

## Chapter 9

# CHALLENGES MOUNT IN MISSOURI

*B*uilding Zion and the New Jerusalem proved to be more difficult than W. W. Phelps first imagined. His editorials in *The Evening and the Morning Star* were optimistic, but life in reality was harsh. Perhaps most challenging were human nature issues as found in each of the Mormon high priests, both those in Ohio and those in Missouri. Being so far away from one another did not help.

### COMMUNICATION PROBLEMS LEAD TO DISUNITY

Early in December 1832, the seven leading high priests in Zion, William Phelps and Edward Partridge chief among them, decided to write two serious letters to Joseph Smith and other church leaders in Kirtland. Sidney Gilbert wrote the first on December 10 and Phelps the second on December 15. These are no longer extant, but some of their contents can be ascertained by return letters from Kirtland addressed to Phelps. The second of these return letters also refers to a June 6 letter from John Corrill in Zion.<sup>1</sup>

The Zion brethren accused Joseph Smith of amassing too much authority. They strongly suggested that the Prophet was obligated to move to Missouri and join the Jackson County Saints. By doing so, he could emphasize the gathering to Zion better than if he maintained his residence in Ohio. Joseph could better continue his work, they assumed, as translator (i.e., for his inspired revision of the Bible), prophet, seer, revelator, and president in Missouri. They wrote with some haughtiness, as can be inferred from a few statements in the replies.

Joseph Smith had been displeased with the June letters from the Missouri brethren, but these December letters evidently cut him to the core. Back in July he had written to Phelps that he felt wounded that the Zion brethren were looking for “motes in the eyes of those who are laboring with tender and prayerful hearts” when their own eyes were “filled

with beams." Instead of letting past grievances lie, John Corrill and Edward Partridge had brought up "those things which had been settled & forgiven & which they dare not bring to our faces."<sup>2</sup>

Smith assumed that the Zion brethren fully trusted him to act in all things by revelation. Back in April when he had visited them, Joseph believed that all divisions had been resolved. "Our hearts are greatly grieved at the spirit which is breathed both in your [Phelps's] letter and that of Brother [Gilbert's]," the Prophet wrote in January 1833, "the very spirit which is wasting the strength of Zion like a pestilence." He warned the Zion brethren that if that evil spirit "is not detected and driven from you, it will ripen Zion for the threatened judgments of God." He reminded them that the Lord had commanded him to remain in Kirtland for a season. Joseph then revealed a new commandment to construct a House of the Lord, or a temple, in Ohio and to establish a school of the prophets (D&C 88). In fact, he enclosed the entire revelation in his missive. Smith called it the "Olive Leaf," a peace offering from the Lord and from the Kirtland brethren to the Zion brethren to bring about better feelings again.<sup>3</sup>

The Prophet's letter breathed a spirit of long-suffering and forgiveness. He did not want to allow these feelings of animosity to get out of hand. "The brethren in Kirtland pray for you unceasingly," he reminded his friends. But he clearly wanted his brethren to repent of their ill feelings of "self-justification." He bluntly stated, "Tell Brother Gilbert that low insinuations God hates; but He rejoices in an honest heart. . . . This from your brother who trembles for Zion, and for the wrath of heaven, which awaits her if she repent not."<sup>4</sup>

Responding to an assignment from a council of high priests in Kirtland, Orson Hyde and Hyrum Smith also wrote a letter to the brethren in Zion. It was written just three days after Joseph's and came right to the point, stating that they were authorized to condemn the "ensorious spirit" manifested by the Missouri leaders. They said they were responding to the Lord's command, found now in D&C 84:76, to upbraid the brethren in Zion for "their evil hearts of unbelief" and "rebellion."<sup>5</sup> Specifically to Phelps they wrote,

Brother Phelps' letter of December 15th is also received and carefully read, and it betrays a lightness of spirit that ill becomes a man placed in the important and responsible station<sup>6</sup> that he is placed in. . . . Think not, brethren, that we make a man an offender for a word; this is not the case; but we want to see a spirit in Zion, by which the Lord will build it up; that is the plain, solemn, and pure spirit of Christ.<sup>7</sup>

These January 1833 letters demonstrated that everything was far from harmonious among the leaders of the church in these early days. They were younger men (all of them under fifty and many in their twenties and thirties) with little training and experience. No doubt much of the problem was the difficulty of communication. Their letters took three to four weeks to reach their destination once they were written. Sometimes their letters passed each other in transit. Misunderstandings and hurt feelings developed quickly. Postal rates were a huge problem. "Between 1816 and 1845, the cost for sending a single sheet letter less than 30 miles was six cents; not over 80 miles, ten cents; not over 150

miles, 12½ cents; and not over 400 miles, 18¾ cents. Greater distances cost 25 cents. Letters of two or more sheets required additional postage in proportion.”<sup>8</sup> Postage would come to multiple dollars in today’s money.

This lack of unity was a matter of deep concern for everybody involved, including their fear that the judgments of God would fall upon them.<sup>9</sup> From this perspective, Latter-day Saints later in the decade felt that their persecutions resulted, in part, from this lack of unity and from selfishness.

Phelps had another reason to be personally frustrated. His dear brother in the gospel, Joseph Smith Jr., whom he loved so deeply, also wrote that Phelps should make some changes with *The Evening and the Morning Star*. “We wish you to render the *Star* as interesting as possible,” the Prophet wrote, “by setting forth the rise, progress, and faith of the Church, *as well as doctrine*; for if you do not render it more interesting than at present, it will fall, and the Church will suffer a great loss thereby.”<sup>10</sup>

In this January 1833 letter, Joseph Smith demonstrated how he exercised authority over all things in the kingdom of God, even though he was more than eight hundred miles away from where Zion was to be built. He had placed an experienced journalist, Phelps, as editor and publisher of all the church’s publications. He had directed the high priests in Zion to guide the church in that part of the Lord’s vineyard. The infant Church of Christ was only a little over two and a half years old. But in that period, the Prophet’s authority over all issues, doctrines, procedures, policies, and programs had been solidified by both revelation and precedent.

Phelps indeed had room for improvement in his editing of *The Evening and the Morning Star*. A historian of nineteenth-century Mormon journalism observed that Phelps’s major weakness “was a combination of a poor selection of material, the absence of orderly and simple development, and a turgid style, the vice of almost all American literature of the time.” He further noted that the *Star*’s problems “could in part be traced to an over-anxious editor, intent upon heralding the messages of the new church, unmindful that many of his readers were not familiar with the historical development and ideas of the Church.”<sup>11</sup>

## THE “OLIVE LEAF”

The January letters from Kirtland to Zion had a salutary effect. First, the Missouri brethren were pleased with the reception of such an exciting revelation, the “Olive Leaf” (D&C 88), that had so much doctrinal insight and practical instructions. The Zion leaders sought ways to implement some of its instructions, including conducting “solemn assemblies.” Second, they ardently desired to reconcile with their Kirtland brethren. Third, they desired to set up a school in Zion as outlined in the revelation. And finally, Phelps sought new ways to make *The Evening and the Morning Star* more interesting and to chart the rise of the church in the latter days. “We hope to publish more original matter in the second volume, than we have in the first. . . . In order to give the progress and prospects of the church, it is necessary that our elders should transmit to us, an account of what they do from time to time. In this way, the spread of the work, and the increase of faith, can be published as one testimony that these things are of the Lord.”<sup>12</sup>

The Olive Leaf commanded the priesthood to “call a solemn assembly” and “ponder the warning [regarding keeping covenants and commandments] in their hearts which they have received.” In these special meetings, they were to “teach one another the doctrine of the kingdom” so that they might “be instructed more perfectly in theory, in principle, in doctrine, in the law of the gospel, in all things that pertain unto the kingdom of God.”<sup>13</sup> Consequently, Edward Partridge, John Corrill, Isaac Morley, Oliver Cowdery, and John Whitmer went throughout the existing branches in Jackson County holding solemn assemblies. They shared the instructions of the Olive Leaf revelation, committed the members to more righteous behavior, and urged them to strive in all ways to live in harmony with all other “disciples of Christ” (Mormons). Phelps and Sidney Gilbert stayed in Independence to care for the printshop and store, respectively.<sup>14</sup>

All high priests in Zion, twenty in number, convened a council on February 26, 1833. They discussed a report of these solemn assemblies. Then they resolved that W. W. Phelps, Oliver Cowdery, and John Corrill compose an “epistle” to “our brethren in Kirtland” that very day. The conference adjourned until 6:00 p.m. so the letter could be written. When the brethren came together again, Phelps read the letter (which is no longer extant). The brethren formally accepted the letter’s contents. John Whitmer recorded in the minutes, “We then all kneeled before the Lord & asked him to effect a perfect harmony between us & our brethren in Kirtland which was the desire of our hearts.” The council voted to reconvene in four weeks.<sup>15</sup>

Meanwhile, back in Kirtland, Joseph Smith received a revelation (D&C 90) on March 8 that pertained in part to the relationship between the leaders in Ohio and Missouri. It reiterated that Joseph Smith and his two counselors in the presidency of the high priesthood, Sidney Rigdon and Frederick G. Williams, held the keys of the kingdom of God jointly and that they would not be taken from Joseph Smith and given to another. This council of three was charged to “set in order all the affairs of this church and kingdom.” The revelation added critical counsel to church leaders in Zion, including Phelps: (1) do not weary Joseph Smith and the Lord any further regarding expecting Joseph Smith to remove to Missouri, and (2) “I [the Lord] say unto you that your brethren in Zion begin to repent, and the angels rejoice over them.”<sup>16</sup>

The aforementioned February 26 letter of Phelps, Cowdery, and Corrill was warmly received by the presidency of the high priesthood and the other high priests when it arrived in Ohio. The Kirtland brethren were also pleased that “a sincere and humble repentance [had been] manifested” and that solemn assemblies for the instruction of all the Saints in Zion had taken place.<sup>17</sup> Thus, relative harmony prevailed again among the church leaders spread so far apart in the two official gathering places in Ohio and Missouri.

## LIFE IN JACKSON COUNTY

Domestic life for the Saints in Zion, including the Phelps family in Independence, went on for the most part peacefully during the second year there. Establishing schools was important. A schoolhouse had opened sometime in 1832 in Kaw, honored later as the first schoolhouse within present-day Kansas City boundaries.<sup>18</sup> William E. McLellin,

an experienced schoolteacher and convert to Mormonism, had opened a school in the summer of 1832 in Independence for about thirty students who were the children of the Mormon families living in the village.<sup>19</sup> The four Phelps children of school age—Sabrina (sixteen), Mehitabel (thirteen), Waterman (nine), and Sarah (seven)—probably attended this school. When McLellin went on a mission in the winter, quite likely someone else, perhaps one or more of the mothers, took over the teaching.

Phelps was exceedingly eager that a regular school system be established in Zion. “Although we have frequently spoke of the necessity, of having children taught in all things appertaining to their welfare in this world,” he wrote in *The Evening and the Morning Star*, “still we feel a great anxiety on the subject, seeing that many children among the disciples, are deprived of, or do not enjoy the blessing of a school.” He urged the formation of schools throughout all the branches. “Children should be taught in the rudiments of common learning out of the best books,” he insisted. This learning was for one consecrated purpose: “And then, as they grow up they can be qualified to search the scriptures, and acquire the knowledge of the Lord, become heirs of the kingdom.”<sup>20</sup>

Phelps loved children, and he believed with the Psalmist that “children are an heritage of the Lord” (Psalm 127:3). But he especially loved his own children, although he could be strict in implementing discipline. Through the pages of the *Star*, he promoted the appropriate treatment and rearing of children. “How important then, that they be watched over,” Phelps urged, “and instructed in a feeling and impressive manner. How important that they be taught to be sober, and avoid every vain and foolish amusement. How important that they be taught to love one another, and always speak the truth.”<sup>21</sup> William and Sally were also blessed with a new baby boy on September 22, 1832, whom they named James. He was their eighth child (sixth living) and third son.

Nineteen-year-old Emily Austin, a member of the original Colesville, New York, Branch that had come to Missouri as a group, observed fondly regarding this period in Jackson County: “The poor were provided for, as well as those who had put their money into the treasury. They were all satisfied and happy to all appearance, and all seemed to enjoy themselves.”<sup>22</sup>

### THIRD ANNIVERSARY CELEBRATION

The next council of high priests in Zion, twenty-one men in number, convened on Tuesday, March 26, 1833. They had “much discussion” on the order of the church in Jackson County. In the various solemn assemblies in the different branches, the brethren had explained to the Saints that “the seven High Priests who were sent from Kirtland to build up Zion—Oliver Cowdery, W. W. Phelps, John Whitmer, Algernon Sidney Gilbert, Bishop Partridge and his two counselors [John Corrill and Isaac Morley]—should stand at the head of affairs relating to the Church, in that section of the Lord’s vineyard; and these seven men, with the common consent of the branches comprising the Church were to appoint presiding Elders, to take the watch care of the several branches, as they were appointed.” It was also concluded that “the Elders [missionaries or new immigrants], when they arrived at Zion, were bound by the authorities set in the Church [the seven

high priests], to be submissive to the powers that be." This council ended on a pleasing note. "The Elders soon saw the beauty of every man standing in his place."<sup>23</sup>

These Zion brethren planned another solemn assembly a few days hence on Saturday, April 6, to celebrate the third anniversary of the church's founding in New York. They invited all Jackson County Saints and held festivities outdoors at the church-run ferry on the Big Blue River operated by Porter Rockwell. It was simply called the "Ferry" by the Saints. Western Missouri had enjoyed an early spring, "and the leaves and blossoms enlivened and gratified the soul of man like a glimpse of Paradise." The assembly lasted from ten in the morning until four in the afternoon. This was the first time members anywhere celebrated the anniversary of the church's founding.<sup>24</sup>

"The day was spent in a very agreeable manner," Phelps remembered, "in giving and receiving knowledge which appertained to this last kingdom." Phelps noted that it was "just 1800 years since the Savior laid down His life that men might have everlasting life." This concept was based on the popular notion that the church was established exactly to the day 1830 years after Jesus Christ was born, all this based on Doctrine and Covenants 20:1—"The rise of the Church of Christ in these last days, being one thousand eight hundred and thirty years since the coming of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ in the flesh."<sup>25</sup> Phelps also observed that "the Saints had great reasons to rejoice: they thought upon the time when this world came into existence, and the morning stars sang together, and all the sons of God shouted for joy." The disciples also reflected on the first "Passover," when the children of Israel were delivered out of Egypt. They also "felt like the shepherds who watched their flocks by night, when the angelic choir sweetly sang the electrifying strain." In sum, "the solemnities of eternity rested upon them."<sup>26</sup> Sadly, this event, as joyous as it was, was the last such pleasant event that the Mormons as a group would enjoy in the county.

This celebration did not go unnoticed by the original settlers of Jackson County. Phelps later recorded in the official history, "Those who professed not our faith talked about it as a strange thing."<sup>27</sup> Actually, these residents had been watching the Mormons warily for some time, and they did not like what they saw. A number of them, including some of the more prominent businessmen, officeholders, and clergy, resolved that this Mormon menace would have to be squelched. They shared their views of concern at first only person-to-person and family-to-family. Then whole groups of neighbors and religious congregations discussed the "obnoxious" Mormons and their practices. In the month of April, probably just days after the Saints' solemn assembly, a group of three hundred citizens gathered together in Independence "to consult upon a plan, for the removal, or immediate destruction, of the Church in Jackson County."<sup>28</sup> Within a few months the inhabitants of Jackson County would take extralegal action to force the Mormons out of their midst.

## NOTES

1. These two letters are from Joseph Smith Jr., dated January 11, 1833, and from Orson Hyde and Hyrum Smith, who were representing a “Conference of Twelve High Priests,” dated January 14, 1833. They are recorded in *JSP*, D2:365–68, 372–78; *MHC*, vol. A-1, 262–70; and *HC*, 1:316–21. The July 31, 1832, letter from Joseph Smith to Phelps, recorded in *JSP*, D2:261–72 and *PWJS*, 269–76, also refers to the renewed rift between the high priests in Zion and the high priests in Ohio as well as to the June letter from John Corrill. Matthew C. Godfrey discusses this contention in his “Seeking after Monarchal Power and Authority’: Joseph Smith and Leadership in the Church of Christ, 1831–1832,” *Mormon Historical Studies* 13 (Spring/Fall 2012): 15–37.
2. *JSP*, D2:263; *PWJS*, 271.
3. *JSP*, D2:367; *MHC*, vol. A-1, 262–64; *HC*, 1:316–17; *JSP*, MRB:292–311. Romig believes that Joseph Smith also wanted to renew the Missouri Saints’ commitment to the law of consecration with this revelation. See Ronald E. Romig, *Eighth Witness: The Biography of John Whitmer* (Independence, MO: John Whitmer Books, 2014), 192–93.
4. *JSP*, D2:367–68; *MHC*, vol. A-1, 263–64; *HC*, 1:316–17.
5. The January 14, 1833, letter of Orson Hyde and Hyrum Smith, along with its historical significance, is in *JSP*, D2:371–78. The quotation from D&C 84:76 in its original form is located in *JSP*, D2:289 and *JSP*, MRB:282–83.
6. Phelps’s “responsible station” would include his callings as “printer unto the church,” member of the United Firm, and one of the presiding high priests in Zion.
7. *JSP*, D2:375; *MHC*, vol. A-1, 266–67; *HC*, 1:319.
8. See quotation from Dean Jesse in Romig, *Biography of John Whitmer*, 171–72, for a complete discussion of the postal rates.
9. Joseph Smith definitely expressed this sentiment in his letter found in *JSP*, D2:365, 367–68; *MHC*, vol. A-1, 262–64; *HC*, 1:316–17.
10. *JSP*, D2:368; *MHC*, vol. A-1, 264; *HC*, 1:317; emphasis added.
11. Monte Burr McLaws, *Spokesman for the Kingdom: Early Mormon Journalism and the Deseret News, 1830–1898* (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University Press, 1977), 6.
12. “The Star,” *EMS* 1, no. 10 (March 1833): [4]. This same issue reported how the church had risen and grown in its three years’ existence. The editors also included what letters they had received from missionaries in the field. The same practice continued in subsequent issues.
13. D&C 88:70–71, 77–78; *JSP*, MRB:300–301; *JSP*, D2:341.
14. *MB2*, 34; *FWR*, 60.
15. *MB2*, 33–34; *FWR*, 60–61; *MHC*, vol. A-1, 275; *HC*, 1:327; *JSP*, D3:65.
16. D&C 90:2–3, 6, 16, 32–34. The original text of this revelation is in *JSP*, MRB:312–17; *JSP*, D3:27–32.
17. On April 21, 1833, Joseph Smith dictated a letter “to the Brethren in Zion” that responded directly to the specific items brought up in the February 26 letter of the Missouri leaders. Apparently Phelps had later written a separate letter to which Joseph Smith responded, “We were well pleased with the spirit in which it was written.” Smith’s letter is in *JSP*, D3:66–70. See also *MHC*, vol. A-1, 282–83, 288–89; and *HC*, 1:335, 340–41.
18. Pearl Wilcox, *The Latter Day Saints on the Missouri Frontier* (Independence, MO: n.p., 1972), 33.
19. Jan Shipp and John W. Welch, eds., *The Journals of William E. McLellin, 1831–1836* (Provo, UT: BYU Studies, 1994), 83.
20. “Schools,” *EMS* 2, no. 14 (July 1833): 107.

21. Phelps wrote the lengthy article "Children," *EMS* 1, no. 12 (May 1833): [5]–[6] (quotation on p. [6]).
22. Emily M. Austin, *Mormonism: or Life among the Mormons* (Madison, WI: M. J. Cantwell Book and Job Printer, 1882): 66–67.
23. MHC, vol. A-1, 282–83; *HC*, 1:335; MB2, 34; *FWR*, 61–62.
24. MHC, vol. A-1, 283–84; *HC*, 1:336. Phelps recorded part of the proceedings in "The Sixth of April," *EMS* 1, no. 11 (April 1833): [5]. Unquestionably, Phelps provided information about the events of this day when he and Willard Richards recorded this portion of the official history in 1843. Phelps's love for the date of April 6 was manifested later in Utah when he composed the poem "The Sixth of April," which was sung by a choir in the April 1851 general conference. "Minutes of the General Conference of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints," *Deseret News* 1, no. 31 (April 19, 1851): 241.
25. Most Mormon historians presently reject that interpretation of "exactly 1830 years since the birth of Christ," stating instead that Joseph Smith was speaking generically about "the year of the Lord" 1830.
26. MHC, vol. A-1, 284; *HC*, 1:336.
27. MHC, vol. A-1, 284; *HC*, 1:336.
28. MHC, vol. A-1, 290; *HC*, 1:342.