

Sidney Rigdon's Fourth of July [1838] Oration

Background

Sidney Rigdon's Missouri Speeches.

by Mark F. McKiernan

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The years of 1838 and 1839 were years of desperation, frustration, and suffering for Sidney Rigdon. After fleeing from Kirtland, he worked with Joseph Smith in attempting to establish another religious community at Far West, Missouri: this in the face of serious internal dissensions as well as external persecutions. Joseph was determined that the Church make a stand and fight the forces which sought to overthrow it; Rigdon was the Prophet's spokesman and counselor in this mission. To both Gentiles and Church members, Rigdon became a symbol of the new Mormon militancy of Far West.

Both Joseph Smith and Sidney Rigdon were determined to stamp out apostasy in Missouri. They believed that the entire future of the Mormon movement rested on their success in driving the dissenters from their midst; and because of Rigdon's ability to sway audiences, he became the Prophet's spokesman in the cause of orthodoxy. At Far West on June 19, 1838, Rigdon delivered a scathing denunciation of disloyalty among the members of the Church. No text nor synopsis has remained of his discourse, but reports of eyewitnesses indicated that Rigdon, who could inspire an audience to tears, could also lash them into fury.¹ Rigdon took his text from the fifth chapter of Matthew: "Ye are the salt of the earth. If the salt hath lost its savor, it is thenceforth good for nothing, but to be cast out and trodden under the feet of men." Joseph Smith followed Rigdon's harangue with a short speech, apparently sanctioning what he had said.² The salt sermon caused a frenzy of activity aimed at purging the ranks of disloyal members. One unfortunate effect of the controversy over dissenters was the formation of the apparently unauthorized Danites, a secret militant society for the enforcement of orthodoxy.

In July, 1838, the direction of the new militancy shifted from opposing dissenters to combating Gentile persecution. Henceforth, proclaimed, the Mormons would make their stand with violence of their own. The First Presidency had been militant in attitude since their arrival at Far West, but

their intention to fight if necessary was declared to the entire state in Rigdon's July 4th speech.³ It was called a Mormon declaration of rights. When Rigdon's address was published in neighboring papers it caused great contention among the Missourians; his Independence Day speech helped polarize both the Mormons and the Missourians, and the stage was set for the Mormon War.

After the disasters of the Mormon War, which included expulsion of the Mormons from Missouri under Governor Lilburn Boggs' so-called extermination order and the Haun's Mill massacre, Joseph Smith and Sidney Rigdon, along with other Mormon leaders, were incarcerated. At the end of November, 1838, the First Presidency and some other Church leaders were transported to the county jail at Liberty, Missouri. Rigdon languished in that damp jail, while his body was racked with fever, often leaving him too weak to stand. In February, 1839, Smith's and Rigdon's pleas for writs of habeas corpus were granted. Alexander Doniphan pleaded the cases of all the Mormon prisoners except Rigdon, who acted in his own defense.

At Rigdon's trial for murder and treason, the courtroom was crowded with about a hundred excited anti-Mormons who were veterans of the Mormon War. Rigdon was ill and emaciated from his months of incarceration. He pleaded innocent to the crimes charged against him but enumerated the privations, persecutions, and sufferings he had received in his relentless pursuit for religious truth. Doniphan recorded, "Such a burst of eloquence it was never my fortune to listen to, at its dose there was not a dry eye in the room, all were moved to tears." The judge discharged the case against Rigdon immediately. One of the audience stood up and declared, "We came here determined to do injury to this man. He is innocent of crime, as has been made to appear. And now, gentlemen, out with your money and help the man return to his destitute family." The anti-Mormon audience raised \$100 and handed it to Rigdon.⁴

Rigdon's fellow Church leaders were returned to jail, but the judge ordered that Rigdon be discharged from custody. However, Rigdon stated, "I was told by those who professed to be my friends, that it would not do for me to get out of jail at this time, as the mob was watching and would most certainly take my life."⁵ Thus he was held in protective custody until his friends, who included the Clay County sheriff, could arrange his safe conduct out of the state. Rigdon fled from Missouri for his life, leaving behind a shattered dream, a scattered people, and a shackled Prophet.

Despite Rigdon's abilities and his continued devotion to the Church, his influence waned in the Mormon movement after Far West. This period in

Mormon history had been a costly failure. The Mormons' settlements were destroyed, their property confiscated, and they were forced to become refugees from the vengeance of the Missouri mobs. The Mormon leaders would have been exterminated had it not been for the courageous intervention of Alexander Doniphan. Most of the Mormons of importance were imprisoned for at least six months. Far West was a period of no significant religious accomplishments; on the contrary, it was a time of purge within the Mormon movement. Rigdon's enunciation of Joseph Smith's policies in the salt sermon and the Fourth of July speech were associated by the Mormons and the non-Mormons alike only with the fiery character of Sidney . Unfortunately for , he became a symbol of the militant Mormonism of the Far West period, and it was a symbol synonymous with disaster.

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1. John Corroll, *Brief History of the Church of Christ of Latter Day Saints (Commonly Called Mormons) Including an Account of the Author for Leaving the Church* (St. Louis, 1839), p. 26.
 2. Lu. B. Cake, *Peepstone Joe and the Peck Manuscript* (New York, 1857), pp. 104-105.
 3. *Elders Journal*, August 1838.
 4. *The Saints' Herald*, August 2, 1884; also see *Daily Missouri Republican* (St. Louis) February 14, 1839.
 5. *Times and Seasons*, August 1, 1843.
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from "The Election Day Battle at Gallatin" by Reed C. Durham, Jr. *BYU Studies* 13.1 (Autumn 1972): 56-58.

I have attempted to show evidence that an aggressive, belligerent, and militant spirit was being developed in the hearts of the Latter-day Saints in Missouri. The Political Motto, the Salt Sermon, the Note of Warning, and the flight of the dissenters all testify to it; but the fact that two formed organizations were actually created and operative in Missouri--two Mormon armies!--adds greater validity to that argument. Yet, with all of this additional supporting evidence comes from the words of Sidney given on Independence Day, 4 1838. His position was given while delivering an official address on that day, an address which reflected the attitudes of the Saints. (It is important to remember that this sermon was delivered only one month before the Gallatin affair.) The address is known as the Mormon Declaration of Independence. [Durham quotes the sermon, and then continues:]

The sermon was enthusiastically welcomed by the entire congregation; in fact, upon the conclusion of it they spontaneously shouted the "hosannah shout." "From every standpoint, the speech was an immediate success." The skeptic who does not believe that either the message or the tone of this address reflected the official Church position or, at least, Joseph Smith's position, and that it only reflected Sidney Rigdon's point of view, must reorient his thinking when he reads the following words from Joseph Smith, given less than one month after the Gallatin Election Day Battle:

ELDERS' JOURNAL

Joseph Smith, jr. Editor

Far West, Mo., August, 1838

In this paper, we give the proceedings[sic] which were had on the fourth of July, at this place, in laying the corner stones of the temple, about to be built in this city.

The oration delivered on the occasion, is now published in pamphlet form: those of our friends wishing to have one, can get it, by calling on Ebenezer Robinson, by whom they were printed. We would recommend to all the saints to get one, to be had in their families, as it contains an outline of the suffering and persecutions of the Church from its rise. As also the fixed determinations of the saints, in relation to the persecutors, who are, and have been, continually, not only threatening us with mobs, but actually have been putting their threats into execution; with which we are absolutely determined no longer to bear, come life or come death, for to be mob[b]ed any more without taking vengeance, we will not. EDITOR.

Joseph Smith's editorial gave wholehearted endorsement of Sidney Rigdon's sermon; the Elders' Journal was the Church's official publication at this time. [...]