

Zionist Nonviolence as Christian Worship and Praxis

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The twentieth and twenty-first centuries have seen nothing short of a revolution in the academic study of the New Testament and early Christianity. As the contours of the first decades and centuries of Christian history become clearer through scholarly research, Latter-day Saints must confront the question of what exactly it means to be participating in and bringing about the restoration of “primitive” Christianity. Since the time of Joseph Smith, the Restoration has commonly been understood to center on the reorganization of an ecclesiastical hierarchy that mirrors (or at least echoes) that found in the New Testament. Hence, the sixth article of faith of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints insists upon a reestablishment of “the same organization that existed in the Primitive Church.”¹ Yet the Restoration has always sought to be more than the mechanical replication of a two-thousand-year-old organizational chart. Indeed, the Restoration also aspires to recapture the spirit, power, and authority

of early Christianity—not simply its offices and forms. An 1842 editorial published in the Church’s periodical *Times and Seasons* suggests that the first generation of Latter-day Saints understood God to be restoring “the gospel as [it] existed in the primitive days”—namely, “the pure principles of truth as taught by our Lord Jesus Christ, and taught and administered in by the Apostles.”²

Among the “pure principles of truth” taught by Jesus, his apostles, and their successors known as the church fathers was a prohibition on killing. The early Christian community, which the modern Church seeks to emulate and restore, featured nonviolence as a central component of the disciple’s life. Jesus’s teaching from the Sermon on the Mount to “love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you” (Matthew 5:44) was, according to theologian Preston Sprinkle, the most frequently quoted verse during Christianity’s first four centuries. “For early Christians,” Sprinkle contends, “enemy-love was the hallmark of what it meant to believe in Jesus.”³ Historians agree that a serious commitment to nonviolence featured prominently in Christianity until the Roman emperor Constantine declared the religion legal early in the fourth century CE. Throughout the Christian movement’s first three centuries, the church fathers forbade killing.⁴ They rooted their position in explicit biblical teachings and in a more organic understanding of the Christian community as being defined by mercy, forgiveness, graciousness, peace, and most of all, love. As historian Roland Bainton further affirms, “The pacifism of the early church was derived not from a New Testament legalism, but from an effort to apply what was taken to be the mind of Christ. Christianity brought to social problems, not a detailed code of ethics or a new political theory, but a new scale of values.”⁵

While some scholars have claimed that Christians were absolute pacifists until Constantine, recent research has revealed a more complex situation, especially around the question of whether Christians could rightly serve in the military. Both textual evidence

and archaeological discoveries attest that particularly by the third century some Christians did serve as Roman soldiers; those who converted while in the army neither received church discipline nor were forced to abandon their profession. Nevertheless, the church fathers remained deeply skeptical about whether one could be a faithful Christian and serve in the Roman military for two primary reasons: first, soldiers (especially officers) were required to make sacrifices to the emperor, which Christians considered to be a form of idolatry; and second, a major component (or at least realistic possibility) of a soldier's duty was to kill other human beings, which the church regarded as a grievous sin.⁶ After reviewing the complex historical record and scholarly debate, scholar Lisa Cahill concludes that "there is a well-substantiated theological and pastoral consensus in the centuries before Constantine that compassion, forgiveness, peace, and peacemaking are regulative Christian ideals, and that killing by Christians is never acceptable."⁷

The early Christians' reticence to defend the empire by violence did not go unnoticed. For instance, Celsus, a second-century pagan critic of Christianity, complained that "if all men were to do the same as you [Christians], there would be nothing to prevent the king from being left in utter solitude and desertion and the forces of the empire would fall into the hands of the wildest and most lawless barbarians."⁸ Such critiques could draw on ample evidence from Jesus's life and teachings, the historical record, and writings of contemporaneous church leaders. Tertullian, a prominent leader and apologist in the late second- and early third-century Christian church in north Africa, acknowledged that those who pursued a military profession could sincerely accept Jesus. Nevertheless, he wrote that "in disarming Peter" in the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus "unbelted every soldier."⁹ The eastern church father Origen, writing shortly after Tertullian in the third century, acknowledged the legitimacy of governments but plainly articulated his skepticism toward Christians employing violence in the service of the state. He based his view on the claim that Christ forbade any form of homicide, even against "the greatest

wrongdoer.”¹⁰ In sum, the testimony of Christians in the “primitive church” was clear: killing was forbidden for followers of Christ, who were called to be peacemakers and build a countercultural community founded on principles of love, forgiveness, and peace.

The Book of Mormon compounds this peace witness of the New Testament and early Christian church. To the surviving Nephites gathered at the temple at the time of his appearance, the resurrected Christ delivered a discourse very similar to the Sermon on the Mount recorded in Matthew. While the two addresses feature a few key differences, virtually identical are the Savior’s so-called hard sayings, in which he commands his followers to turn the other cheek, love their enemies, and pray for their persecutors rather than retaliate against them (see Matthew 5:38–44; 3 Nephi 12:38–44). Just as the early Christians in the Old World embraced nonviolence, so too did the converted Lehiters. In the wake of the people’s transformational encounter with the resurrected Christ, the entire society had “no contentions and disputations,” leading to “peace in the land” for nearly two hundred years. Because of “the love of God which did dwell in the hearts of the people,” the society experienced no “strifes, nor tumults . . . nor murders” (4 Nephi 1:2–4, 15–16). Prior to the coming of Christ, war had featured prominently in the experience of God’s covenant people in both the Bible and the Book of Mormon. This changed, however, after Christ delivered a higher law of love (see Matthew 5; 3 Nephi 12). The New Testament and Book of Mormon jointly attest that nonviolence became a central component of Christian discipleship for those blessed souls in both hemispheres who directly witnessed Jesus’s ministry and Resurrection, as well as for the generations that immediately followed after them.

The question before us is whether a deep individual and collective commitment to Christian nonviolence is an essential feature of what the Restoration seeks to restore. After all, it is not a foregone conclusion that any particular aspect of a previous dispensation will be a featured component of the current one. Many Old Testament and Pauline teachings about women, for instance, have not had a

determinative effect on Restoration theology or practice.¹¹ My contention here is that the revelations given to Joseph Smith and canonized in the Doctrine and Covenants emphatically affirm that nonviolence is a central feature of how to worship the Prince of Peace.¹² In other words, I argue that the nonviolence of the early Christian church in both the ancient Mediterranean world and the Book of Mormon's promised land was neither incidental nor a historical particularity. Nonviolence was and is an integral feature of Christian life and worship, organically emerging from core teachings and principles of the gospel. If the Restoration seeks to restore the power and spirit of early Christianity in addition to its forms, then a deep and countercultural commitment to nonviolence should be similarly integral to modern disciples' understanding and witness of Christ's redeeming work.

Divine guidance regarding how members of the restored Church should navigate a world of violence came first in the context of Joseph Smith's Zion revelations. The Restoration's Christian peace witness developed further in revelations that pointedly addressed violence in the context of persecution in Missouri beginning in 1833 and the subsequent formation of Zion's Camp. Generally speaking, Smith's revelations in the first two years after the organization of the Church featured an apocalyptic tone and perspective in which the political structures and events of this world were seen as virtually inconsequential in light of the impending return of Christ. Beginning in 1833 the revelations transitioned to a more accommodationist position, allowing for negotiation and even friendship with secular political structures.¹³ However, the revelations remained consistent in counseling the Saints to eschew violence and raise the standard of peace, even toward aggressors. If violent conflict cannot be avoided, it is better that disciples of Christ suffer bloodshed than inflict it. The Saints are always free to choose the path of violence, but doing so is never the preferred option and will typically initiate (or continue) a cycle of destructive consequences with multigenerational implications. In short, if the Saints want to worship Christ and build Zion, they will have to learn to be peacebuilders.

Revealing a Nonviolent Zion

As early as January 1831, less than a year after the establishment of the Church of Christ, Joseph Smith's revelations recognized that the world inhabited by latter-day disciples of Jesus is a violent one. In addition to hearing of "wars in far countries," Church members in the United States could not assume that violence would always remain safely distant. "Ye know not the hearts of men in your own land," the Lord ominously warned (Doctrine and Covenants 38:29). No doubt this was unsettling to those who heard or read the revelation. Shortly thereafter, the Lord confirmed that in the last days peace would be "taken from the earth" (Doctrine and Covenants 1:35). What could the followers of Christ do in such a time of travail? The answer came loud and clear in a March 1831 revelation: build Zion.

The commandment to gather had been given just two months earlier (see Doctrine and Covenants 38). Now the purpose of that gathering became clearer. Church members were to consecrate their money so as to purchase land as an inheritance for themselves and future generations of Saints. This would be no ordinary communal society. This was to be the New Jerusalem built on the American continent according to ancient prophecies (see Ether 13:6–8). The New Jerusalem would be "a land of peace, a city of refuge, a place of safety for the saints of the Most High God" (Doctrine and Covenants 45:66). This city—like the city of Zion that Enoch and his people built (see Moses 7:16–20)—would be so full of the glory and terror of the Lord that the ungodly would not even approach it (see Doctrine and Covenants 45:67). Crucially, the Latter-day Saint Zion was not intended only for the Saints. Rather than an exclusivist or tribal utopia, Zion would be a cosmopolitan community of peace, a refuge for "every man that will not take his sword against his neighbor" (45:68). Lovers of peace, the revelation prophesies, would gather from "every nation under heaven" (45:69). Indeed, in an era of world-consuming violence, those gathered to Zion would be "the only people that shall not be at war one with another" (45:69). Although a purely spiritual

reading of this revelation is possible, the text itself is insistent that what is at stake in building Zion in the last days is protection from real violence and actual war. Zion is an alternative political community that offers a prophetic counterpoint to a world both infected and infatuated with violence.¹⁴

As Joseph Smith and other early Church leaders prepared to build the city of Zion in western Missouri, further revelations instructed them that their settlement of the region should occur in an orderly and peaceable fashion. “Wherefore, it is wisdom,” the Lord counseled in July 1831, “that the land should be purchased by the saints” (Doctrine and Covenants 57:4). Mutual exchange with existing settlers would allow Church members to secure the land of Zion as their “everlasting inheritance” without conflict or animosity (57:5). A month later, the Lord underscored his prior instructions. The Saints were understandably enthusiastic about the prospect of establishing Zion in anticipation of Christ’s Second Coming. But it seems that some of them may have believed they could do so by any means necessary—that the end of building Zion justified any methods whereby it was accomplished. The Lord chastised them and rejected this consequentialist ethic. First, he reminded them that the land upon which they would build Zion was rightfully *his*, not *theirs*. The Saints’ assembly upon the land should be deliberate, organized, and lawful. He reemphasized what he had commanded them a month earlier, namely that they should purchase the lands. This would have the advantage of establishing a rightful claim that could not be denied by others and would not stir up anger among their neighbors (see 63:24–27).

The Lord did acknowledge that there was another possibility, one that apparently lurked in some of the Saints’ hearts: They could obtain the land of Zion “by blood” (Doctrine and Covenants 63:29–31). They could come as conquerors, as modern-day crusaders in pursuit of their holy land. They could arm themselves and forcefully push out the current inhabitants. Perhaps, given the sparse and largely disorganized population of settlers in western Missouri, they

might even succeed in the short term. Violence was a live option—and one frequently taken by Americans as they moved west.¹⁵ But the Lord told them how that strategy would play out. The local settlers were already disposed to “anger against you [the Saints], and to the shedding of blood” (63:28). If the Saints took up arms, they would initiate a cycle of violence they would soon regret: “Lo, your enemies are upon you, and ye shall be scourged from city to city, and from synagogue to synagogue, and but few shall stand to receive an inheritance” (63:31). True, as freewill actors the Saints could forsake the path of peace and seek to establish themselves on the land by force of arms. But the Lord said unequivocally, “You are forbidden to shed blood” (63:31). The results for doing so would be disastrous, even to the point of losing the Saints’ inheritance. Wars were coming, the Lord prophesied, and “the saints also shall hardly escape” (63:34). Their only real hope in a world of violence was to peacefully establish Zion and gather there, to reject the temptation of shedding other people’s blood, and to declare the Christian gospel of peace (see 63:28–37; see also 87:8).

The principles outlined in these early revelations seem to have sufficed for the first two years of settlement in Missouri. Even after he left the church and turned critic, John Corrill testified of the Saints’ commitment to Christian nonviolence in the Restoration’s earliest years. Up until the summer of 1833, he asserted, “the Mormons had not so much as lifted a finger, even in their own defence, so tenacious were they for the precepts of the gospel—‘turn the other cheek.’”¹⁶ That changed as the local settlers’ antagonisms toward Church members escalated to the point of violent persecution in Jackson County, with mobs destroying the Saints’ printing press and newspaper office and then tarring and feathering Bishop Edward Partridge and Charles Allen. Under duress in late July Church leaders signed an agreement to leave the county.¹⁷

More than eight hundred miles to the east, Joseph Smith was only partially aware of what was happening in Missouri when he received a revelation in early August 1833. The Lord expressed his

tender concern for the beleaguered Saints in Missouri, reiterating his earlier promises that he would protect Zion and her people, that he was “her high tower,” and that the Saints could therefore rejoice until the time that he exacted his vengeance upon the wicked (see Doctrine and Covenants 97:20–21). “Zion shall escape if she observe to do all things whatsoever I have commanded her,” the Lord assured (97:25). “But if she observe not to do whatsoever I have commanded her,” then God’s promise of protection was withdrawn, and Zion’s inhabitants would be subject to “sore affliction, with pestilence, with plague, with sword, with vengeance, with devouring fire” (97:26). Would Zion trust God or trust in the arm of flesh?

Renounce War and Proclaim Peace

Four days later, on 6 August 1833, Joseph Smith received further divine instruction on how the Saints should respond to violence, not only in the immediate context of the Jackson County persecutions but as a more general rule. Canonized as section 98 in the Doctrine and Covenants, the revelation is a singular text in which the Lord provides in greater detail than anywhere else in scripture his law regarding retaliation. The revelation, presented as an “immutable covenant,” opens by affirming that the Saints are justified in “befriending that law which is the constitutional law of the land,” insofar as it supports freedom and maintains human rights and privileges (Doctrine and Covenants 98:3, 6). While a peaceable, well-ordered, and rights-respecting government led by “honest . . . good . . . and wise men” (and presumably women) is the ideal arrangement in the civil sphere, God recognizes that there will be times in which “the wicked rule [and] the people mourn” (98:9–10). It is precisely at the moment when the political order breaks down, or even takes on malicious forms, that the Saints will be tested in their willingness to abide by their covenant. God promised that the Saints need not be afraid of their enemies, at least not in the ultimate scheme of things. Significantly, however, his covenant with them did not entail a guarantee of temporal safety and

security. To the contrary, he said that he would “prove [them] in all things,” testing whether they were willing to “abide in [his] covenant, even unto death” (98:14). In the face of political evil, violence, and suffering, God offered straightforward guidance to his covenant people: “Renounce war and proclaim peace” (98:16).

“Renounce war and proclaim peace” sounds like a bumper sticker slogan. Far from being an empty platitude, however, God put teeth in his command by supplementing it with elaborate instructions about how the Saints should respond when confronted with violence—as individuals, members of families, and citizens of nations. Speaking first about violence against individuals and families, the Lord said that if the Saints were attacked by their enemies, they were to “bear it patiently and revile not against them, neither seek revenge” (Doctrine and Covenants 98:23). If they displayed forbearance in this way, they would be divinely rewarded. If they chose to fight back, however, then the violence they received in the first place would be counted as “being meted out as a just measure unto you” (98:24). In other words, it was not enough for the Saints to refrain from striking *first*—they were not to strike *back*. They were Christians, bound by the Savior’s command to turn the other cheek, committed to follow Christ’s example of suffering without seeking recrimination. If the Saints failed to live up to their Christian convictions and obligations, then the violence they received was just compensation for their choice to participate in rather than renounce violence. The revelation continued by saying that their blessings would increase exponentially if the Saints continued to forbear any additional acts of aggression, to the point of having their reward multiplied by a factor of eight hundred (see 98:23–26). My reading is that this is not meant to indicate a precise numerical measure of individuated blessings gained and counted but is rather a metaphoric expression of a substantial increase in divine favor and holiness for faithful covenant keepers.¹⁸

In short, the Lord’s clearly preferred response to violence is forbearance and forgiveness. But is this the only way? What happens if the Saints (individually or collectively) simply can’t take it anymore or

give in to the very natural desire to violently defend their families and innocent victims from unjust and unchecked aggression? The Lord in his merciful understanding of human frailty makes provision for this—just as he did in providing the Mosaic law, Aaronic Priesthood, and law of tithing, all lesser laws designed to accommodate human inability to live a celestial standard. If your enemy attacks you once, the revelation states, you are commanded not to seek vengeance. If he attacks a second time, you are to warn him to cease his aggression. If he ignores your warning and attacks you or your family a third time, then the Christian response is still to “spare him” (Doctrine and Covenants 98:30; see 24–30). “Nevertheless,” the Lord says, after this third unjust and unwarranted assault, if you cannot find it in yourself to once again turn a cheek that has already been bruised and bloodied from multiple attacks, “thine enemy is in thine hands; and if thou rewardest him according to his works thou art justified” (98:31).

The word *justified* is clearly intentional—it is repeated twice in the same verse and twice more (in different forms) in the ensuing verses (Doctrine and Covenants 98:36, 38). Unpacking that word is therefore essential to understanding how the Lord thinks about the Saints’ potential use of retributive violence after being victimized multiple times. The theological definition of justification, informed primarily by the Pauline epistles, is to make righteous, or just, in the sight of God.¹⁹ An attitude or action does not need to be justified if it is already just, or righteous. If an attitude or action is inherently holy or godly—pure love, for instance—it does not require justification. Only actions that are not godly in themselves, which depart in some way from a celestial standard of righteousness, need to be justified. The good news of the gospel is that God in his mercy and Christ in his love have provided a path of justification for those whose attitudes or actions are not always godly—that is, for all fallen humans. However, it is vitally important to recognize and appreciate the distinction between actions that are *justified*, or made right through the grace of God, versus those that are *sanctified*, or intrinsically holy. Sanctification may follow justification, but it does not inhere in it.

In short, for God to declare that he justifies a particular human attitude or action is also an implicit acknowledgment that the attitude or action is unholy in itself.

Applying this understanding to Doctrine and Covenants 98 reveals that even when God allows retributive violence, he does so under extremely strict and specific conditions. Even so, the violence committed by virtue of human frailty is still not inherently righteous but can nevertheless be justified, or made right, through his grace. Significantly, the Lord's preferred option of forbearance requires no justification (if done with pure motives), since it is the godly response to violence. Furthermore, the revelation underscores the fact that while we cannot always choose how others will treat us, how we respond is always an act of volition. Violence, even when thoroughly justified, is never the only option. Even in the most extreme circumstances, we can choose to "revile not" (Doctrine and Covenants 98:23). This was the path that Jesus took, and also what it means in a literal sense, when he commands each of his disciples to "take up their cross and follow me." The cross can be a metaphor for discipleship, but it was not a metaphor for Jesus. When he told his followers that in the moment of extremity they could opt to either "save their life" or to "lose their life for my sake," he was speaking both spiritually and literally (Matthew 16:24–25 New Revised Standard Version; hereafter NRSV). The same holds true for the Lord's covenant with his latter-day disciples as found in Doctrine and Covenants 98, in which God attests that he will try us "in all things, whether [we] will abide in [his] covenant, even unto death" (Doctrine and Covenants 98:14). Latter-day disciples of Jesus must be willing in the face of unjust violence to participate in "the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death" (Philippians 3:10 NRSV).

Christian nonviolence understands that how we choose to respond to violence will have multigenerational impacts. Indeed, this is another one of the trenchant insights of Doctrine and Covenants 98. The command to "renounce war and proclaim peace" is immediately and directly connected to a command to "seek diligently to turn the

hearts of the children to their fathers, and the hearts of the fathers to the children” (98:16). Peacebuilders work not only for themselves and their neighbors but also for the sake of future generations. One of the great legacies we can leave our children—which will turn their hearts toward us—is peace. Over and over, the August 1833 revelation calls out the multigenerational nature of both conflict and reconciliation. If we choose to spare our enemies, it redounds not only to our credit but also to that of our children and descendants “unto the third and fourth generation” (98:30). But if our enemies persist in their aggression, then the negative effects of ongoing conflict will be visited upon their children and descendants also “unto the third and fourth generation” (98:46).

Both violence and nonviolence have a cyclical quality. Perhaps no text better attests this than the Book of Mormon, which repeatedly demonstrates the devastating effects of unresolved conflict on individuals, families, and nations. The sins and violence of the fathers become visited upon their children for generations, until someone—like the sons of Mosiah—interrupts the destructive cycle of violence and replaces it with a new cycle of reconciliation, forgiveness, peace, and love. The example of the Jaredites offers a sobering warning that if left to itself, violence has a metastasizing quality that will eventually consume everyone and everything in its path. But the Lord’s promise in Doctrine and Covenants 98 is that even the most destructive cycle can be interrupted and transformed. If an aggressor’s “children shall repent, or the children’s children, and turn to the Lord their God, with all their hearts and with all their might, mind, and strength, and restore four-fold for all their trespasses wherewith they have trespassed, or wherewith their fathers have trespassed, or their fathers’ fathers,” then even a multigenerational conflict can be transformed, the cycle of vengeance can be arrested and reversed, and a new set of restored relationships can be nurtured to life (98:47). The message of the Lord to the Saints in 1833 and today is essentially twofold: Violence is an option that under certain restrictive conditions may be

justified; but forbearance, sincere forgiveness, and reconciliation are always better, sanctifying options.

The Nonviolent Redemption of Zion

Two and a half months after Joseph Smith received the August 1833 revelation, Church leaders in Missouri decided to set aside their signed agreement that included the provision that the Saints would leave Jackson County. Instead they took up arms and announced that they would forcibly defend themselves, their families, their property, and their Zion. We should have nothing but sympathy for these bedraggled and victimized Saints. The depredations committed against them were real, and their impulse to protect life and property was natural and well-intentioned. They had received multiple offenses and had lifted the ensign of peace to their neighbors, and so according to the law revealed in the August revelation they were justified in defending themselves. It is therefore out of neither condemnation nor moral judgment but rather a sober assessment of the documentary evidence to observe that the Missouri Saints' self-defensive violence was a choice, but not the choice that God recommended to them as their primary or best option. To the contrary, as we have seen, God had repeatedly told them that he would defend Zion from its enemies, and that if they tried to secure it by blood they would "be scourged from city to city" and be met "with sword, [and] with vengeance" (Doctrine and Covenants 63:31; 97:26). The Lord's prophecies, alas, came true. Outgunned, the Saints' attempt at violent self-defense foundered. The Missourians overpowered them in a matter of only a few days. The original signed agreement—itsself an injustice—had provided that half the Saints would leave by the end of the year and the other half in the early spring, thus allowing for an orderly migration. Now, however, the mob showed no mercy and drove thousands of Saints from their homes and farms with no additional time for preparation. Fortunately, the good citizens of Clay County welcomed the refugees and helped them through the winter.

As the Saints in Kirtland received reports of the persecution of their brothers and sisters in Missouri, they quite naturally wanted to do something in response. The matter weighed heavily on the mind and heart of Joseph Smith, who a few days before Christmas received a revelation with the Lord's instructions to the Church. The opening verses matter-of-factly addressed those who had been "afflicted, and persecuted, and cast out from the land of their inheritance" (Doctrine and Covenants 101:1). Rather than seeing them as innocent victims of a merciless mob, the Lord chastised them, saying that their afflictions had come "in consequence of their transgressions" (101:2). He pointed out their moral failures, speaking of "jarrings, and contentions, and envyings, and strifes, and lustful and covetous desires among them" (101:6). But he also suggested that they had failed to trust in his promise to protect them and lightly esteemed his previous counsel, including the obligation he gave them, as Christians, to receive suffering rather than inflict it (see 101:8). "For all those who will not endure chastening, but deny me, cannot be sanctified," the revelation sternly pronounced (101:5). The Saints had not denied Christ, certainly not in any formal sense, but by taking up arms they had rebuffed his words and his covenant. Perhaps their retributive actions were justified, but they were not sanctified and therefore were not worthy of Zion. Despite the Saints' lapses, however, God promised that he was full of compassion toward them, and they would be both remembered and redeemed (see 101:3, 9). Significantly, they had not lost Zion—they had simply forsaken its principles. "Zion shall not be moved out of her place," the Lord reassured the Saints, "notwithstanding her children are scattered" (101:17). Once they had prepared and purified themselves, "they and their children" would be eligible to return and reclaim the original promises (101:18). The Lord reiterated that the land of Zion could belong to the Saints, but only through legal purchase and lawful redress (see 101:70–71, 76–77).

Two months later, Joseph Smith once again sought the will of the Lord, this time after having heard firsthand of the Saints' sufferings from Parley P. Pratt and Lyman Wight, who had traveled from

Missouri to Kirtland to appeal for help. The Lord expressed sympathy and love for the beleaguered Missouri Saints and promised divine vengeance against their enemies. But, he repeated, as long as they failed “to observe all my words”—including presumably his previous counsel regarding Christian nonviolence—then “the kingdoms of the world shall prevail against them” (Doctrine and Covenants 103:8). The Saints had been called to be “a light unto the world, and to be the saviors of men,” a reference to the Sermon on the Mount, where Jesus most famously outlined his higher law of nonviolent love (103:9; see also Matthew 5:14–16, 38–44). But they had failed to live up to that charge and thus had been “trodden under foot of men” (103:10). The revelation went on to speak of the redemption of Zion, which the Lord declared would come by power (see 103:15). This language may have excited those anxious to mount an armed campaign to reclaim Zion for the Saints. But the following verses should have deflated their militaristic expectations. The power that would redeem Zion was not that of armed violence. It was instead the same power that led Moses and the children out of Egypt—the power of God and of angels (see 103:16–19). What was required of the Saints was not their violent retribution for the wrongs they had suffered but an acceptance that loving and nonviolent suffering is a constituent aspect of Christian discipleship. “Let no man be afraid to lay down his life for my sake,” the Lord counseled, for “whoso is not willing to lay down his life for my sake is not my disciple” (103:27–28). A violent conflict with their enemies would produce casualties. Significantly, however, the only potential loss of life mentioned by the Lord was that of the Saints. At no point in this or previous revelations did God give his blessing for the Saints to shed—let alone seek—the blood of their enemies.

What God did allow for was the formation of companies of up to five hundred Kirtland Saints to join Pratt and Wight on their return trip to Zion (see Doctrine and Covenants 103:30). When the Saints thought of redeeming Zion, they clearly had in mind the idea of reclaiming lost properties and perhaps exacting vengeance on their

aggressors. God's mission statement for the company was rather different, however, and distinctly nonmilitaristic. Their task, under Joseph Smith's leadership, was to "organize my kingdom upon the consecrated land, and establish the children of Zion upon the laws and commandments which have been and which shall be given unto you" (103:35). If the group was to claim victory and glory, it would not be through force of arms, but rather a different kind of power: "your diligence, faithfulness, and prayers of faith" (103:36). The revelation initiating Zion's Camp, as the march from Ohio to Missouri came to be popularly known, was founded upon a call to faithfulness, not a call to arms. Nowhere did God declare Zion would be won back through violent means.

The Lord reasserted his will in a revelation that the Prophet received while in council with camp members on the banks of Fishing River on 22 June 1834. They had made the long, wearying march across the country and were nearing their destination of Jackson County. Governor Daniel Dunklin had just reneged on his earlier offer of sending the state militia to help the Saints reclaim their lands, and the sheriff of Clay County had communicated to Smith that the camp's march had raised considerable anxieties among the Saints' enemies that could lead to outright violence.²⁰ The outnumbered Saints were unsure of what to do when the Lord's instructions came. He chastised the Church once again for their failure to do all he had commanded them and insisted that "Zion cannot be built up unless it is by the principles of the law of the celestial kingdom" (Doctrine and Covenants 105:5). If the Saints insisted on living a lesser law, they would have to "wait for a little season for the redemption of Zion" until they had the occasion to be "taught more perfectly, and have experience, and know more perfectly concerning their duty" (105:9–10). In a statement that has often been interpreted as the Lord giving the camp members a release from their duty, in fact he was simply reiterating what he had taught them many times before: "For behold, I do not require at their hands to fight the battles of Zion; for,

as I said in a former commandment, even so will I fulfil—I will fight your battles” (105:14).

Zion did not need a ragtag band of a couple hundred armed frontiersmen to redeem it. The Lord could do his own work if and when he so chose, as indicated by the violent storm that flooded Fishing River and prevented the massing mobs from attacking the camp.²¹ In the meantime, God counseled the people to be “very faithful, and prayerful, and humble” (Doctrine and Covenants 105:23) and to gather their resources to purchase lands in Jackson County and surrounding areas. “For it is my will that these lands should be purchased,” the Lord reiterated (105:29). It was only through the purchase of the lands of Zion that the “armies of Israel” would be held guiltless in “throwing down the towers” of their enemies (now located on the lands the Saints held title to) and “scattering their watchmen” (who no longer had legal right to the land) (105:30). At no point did the Lord command the members of Zion’s Camp to perpetrate violence against their enemies. So as to remove all doubt about the duty of his disciples toward those who had persecuted them and spitefully abused them, the Lord concluded the revelation by commanding that the Saints “sue for peace, not only to the people that have smitten you, but also to all people” (105:38). Followers of the Prince of Peace should “lift up an ensign of peace, and make a proclamation of peace unto the ends of the earth; and make proposals for peace unto those who have smitten you” (105:39–40). As they transformed themselves into emissaries of peace, the Lord promised the Saints that “all things [would] work together for [their] good” (105:40).

The members of Zion’s Camp had dramatically different responses to the Fishing River revelation. Nathan Baldwin, who had been hesitant about bearing arms from the beginning of the expedition, said that the revelation “was the most acceptable to me of anything I had ever heard before, the gospel being the exception.” Others could hardly hide their distaste. According to William Cahoon, their negative feelings to some degree came from an understandable disappointment that they would not be “permitted at this time to restore our

Brethren & Sisters to their Homes and defend them.” But others had been spoiling for a fight from the outset and now complained that they had marched across the country only to leave with their tails between their legs. George A. Smith recalled that several camp members “apostatized because they were not going to have the privilege of fighting.” “They had rather die,” Nathan Tanner remembered, “than to return without a fight.”²² This vengeful attitude stood in stark contrast to the express language of the revelation, which specifically said that the Saints had to be willing to lay down their lives if they were to be worthy of Zion (see Doctrine and Covenants 98:13–14). The failure of at least some in Zion’s Camp to live up to the Lord’s celestial law only punctuated the Lord’s admonition that Zion would be theirs only when they had learned to abide by “the principles of the law of the celestial kingdom” (105:5).

Conclusion

Taken together, the revelations received by Joseph Smith during the eventful first four years of the restored Church’s history pointed to a simple reality: Zion, the land of peace (see Doctrine and Covenants 45:66), would only become the Saints’ inheritance once they learned to “renounce war and proclaim peace” (98:16) and to “make a proclamation of peace unto the ends of the earth” (105:39). The Restoration was never immune to the travails of a fallen world, and the Saints became personally acquainted with its violence all too soon. As Joseph Smith and his followers sought to restore the purity of early Christianity, the revelations counseled these latter-day disciples of Jesus to pursue the path of Christian nonviolence despite the violence they endured. They learned that true Christian worship and practice can never be divorced from the nonviolent example and character of Christ, who exemplified a redemptive willingness to suffer injustice rather than inflict it. An essential component of following the Prince of Peace and building Zion is embracing the nonviolence featured at the heart of the Christian gospel.

Notes

1. Articles of Faith 1:6.
2. "Letter from Tennessee," *Times and Seasons*, 15 June 1842, in Elizabeth A. Kuehn, Jordan T. Watkins, Matthew G. Godfrey, and Mason K. Allred, eds., *Documents, Volume 10: May–August 1842*, vol. 10 of the Documents series of *The Joseph Smith Papers*, ed. Matthew C. Godfrey, R. Eric Smith, Matthew J. Grow, and Ronald K. Esplin (Salt Lake City: Church Historian's Press, 2020), 154–55.
3. Preston Sprinkle, *Fight: A Christian Case for Nonviolence* (Colorado Springs, CO: David C. Cook, 2013), 142.
4. Roland H. Bainton, *Christian Attitudes toward War and Peace: A Historical Survey and Critical Reevaluation* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1960); Ronald J. Sider, *The Early Church on Killing: A Comprehensive Sourcebook on War, Abortion, and Capital Punishment* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2012); Lisa Sowle Cahill, *Blessed Are the Peacemakers: Pacifism, Just War, and Peacebuilding* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2019), chapter 3.
5. Bainton, *Christian Attitudes*, 53–54.
6. See Roland Bainton, *Early Christianity* (Princeton, NJ: D. Van Nostrand, 1960), 53; Diarmaid MacCulloch, *Christianity: The First Three Thousand Years* (New York: Penguin Books, 2009), 156; Justo L. Gonzalez, *The Story of Christianity, Vol. 1, The Early Church to the Reformation*, revised and updated (New York: HarperOne, 2010), 63.
7. Cahill, *Blessed Are the Peacemakers*, 74; see all of chapter 2.
8. Quoted in Bainton, *Christian Attitudes*, 68.
9. Quoted in Cahill, *Blessed Are the Peacemakers*, 77.
10. Quoted in Cahill, *Blessed Are the Peacemakers*, 87.
11. For examples, see Leviticus 15:19–33; 1 Corinthians 11:5–6, 14:34.
12. A note on method: This essay focuses primarily on Joseph Smith's canonized revelations as scripture that carry transhistorical authority and applicability for Latter-day Saints. I therefore quote from the modern Doctrine and Covenants rather than from the documentary sources as compiled and transcribed in the Joseph Smith Papers. In short, while my argument here is deeply informed by history, and I fully appreciate that all revelation

originates in historical particularity, my aims here are more exegetical and theological than historical.

13. See Mark Ashurst-McGee, "Zion Rising: Joseph Smith's Early Social and Political Thought" (PhD diss., Arizona State University, 2008); Richard Lyman Bushman, *Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2005), 168. On early Latter-day Saint millennialism, see Grant Underwood, *The Millenarian World of Early Mormonism* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993).
14. See Mark Ashurst-McGee, "Zion as a Refuge from the Wars of the Nations," in *War and Peace in Our Times: Mormon Perspectives*, ed. Patrick Q. Mason, J. David Pulsipher, and Richard L. Bushman (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2012), 83–91; Patrick Q. Mason, "'The Wars and the Perplexities of the Nations': Reflections on Early Mormonism, Violence, and the State," *Journal of Mormon History* 38, no. 3 (Summer 2012): 72–89.
15. See Richard Maxwell Brown, *Strain of Violence: Historical Studies of American Violence and Vigilantism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1975).
16. John Corrill, *A Brief History of the Church of Christ of Latter Day Saints (Commonly Called Mormons)* (St. Louis: printed by the author, 1839), 19; spelling as in original.
17. See Marvin S. Hill, *Quest for Refuge: The Mormon Flight from American Pluralism* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1989), chapter 3.
18. In this respect I believe the enumeration of blessings functions something like Christ's command to forgive "seventy times seven" (Matthew 18:22; Doctrine and Covenants 98:40).
19. See Kenneth Appold, "Justification," in *The Cambridge Dictionary of Christian Theology*, ed. Ian A. McFarland et al. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 257–59.
20. See Matthew C. Godfrey, "'The Redemption of Zion Must Needs Come by Power': Insights into the Camp of Israel Expedition, 1834," *BYU Studies Quarterly* 53, no. 4 (2014): 125–46.
21. Matthew C. Godfrey, "'We Believe the Hand of the Lord Is in It': Memories of Divine Intervention in the Zion's Camp Expedition," *BYU Studies Quarterly* 56, no. 4 (2017): 125–28.

22. Baldwin, Cahoon, Smith, and Tanner, all quoted in historical introduction to Revelation, 22 June 1834 [D&C 105], The Joseph Smith Papers, <https://josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/revelation-22-june-1834-dc-105/1#historical-intro>; spelling modernized.