the backbone on which part of the ascent was made. Three cheers were given as the last wagon reached the summit of the precipice in safety.⁵

Ahead of them now lay the fifty-two mile stretch to Las Vegas. It was during this period of the trip that N. V. Jones became very ill. He did not respond to any of the usual remedies or the blessing of the Elders, and it was necessary for the company to lay over for a couple of days at Las Vegas in hope of his recovery. In two days he improved enough for the group to resume movement. Three days after leaving Las Vegas, the company reached Cajon Pass. Because the men and animals were so exhausted, their food was gone, and snow had begun to fall, it was a task to make it across the mountain; but by pushing on they were able to get to San Bernardino in the evening of December 3, 1852.⁶

The Elders were happy to see once again a well-organized community of Saints. San Bernardino was a thriving community, surrounded by many acres of rich and fertile farm land. The people of San Bernardino were very kind to them and took them into their homes, fed them and gave them every comfort they could afford as well as giving money to the missionaries. For twelve days the group rested and wrote letters home. They also sold their wagons, horses and mules, and all else that was not needed for the journey that lay ahead. On December 17 the company moved on toward Los Angeles and San Pedro, where they would embark for San Francisco and thence to their various fields of labor.

The group stayed a night in Los Angeles, where they were shocked by the way the lower element lived,⁷ then moved on to San Pedro, where they arrived on the twenty-second and waited for passage to San Francisco. On December 29, fares were arranged at \$17.60 a person, a full \$37.50 less than the usual fares on steam packets, and the brig *Fremont* sailed for San Francisco on the thirtieth with all but two of the missionaries aboard. Musser and several others were able to work on board to help defray expenses, for even at such low fares, the cost for the group was around \$700.⁸

The Elders landed in San Francisco on January 9, 1853.⁹ Their next problem was raising funds to pay for their passage to the various missions. The approximate costs for transportation to the different missions were listed as follows:

Australian Mission	\$1,250
Calcutta	1,800
Sandwich Islands	1,000
China	1,000
Siam	1,200
Total	\$6,250 ¹⁰

In consultation with the San Francisco Branch of the Church, it was decided that because of especially high demands made recently on the Church, it would be well if the missionaries tried to solicit funds from outside the membership. So for three weeks the Elders attempted to collect funds, but were able to gather only \$150 from non-members. The remainder of the needed money was donated by T. S. Williams, who gave \$500, and John M. Homer, a wealthy member, who donated the difference, which must have been between \$5,000 and \$6,000.¹¹

Although the major portion of the missionaries was in San Francisco, two of the China-bound Elders had remained in San Pedro. Hosea Stout, one of the men, lingered to look for a horse that he had lost and later made the trip to San Francisco on board a different ship, the *Sea Bird*, which arrived there January 13, 1853. Walter Thompson, another of the Hong Kong-bound Elders, did not go on to San Francisco because of illness. He had been sick on the trip to San Bernardino and on to San Pedro; and because he did not improve, he subsequently returned home to the Salt Lake Valley.¹² Immediately upon Stout's arrival in San Francisco, he made contact with the rest of the company who had arrived a few days earlier. They had rented a house which served as headquarters until their departures to their various destinations.

On January 22, the missionaries received their passports from Washington, and were free to secure passage, hopefully on the first ship leaving for China. However, it took the Elders a long time to arrange for passage to China. In fact it was only after the failure of two different ships to sail that a successful contract was made. Finally, when the docks were almost empty, passage was found at a cost of \$80 per person to Hong Kong. They left San Francisco on March 9, and their voyage to Hong Kong lasted forty-seven days. The *Bark Hoorn* dropped anchor on what the missionaries recorded as the twenty-seventh of April, although this date was actually the twenty-eighth, because they had passed the international dateline.

The missionaries had seen Chinese junks for several days and found the atmosphere quite exciting even before they landed. Hosea Stout recorded their reception in Hong Kong as follows:

We had scarcely dropped anchor before the deck was covered with Chinese [sic] men and women as well as *professional* whites who were seeking for an

opportunity to make a drive on the *Green Horns*. While the china men were seeking employment and the women were soliciting our washing patronage, while others came forward to bargain off their *professional sex* to the crew and all whom it concerned at the lowest possible rates, which seemed on board to range at about one dollar each. The custom far exceeding the patronage even at that reduced rate, and I was informed by those who said they knew by experience, that in the city such services could be procured for from ten to twenty cents. We staid [*sic*] on board.¹³

The following day Elders Duncan and Stout went ashore and spent the morning walking about the city. They became acquainted with a Mr. Emeny, a ship chandler, who gave a great amount of information concerning the city and offered to rent them one of his rooms. They accepted the offer, establishing temporary quarters, and for the next few days sought information concerning conditions in the city and also looked for someone “who will be willing to hear the message we have to this nation but as yet we find none.”¹⁴ Discouraged because the cost of rent was too high, they had been able to secure nothing for less than about thirty dollars a month each. Stout felt that they had reached their darkest hour. Fortunately, within a day or two after this depressing experience, the Elders had befriended a landlord by the name of Dudell. Mr. Dudell, after listening to the purposes of the missionaries, offered free rent for three months, greatly encouraging the three preachers.

On May 5, 1853, the missionaries moved into their own apartment. Located at “Canton Bazaar,” they had an “excellent suit of rooms” on the third story of the building. The men hired a “Chinese servant at six dollars and fifty cents per month, who does all the duties of cook, market man, and chamber maid.”¹⁵ Apparently, they were a little embarrassed to have a servant for Hosea Stout wrote the following apology:

Such is the force of custom here that it is far cheaper to employ one than to do without for we can not purchase in the markets if you do you will be cheated in both weight and measure and shaved in your change.¹⁶

On the evening of May 6, after spending most of the day indoors because of the oppressive heat, the Eiders held their first preaching meeting. Five Methodist soldiers who were living in the same building met nightly to study the scriptures together and to build one another’s faith. Since their minister was away to Canton, they invited the Mormons to teach them. This they did and apparently the message was well received.

Two days later another meeting was held in which two additional investigators were present. Stout felt that Elder Duncan did a good job of preaching. He wrote: “Elder Duncan preached and quite boldly declared our principles, and by the way, gave the Sects a tolerably Sever [*sic*] turn. Whether or not our Methodist friends could see that their religion was declared false, I do not know. . . .”¹⁷

On May 11, the first contact was made with Chinese people, to whom, it should be remembered, these missionaries had been sent. The first two Chinese to investigate were a pair of curious Christians. One was a local tailor, the other was a product of the London Missionary Society, who had spent eight years in England and was well educated. Although it looked promising, nothing came of the meetings between the missionaries and their Chinese friends.

The Elders had little encouragement. They didn't seem to have any contacts or even an approach that permitted them to make any headway. They did experience a momentary lift in their spirits when they met the acting editor of the *China Mail*, a local paper. This man treated the Elders kindly and suggested that it would be wise if they would hold their meetings on the "green," promising not only to attend, but also to publish the times of the meetings free of charge.¹⁸

On Saturday, May 14, the Elders took an announcement to the *China Mail* to the effect that they would hold a meeting on the next Monday at 5 o'clock P.M. But it had to be canceled because of a rather heavy rainstorm. The next day they placed notices in two newspapers announcing a meeting on the parade ground on Wednesday, May 18, at 5:00 P.M., the weather permitting. This meeting was held as scheduled. Stout stated in his diary that

there were about 100 citizens and as many soldiers present. Elder Lewis spoke on the first principles of the gospel, showing also the difference between our religion and the sects of the day. He delivered a powerful discourse, handling the sects quite uncerimoniously. [sic]¹⁹

Interest seemed to be manifest and Stout said that he felt that "the ice of superstition is broken and a good work will follow." Meetings were subsequently held on May 19 and 20. At the latter meeting there were about thirty citizens and 200 soldiers moving in and out of the group "in swarms." Although Stout thought Duncan was in his usual good form, he noticed a change of attitude and wrote:

It is amusing to see how nice and reserved the people act with an assumed modesty of a ticklish coquette wanting to talk but not be seen.²⁰

The cause of this change turned out to be the spreading of the news, in articles that appeared in three newspapers that the Mormons were polygamists.

Mr. Dixon, one of the newspaper editors, gave the Elders some theater tickets. While there they had an experience that merits recording:

A few Persians, some of whom were at our last lecture, were there. One of them came to me and introducing himself, enquired when we would have another lecture. I informed him it would be next Monday. He then spoke to the rest of his country men in their own language after which he said to me that he was telling them that we were the men who lectured and that we believed in having more than one wife and they desired to know more about

it. We never had mentioned the subject but it has been humbugged today through the city in consequence of what came out in the papers. . . and today the Persians have been informed on the subject by those who are opposed to us which has had the effect to make them believe we are correct.²¹

Stout closed his diary that day by saying that he was not very well entertained at the theater.

The days dragged on and little was accomplished. The Elders spent a large percentage of their time indoors because the weather was too hot and often very rainy. Most of the contacts recorded in Stout's diary were meetings with various newspaper editors. The editors seem to have been reasonable men, but that did not keep them from printing derogatory articles that upset the missionaries. On May 31, 1853, such an article appeared in the *Hong Kong Register*. With regard to that article Stout wrote:

This morning's No. of the "Hong Kong Register" has a long article showing the necessity of having the "Mormonites" indicted for Blasphemy, and set to "picking oakum and kept on bread and water" but the Editor replies that his prescriptions "savours too much of the dark ages and days of thankings" and recommends for the people to let us alone.²²

Their last meeting on the parade ground (or green as it was called), was held on May 31. Preaching to a group of about fifty persons, the missionaries felt that they did a good job of proving various contending religions wrong, but the crowd did not ask a single question and left almost immediately. Future meetings were attempted, but the weather caused problems. The Elders tried to find ways to enter people's homes to preach to them, but this also proved to be futile. On June 7, Stout wrote that he felt that he and his companions had done all that God or man could require of them in Hong Kong. He said, "We have preached publicly and privately as long as anyone would hear and often tried when no one would hear." On June 9, Stout recorded that they decided that their labors in that place should be discontinued.²³

Stout was disturbed not only by the fact that they were not able to find interested listeners, but also by the fact that they could not even find overt opposition. He found that

no one will give heed to what we say, neither does anyone manifest any opposition or interest but treats us with the utmost civility, conversing freely on all subjects except the pure principles of the gospel. When we approach that they have universally in the most polite manner declined by saying that they did not wish to hear anything on that subject for they are willing to extend the mantle of charity over all christian believers and ourselves among the rest, not doubting that we were good men and all would be right with all.²⁴

The same day the Elders went on board an English ship, *The Rose of Sharon*, and arranged cabin passage to San Francisco, the cost being fifty dollars

each, excluding board. For the next two weeks they were busy clearing up their few affairs, selling their furniture, and preparing for their voyage back to America. They bought the necessary supplies to keep themselves fed, and sailed for San Francisco on June 22, 1853.

The mission to China cannot be assessed other than a complete failure, and the missionaries were as well aware of this as any later observer. Available sources reveal that while in China, the Elders were quite well apprised of the situations as they existed in the country. However, before arriving in China they were not very well informed concerning the conditions they would meet there.

A serious problem was that of their arrival in Hong Kong at a climatically poor time of year. Hong Kong is in tropical China and lies only 22 degrees north latitude from the equator. There is a long, wet summer with excessive humidity and high temperatures from mid-April until mid-October. During these months the rains are very heavy, varying from six to twelve inches a month. The missionaries arrived in Hong Kong during this most oppressive period, and Elder Stout made frequent reference in his diary to the excessive rains.²⁵ He also mentioned the heat a number of different times. Many entries state that the gospel teachers were forced to stay indoors all or most of the time because the heat and humidity were too great to work outside. The enthusiasm of the Elders was greatly dulled by the climate.

The missionaries realized many of the reasons for their failure. Two letters are available that reveal the depth of the Elders' understanding of the situation in which they were working. The first of these letters, dated May 16, 1853, was sent to President Brigham Young, and is very revealing in that it contains information concerning the T'ai-ping Rebellion, the general cultural situation, and problems relating to the Chinese language. The second one, also to Brigham Young, was written August 23, 1853, from San Francisco, after the Elders had returned there.

Probably the greatest disappointment the Elders faced was that there were so few Europeans in Hong Kong. According to their count there were around 250 European civilians in Hong Kong, plus between one and two thousand soldiers. Stout wrote concerning this problem:

Here we find a people situated differently from others we have seen and less likely to receive the gospel. There are no common or middle class inhabitants here. There are few whites and these are merchants, traders, all deeply engrossed in business.²⁶

When Stout wrote his second letter from San Francisco he stated that the Europeans were the "would be *nabobs*, of the world . . ." and further noted that

This class we found almost unapproachable, on account of their wealth and popularity, and look with contempt upon all who are not of the same grade

with themselves; also a few lawyers, doctors, and a small sprinkling of missionaries also of the upper circles, luxuriating upon the proceeds of the cent societies at home, and the miseries of the people in that region.²⁷

After the first and seemingly easiest approach of teaching the gospel to the Europeans had been closed, the next alternative was to turn to the native Chinese. Unfortunately, not many Chinese knew English, and the Elders knew no Chinese. This problem ultimately came down to one of money for it would have cost \$30.00 a month for a language teacher. Furthermore, most of the Chinese who knew English worked either for the government or for missionaries of other faiths. The Elders seem to have had a fair understanding of the magnitude of the problem for Stout wrote the following:

China is divided into many provinces, each province having a different dialect, not understood by the others. Their written language is uniform and understood by all, having different sounds to the same character, but the same meaning. Their words are monosyllables and are represented by complex characters, except in compound words which have a character for each syllable. There are different meanings to the same sound distinguished by intonations of the voice as in music. These are divided into nasal, guttural, liquid, long and short sounds which are blended together and compounded *ad infinitum*, making the language very difficult to learn and utterly impossible without a teacher. These are the general principles so far as I can understand them.²⁸

Stout is not correct on all of the details and intricacies of the language, but it is clear that he had a good idea of the problems of learning the language. Although the Elders knew that they had to learn the language if they were to teach the gospel in China, they did not know how to accomplish this task. In addition to the language problem, they found the variations in the class structure among the Chinese to be a problem.

Within six weeks of their arrival in Hong Kong, the Elders realized that they were not going to succeed. To the general observer it may not be clear why they did not turn to another port or go inland. The answer is that the mainland of China was at this time seized in a great revolution—the T'ai-ping rebellion. This partially religiously motivated uprising had started in July 1851. It lasted until 1864, and the Mormon Elders arrived in China in April 1853, the time of some of the greatest successes of the rebel army. During one period or another the movement engulfed a great portion of China and allegedly a total of twenty million people died in its battles and the resulting famines.²⁹

The report that Stout rendered concerning the rebellion is significant enough to warrant a long quotation.

Concerning the rebellion in China, the present reigning Tartar³⁰ dynasty usurped the government about 270 years ago.³¹ Since that time the nation has been ruled by these tyrants. They require the subject peoples to shave their

heads and wear tails in token of submission.³² They impose many other customs and requirements repugnant to the conquered. The leader of the rebellion against the Tartars is a descendent of the deposed royal family³³ and shows possibilities of defeating the Tartars. He declares himself directly commissioned by heaven to drive the usurping Tartars out of the realm. He will then proclaim peace and safety to all Chinese as soon as they submit to his rule.³⁴ He gives no quarter to Tartars, putting to death all who fall into his power. He has offered a reward for the head of the Mandarins and other Tartar rulers. The latest news is, the rebels have taken Nanking and are preparing to march against Peking; if successful in taking Peking, the Emperor would, if he escapes, seek safety over the big wall, while the country would come under the ancient rulers. The rebel has the sympathy of the nation. He has established a well-regulated government in all the conquered provinces, allowed the people to wear long hair without tails which is considered a good stroke of policy. There are, however, so many contradictory rumors afloat that it is difficult to tell what is the true state of affairs.³⁵

There are a number of inaccuracies in Stout's report, but for the most part he seems to have been well informed. He was aware of the impossibility of traveling elsewhere in China.

The voyage home to San Francisco was a long one requiring sixty-two days. The winds were contrary and at times the ship sat in a doldrum. The arrival of the Elders in San Francisco on August 22, 1853, ended the efforts of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in China until 1949.

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1. Brigham H. Roberts, *A Comprehensive History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, (Salt Lake City: Deseret News Press, 1930), Vol. 4, pp. 55–56.

2. Wayne Stout, *Hosea Stout: Utah's Pioneer Statesman* (Salt Lake City, 1953), p. 157.

3. Amos Milton Musser, "Diary," Journal I, p. 7. Mss. in possession of Burton Musser, Salt Lake City, Utah.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 61.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 62.

6. For descriptions of the trip to San Bernardino and on to San Francisco in greater detail see Conway B. Sonne, *Knight of the Kingdom: The Story of Richard Ballantyne*, (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1949), pp. 57–69 and Karl Brooks' unpublished thesis, BYU, "The Life of Amos Milton Musser," pp. 28–33.

7. Musser, Jour. I, pp. 28–29.

8. *Ibid.*, Jour. II, p. 9.

9. *The Alta* (San Francisco), January 10, 1853.

10. Musser, Jour. II, p. 16.

11. *Ibid.*, see also Andrew Jensen, *Church Chronology* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1899), p. 47.

12. Stout, *Hosea Stout*, p. 165.

13. Juanita Brooks, (ed.), *On the Mormon Frontier: The Diary of Hosea Stout* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1964), Vol. 2, p. 476.

14. *Ibid.*

15. *Ibid.*

16. *Ibid.*

17. *Ibid.*, p. 478.

18. *Ibid.*, p. 479.

19. *Ibid.*

20. *Ibid.*, pp. 479–80.

21. *Ibid.*, p. 480.

22. *Ibid.*, p. 481.

23. *Ibid.*, p. 482.

24. *Ibid.*

25. There are thirteen different entries concerning the rains. Most of them come during the latter part of May and throughout June. In most cases the rains were mentioned because they caused cancellation of scheduled meetings and appointments.

26. Stout, *Hosea Stout*, pp. 170–71.

27. *Deseret News*, Dec. 22, 1853.

28. Stout, *Hosea Stout*, p. 172

29. The movement first emerged in the province of Kwangsi. The founder, Hung Hsiu-ch'uan (1814–1864), and his chief collaborators were Hakkas, that is, members of a distinct linguistic group descended from North Chinese migrants. Hung was not only a mystic, but was also a frustrated scholar, who had failed more than once in the Canton Civil Service examinations. He had a religious experience that convinced him that he was actually a messiah, a concept he picked up from Christianity. Just two months before the Elders arrived in Hong Kong, the T'ai-pings had captured Nanking, the number two city of the empire.

30. Actually called the Manchu dynasty, or Ch'ing dynasty. It was common at the time of Stout's writing to refer to the Manchus as Tartars.

31. The date of the establishment of the Ch'ing dynasty was 1636. The man who is given credit for establishing this new dynasty was Abahai, the son of Nurhachi, the architect of the Manchu movement. Stout's date is off fifty-three years.

32. This was the requirement of wearing a queue or long braid. The T'ai-pings refused to do this and wore long hair. Thus the title "longhair" was given them. The Manchus made a number of exactions of this nature upon the Chinese people. They did not wish to become part of the Chinese culture. Their fear was that if they lost their identity they would be absorbed and thus lose their position of power.

33. There is no historical basis for this statement.

34. Hung, the founder, proclaimed his new dynasty to be the "Heavenly Kingdom of Great Peace" (T'ai-p'ing t'ien-kuo). Thus the name for the rebellion. Hung took the title of T'ien-wang or Heavenly King. He actually considered himself the brother of Jesus Christ. The best study in English of the religious aspects of the movement is: Eugene P. Boardman, *Christian Influence Upon the Theology of the Taiping Rebellion* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1952).

35. Stout, *Hosea Stout*, pp. 171–72.