

OLIVER COWDERY.

BY ELDER SAMUEL W. RICHARDS.

[It was announced in the prospectus of the ERA for Volume II, that we would publish a series of letters on the EARLY SCENES AND INCIDENTS IN THE CHURCH, from the pen of Oliver Cowdery. Before proceeding with the letters it is thought proper to present to our readers the following article on OLIVER COWDERY, by his personal friend, Elder Samuel W. Richards, who, as it will be seen from the article itself, possessed exceptional opportunities for learning much concerning this remarkable man who was so closely associated with the Prophet Joseph Smith.—*Editor.*]

Among the most interesting and important events ever recorded in history, are those connected with the coming forth of the dispensation of the fullness of times from the heavens to the children of men in our day, in which the heavens were opened and God, Jesus Christ, angels, and departed spirits of holy men united in one grand effort for the final and complete redemption of fallen humanity.

One of the first recipients of the Godly authority necessary to the accomplishment of such a glorious work was he whose name appears at the head of this article.

Oliver Cowdery was born in the town of Wells, Rutland County, Vermont, October, 1805. About 1825 he removed to the State of New York, and was employed as clerk in a store until the winter of 1828-9, when he taught school in the town of Manchester, Ontario County, New York. There he became acquainted with the family of Joseph Smith, Sr., who sent children to his school, and Oliver went to board with them.

While here he learned of Joseph Smith, the younger, having found plates containing ancient records of the history of the early settlers of this, the American continent, and revealed to him by a heavenly messenger. This so engaged his attention and occupied his mind that he could not be satisfied until he made a visit to the now reputed Prophet, which he did at Harmony, Pennsylvania, on the fifth day of April, 1829.

The Prophet Joseph immediately recognized him as the person he had been praying for to be sent by God to assist him as scribe, in the translation of the records he had found, preparatory to its publication in the English language. Only two days after this, their first meeting, they commenced translating the Book of Mormon. Joseph was the translator by aid of the Urim and Thummim, and Oliver was the scribe who wrote the words as they were spoken by the translator. He not only wrote the first copy of the translation, but made another copy before it was sent to the printer. This was deemed necessary because of determined efforts being made to obtain the manuscript, by parties opposed to the young Prophet's declaration of its being a divine record, brought forth and translated by the gift and power of God.

During the translation, incidents occurred which proved to Oliver's mind that it was a divine work; as, for instance, when, on the 15th of May, 1829, he with the Prophet Joseph went into the woods to pray, John the Baptist descended in a cloud of light, and ordained them to the Priesthood of Aaron, and promised that soon the Melchisedek Priesthood would be conferred upon them; that Joseph should be the first and Oliver the second Elder in the Church of Christ, to be organized with the full powers of both Priesthoods which were to be in the Church.

In the following month of June, 1829, a revelation was given through the Prophet Joseph, declaring that Oliver had received "the same power and the same faith, and the same gift like unto him," and if he (Oliver) would testify of the things he had seen and heard, he was promised "the gates of hell shall not prevail against you; for my grace is sufficient for you, and you shall be lifted up at the last day."

That he did testify of the plates found, and of their translation by the gift and power of God, as commanded, to the latest day

of his life, there are many witnesses; and that, too, under many trying ordeals when it was thought his faith was not strong in that which he had declared to all the world.

It also fell to the lot of Oliver Cowdery, in company with David Whitmer, to search out the first Twelve, on whom should be conferred the powers of the Melchisedek Priesthood, which Joseph and Oliver had received by the administration of Peter, James, and John, and by ordination under their hands, that they should be Apostles, and become special witnesses of Jesus Christ to all the world.

Oliver Cowdery, by virtue of the Priesthood conferred upon him, was the first to administer the ordinance of baptism, and to preach the first public Gospel sermon in this dispensation of God to man. His experience and labors were of that divine character which could never be forgotten, and after years proved that they were to him as though engraven with an iron pen upon the rock, never to be obliterated.

Soon after the organization of the Church in 1830, he was called with others to fill a mission to the Lamanites on the western border of Missouri, after which he returned to Ohio where the Church was being established.

In December, 1831, the revelations which the Prophet Joseph had received up to that time, were by Oliver Cowdery, then Church Historian, sent up to Missouri with money for publication.

In July, 1834, Oliver was sent as a special messenger from Missouri to Ohio on matters of importance relating to the affairs of the Church there, about the time of their being driven and persecuted by their enemies. Being then in harmony with the Prophet Joseph, they both entered into covenant with the Lord to pay tithing, November 29th, 1834.

On April 3rd, 1836, he was favored, with the Prophet Joseph, to witness the marvelous manifestations which occurred in the Kirtland Temple, when they saw the Lord standing upon the breastwork of the pulpit, and received from Him the declaration that their sins were forgiven them, and that they were clean in His sight. Immediately after this, also appeared in succession Moses, Elias, and Elijah, each delivering up the keys and powers of their several missions and dispensations to Joseph and Oliver,

and while standing in their presence declared the time had come for the turning of the hearts of the fathers to the children and the children to the fathers, lest the whole earth be smitten with a curse; and the keys of this dispensation were committed to them by the several administrators who had held them in former dispensations.

Oliver, who was now, and had been, General Church Recorder, removed to Missouri, September 17th, 1837.

Before leaving Kirtland, however, he was, with others, appointed Assistant Counselor to the First Presidency, and as such went to the Saints in Missouri. While spending the winter there with the Saints his course of life proved to be such that on the 12th of April, 1838, he was charged with misconduct before the High Council and by them excommunicated from the Church. But few in the history of the Church or of the world have ever been favored with such intimacy with prophets, angels, and Jesus Christ Himself, as Oliver had; which makes it more marvelous that his ambition, without proper restraint, should lead him, or cause him to be led where he must be severed from the fellowship of the Saints.

Without apparently making any effort to recover his standing or even visit the Prophet Joseph, he removed to Ohio, where he spent his time mostly in the study and pursuit of law practice, and other practices of a literary character, as he could not, with the knowledge he had, think of connecting himself with any of the religious sects of the day. This position he occupied until after the Prophet's death and the removal of the Saints from Nauvoo to the mountains in 1847.

In 1848, a yearning which he had for the society of those with whom he had once been so familiar, caused him to visit Kanesville, Iowa, where Elder Orson Hyde, then President of the Twelve Apostles, was residing, and make application for a reunion with the Church, which was granted by his being baptized and duly admitted into the Church by Elder Hyde officiating.

Soon after this, with the view of joining the Saints in Salt Lake Valley the next season, he, with his wife, desired first to visit her brother, David Whitmer, then living in Richmond, Missouri. For this purpose in the winter month of January they started on

the journey by team, but were overtaken by a severe snow storm which compelled them to seek shelter, which they obtained with the writer of this article, then temporarily residing in the upper part of that State. Here they found it necessary to remain some length of time on account of the great amount of snow which had fallen completely blockading the road, and for a time preventing travel by teams.

This detention of nearly two weeks' time was extremely interesting and made very enjoyable to both parties participating in the social and intellectual feast so unexpectedly provided.

I had but the fall before returned from my first mission to the British Isles, and was in the spirit of inquiry as to all matters of early history and experiences in the Church, and soon found there was no reserve on the part of Oliver in answering my many questions. In doing so his mind seemed as fresh in recollection of events which occurred more than a score of years before as though they were but of yesterday.

Upon carefully inquiring as to his long absence from the body of the Church, he stated that he had never met the Prophet Joseph, after his expulsion from the Church, while he lived, apparently feeling that the Prophet could with equal propriety enquire after him as for him to visit the Prophet, and as his pride would seemingly not allow him to become a suppliant without that inquiry, it was never made; while he felt quite sure that had he ever met the Prophet there would have been no difficulty in effecting a reconciliation, as a feeling of jealousy towards him on the part of his accusers had entered largely into their purpose of having him removed, which he thought Joseph must have discovered after going up to Missouri.

In what had transpired with him he now felt to acknowledge the hand of God, in that he had been preserved; for if he had been with the Church he would have undoubtedly been with Joseph in his days of trial and shared like fate with him; but being spared, he now desired to go to the nations and bear a testimony of this work which no other man living could bear; and he decided to go to the Presidency of the Church and offer his services for that purpose.

This indeed seemed to be his only ambition, and he was now

going to visit his wife's brother, David Whitmer, and prepare to go to the mountains and join the body of the Church the following summer and unite with them. For some cause this was not permitted, and he died in Missouri among relatives, before realizing the intent and purpose he had cherished of again testifying of the great work and dispensation which he had been instrumental with the Prophet in opening up to the world.

To hear him describe in his pleasant but earnest manner the personality of those heavenly messengers, with whom he and the Prophet had so freely held converse, was enchanting to my soul. Their heavenly appearance, clothed in robes of purity; the influence of their presence so lovely and serene; their eyes that seemed to penetrate to the very depths of the soul, together with the color of the eyes that gazed upon them, were all so beautifully related as to almost make one feel that they were then present; and as I placed my hands upon his head where these angels had placed theirs, a divine influence filled the soul to that degree that one could truly feel to be in the presence of something that was more than earthly; and from that day to this—now almost fifty years ago—the interest of those glorious truths upon the mind has never been lost, but as a beacon light ever guiding to the home of their glory for a like inheritance.

Before taking his departure he wrote and left with the writer of this the following statement, which we believe to be his last living testimony, though oft repeated, of the wonderful manifestations which brought the authority of God to men on earth:

TESTIMONY.

“While darkness covered the earth, and gross darkness the people; long after the authority to administer in holy things had been taken away, the Lord opened the heavens and sent forth His word for the salvation of Israel. In fulfillment of the sacred scriptures, the everlasting Gospel was proclaimed by the mighty angel (Moroni) who, clothed with the authority of his mission, gave glory to God in the highest. This Gospel is the ‘stone taken from the mountains without hands.’ John the Baptist, holding the keys of the Aaronic Priesthood; Peter, James, and John, holding the keys of the Melchisedek Priesthood, have also ministered for

those who shall be heirs of salvation, and with these administrations ordained men to the same Priesthoods. These Priesthoods, with their authority, are now, and must continue to be, in the body of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Blessed is the Elder who has received the same, and thrice blessed and holy is he who shall endure to the end.

“Accept assurances, dear brother, of the unfeigned prayer of him who, in connection with Joseph the Seer, was blessed with the above ministrations, and who earnestly and devoutly hopes to meet you in the Celestial Glory.

“OLIVER COWDERY.

“*To Elder Samuel W. Richards, January 13th, 1849.*”

Thus, by the foregoing testimony which he bears, as his last written, and virtually his dying testimony, is secured the promise made to him by the Lord in the early part of his career, that “the gates of hell should not prevail against him; and he should be lifted up at the last day.”

He went to his rest March 3rd, 1850, entitled to a glorious resurrection and crown of eternal life, such as the Lord, the righteous Judge, shall give to all those who keep covenant with Him.