



The Wentworth Letter

The Wentworth Letter is the Prophet Joseph Smith's account of "the rise, progress, persecution, and faith of the Latter-day Saints," including the statements known as the Articles of Faith.

From the Life of Joseph Smith

In addition to being President of the Church, Joseph Smith had many other responsibilities in Nauvoo. In May 1842, he became mayor of Nauvoo, which meant that he was also chief judge of the Nauvoo Municipal Court. He was a lieutenant general and commander of the Nauvoo Legion. And in February 1842, he assumed the role of editor of the *Times and Seasons*, a Church periodical that was published twice a month. The *Times and Seasons* provided a way for Church leaders to communicate with the Saints, publish revelations and important discourses, and share news of the Church. John Taylor, a member of the Quorum of the Twelve, was appointed to handle many aspects of the publication under the Prophet's direction.

In the first edition published while he was editor, the Prophet wrote that the periodical would provide articles on "the important events that are daily transpiring around us; the rapid advance of truth; the many communications that we are receiving, daily, from elders abroad; both in this country, in England, from the continent of Europe, and other parts of the world; the convulsed state of the nations; the epistles and teachings of the Twelve; and the revelations which we are receiving from the Most High."¹

While the Prophet served as editor, the *Times and Seasons* published documents of great importance. The text of the book of Abraham and two of the facsimiles were published in March 1842, with the third facsimile published in May. Also in March,



“At the request of Mr. John Wentworth, . . . I have written the following sketch of the rise, progress, persecution, and faith of the Latter-day Saints, of which I have the honor, under God, of being the founder.”

the Prophet began publishing the “History of Joseph Smith,” the account that would later become *History of the Church*.

In the *Times and Seasons* issue dated March 1, 1842, the Prophet published what has come to be known as the Wentworth Letter. Describing his reasons for producing this document, the Prophet explained: “At the request of Mr. John Wentworth, Editor and Proprietor of the *Chicago Democrat*, I have written the following sketch of the rise, progress, persecution, and faith of the Latter-day Saints, of which I have the honor, under God, of being the founder. Mr. Wentworth says that he wishes to furnish Mr. [George] Barstow, a friend of his, who is writing the history of New Hampshire, with this document. As Mr. Barstow has taken the proper steps to obtain correct information, all that I shall ask at his hands, is, that he publish the account entire, un-garnished, and without misrepresentation.”²

George Barstow ultimately did not include the Prophet’s account in his history because he decided to cover events only through the year 1819 in his book.³ But the Wentworth Letter has immense value to Latter-day Saints. It is an original account by Joseph Smith testifying of his sacred call from God, his visions, and his ministry and teachings. It recounts the rise and growth of the Church and the persecutions of the Saints. It contains a prophetic declaration of the Church’s future success in the earth under the protective hand of the Great Jehovah. It also contains several important details not found elsewhere in the Prophet’s teachings, including a description of the gold plates and a sketch of the contents of the Book of Mormon. Significantly, it is the first time that Joseph Smith himself published an account of his First Vision.

Concluding with the 13 declarations of Church doctrine now called the Articles of Faith, it stands as a powerful witness of the divine calling of the Prophet Joseph Smith.

Teachings of Joseph Smith

God the Father and Jesus Christ appeared to Joseph Smith in answer to his prayer.

“I was born in the town of Sharon, Windsor County, Vermont, on the 23rd of December, A.D. 1805. When [I was] ten years old, my parents removed to Palmyra, New York, where we resided about four years, and from thence we removed to the town of Manchester. My father was a farmer and taught me the art of husbandry. When about fourteen years of age, I began to reflect upon the importance of being prepared for a future state, and upon inquiring [about] the plan of salvation, I found that there was a great clash in religious sentiment; if I went to one society they referred me to one plan, and another to another; each one pointing to his own particular creed as the *summum bonum* of perfection. Considering that all could not be right, and that God could not be the author of so much confusion, I determined to investigate the subject more fully, believing that if God had a Church it would not be split up into factions, and that if He taught one society to worship one way, and administer in one set of ordinances, He would not teach another, principles which were diametrically opposed.

“Believing the word of God, I had confidence in the declaration of James—‘If any of you lack wisdom, let him ask of God, that giveth to all men liberally, and upbraideth not; and it shall be given him.’ [James 1:5.] I retired to a secret place in a grove, and began to call upon the Lord; while fervently engaged in supplication, my mind was taken away from the objects with which I was surrounded, and I was enwrapped in a heavenly vision, and saw two glorious personages, who exactly resembled each other in features and likeness, surrounded with a brilliant light which eclipsed the sun at noon day. They told me that all religious denominations were believing in incorrect doctrines, and that none of them was acknowledged of God as His Church and kingdom: and I was expressly commanded ‘to go not after them,’ at the same time receiving a promise that the fullness of the Gospel should at some future time be made known unto me.

The Book of Mormon was written anciently upon gold plates and delivered to Joseph Smith by a divinely sent messenger.

“On the evening of the 21st of September, A.D. 1823, while I was praying unto God, and endeavoring to exercise faith in the precious promises of Scripture, on a sudden a light like that of day, only of a far purer and more glorious appearance and brightness, burst into the room; indeed the first sight was as though the house was filled with consuming fire; the appearance produced a shock that affected the whole body; in a moment a personage stood before me surrounded with a glory yet greater than that with which I was already surrounded. This messenger proclaimed himself to be an angel of God, sent to bring the joyful tidings that the covenant which God made with ancient Israel was at hand to be fulfilled, that the preparatory work for the second coming of the Messiah was speedily to commence, that the time was at hand for the Gospel in all its fullness to be preached in power, unto all nations that a people might be prepared for the Millennial reign. I was informed that I was chosen to be an instrument in the hands of God to bring about some of His purposes in this glorious dispensation.

“I was also informed concerning the aboriginal inhabitants of this country and shown who they were, and from whence they came; a brief sketch of their origin, progress, civilization, laws, governments, of their righteousness and iniquity, and the blessings of God being finally withdrawn from them as a people, was made known unto me; I was also told where were deposited some plates on which were engraven an abridgment of the records of the ancient Prophets that had existed on this continent. The angel appeared to me three times the same night and unfolded the same things. After having received many visits from the angels of God unfolding the majesty and glory of the events that should transpire in the last days, on the morning of the 22nd of September, A.D. 1827, the angel of the Lord delivered the records into my hands.

“These records were engraven on plates which had the appearance of gold; each plate was six inches wide and eight inches long, and not quite so thick as common tin. They were filled with



*"On the morning of the 22nd of September, A.D. 1827,
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engravings, in Egyptian characters, and bound together in a volume as the leaves of a book, with three rings running through the whole. The volume was something near six inches in thickness, a part of which was sealed. The characters on the unsealed part were small, and beautifully engraved. The whole book exhibited many marks of antiquity in its construction, and much skill in the art of engraving. With the records was found a curious instrument, which the ancients called 'Urim and Thummin,' which consisted of two transparent stones set in the rim of a bow fastened

to a breast plate. Through the medium of the Urim and Thummim I translated the record by the gift and power of God.

“ . . . This book . . . tells us that our Savior made His appearance upon this continent after His resurrection; that He planted the Gospel here in all its fulness, and richness, and power, and blessing; that they had Apostles, Prophets, Pastors, Teachers, and Evangelists, the same order, the same priesthood, the same ordinances, gifts, powers, and blessings, as were enjoyed on the eastern continent; that the people were cut off in consequence of their transgressions; that the last of their prophets who existed among them was commanded to write an abridgment of their prophecies, history, etc., and to hide it up in the earth, and that it should come forth and be united with the Bible for the accomplishment of the purposes of God in the last days. For a more particular account I would refer to the Book of Mormon, which can be purchased at Nauvoo, or from any of our Traveling Elders.

“As soon as the news of this discovery was made known, false reports, misrepresentation and slander flew, as on the wings of the wind, in every direction; the house was frequently beset by mobs and evil designing persons. Several times I was shot at, and very narrowly escaped, and every device was made use of to get the plates away from me; but the power and blessing of God attended me, and several began to believe my testimony.

**Although persecution may rage against the Church,
nothing can stop the progress of truth.**

“On the 6th of April, 1830, the ‘Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints’ was first organized in the town of Fayette, Seneca county, state of New York. Some few were called and ordained by the Spirit of revelation and prophecy, and began to preach as the Spirit gave them utterance, and though weak, yet were they strengthened by the power of God, and many were brought to repentance, were immersed in the water, and were filled with the Holy Ghost by the laying on of hands. They saw visions and prophesied, devils were cast out, and the sick healed by the laying on of hands. From that time the work rolled forth with astonishing rapidity, and churches were soon formed in the states of

New York, Pennsylvania, Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, and Missouri; in the last named state a considerable settlement was formed in Jackson county: numbers joined the Church and we were increasing rapidly; we made large purchases of land, our farms teemed with plenty, and peace and happiness were enjoyed in our domestic circle, and throughout our neighborhood; but as we could not associate with our neighbors (who were, many of them, of the basest of men, and had fled from the face of civilized society, to the frontier country to escape the hand of justice,) in their midnight revels, their Sabbath breaking, horse racing and gambling; they commenced at first to ridicule, then to persecute, and finally an organized mob assembled and burned our houses, tarred and feathered and whipped many of our brethren, and finally, contrary to law, justice and humanity, drove them from their habitations; who, houseless and homeless, had to wander on the bleak prairies till the children left the tracks of their blood on the prairie. This took place in the month of November, and they had no other covering but the canopy of heaven, in this inclement season of the year; this proceeding was winked at by the government, and although we had warranty deeds for our land, and had violated no law, we could obtain no redress.

“There were many sick, who were thus inhumanly driven from their houses, and had to endure all this abuse and to seek homes where they could be found. The result was, that a great many of them being deprived of the comforts of life, and the necessary attendances, died; many children were left orphans, wives [were left] widows, and husbands, widowers; our farms were taken possession of by the mob, many thousands of cattle, sheep, horses and hogs were taken, and our household goods, store goods, and printing press and type were broken, taken, or otherwise destroyed.

“Many of our brethren removed to Clay county, where they continued until 1836, three years; there was no violence offered, but there were threatenings of violence. But in the summer of 1836 these threatenings began to assume a more serious form, from threats, public meetings were called, resolutions were passed, vengeance and destruction were threatened, and affairs

again assumed a fearful attitude; Jackson county was a sufficient precedent, and as the authorities in that county did not interfere, they [the Clay county authorities] boasted that they would not in this; which on application to the authorities we found to be too true, and after much privation and loss of property, we were again driven from our homes.

“We next settled in Caldwell and Daviess counties, where we made large and extensive settlements, thinking to free ourselves from the power of oppression, by settling in new counties, with very few inhabitants in them; but here we were not allowed to live in peace, but in 1838 we were again attacked by mobs, an exterminating order was issued by Governor Boggs, and under the sanction of law, an organized banditti ranged through the country, robbed us of our cattle, sheep, hogs, etc., many of our people were murdered in cold blood, the chastity of our women was violated, and we were forced to sign away our property at the point of the sword; and after enduring every indignity that could be heaped upon us by an inhuman, ungodly band of marauders, from twelve to fifteen thousand souls, men, women, and children, were driven from their own firesides, and from lands to which they had warranty deeds, houseless, friendless, and homeless (in the depths of winter) to wander as exiles on the earth, or to seek an asylum in a more genial clime, and among a less barbarous people. Many sickened and died in consequence of the cold and hardships they had to endure; many wives were left widows, and children [were left] orphans, and destitute. It would take more time than is allotted me here to describe the injustice, the wrongs, the murders, the bloodshed, the theft, misery and woe that have been caused by the barbarous, inhuman, and lawless proceedings of the state of Missouri.

“In the situation before alluded to, we arrived in the state of Illinois in 1839, where we found a hospitable people and a friendly home: a people who were willing to be governed by the principles of law and humanity. We have commenced to build a city called ‘Nauvoo,’ in Hancock county. We number from six to eight thousand here, besides vast numbers in the county around, and in almost every county of the state. We have a city charter

granted us, and charter for a Legion, the troops of which now number 1,500. We have also a charter for a University, for an Agricultural and Manufacturing Society, have our own laws and administrators, and possess all the privileges that other free and enlightened citizens enjoy.

“Persecution has not stopped the progress of truth, but has only added fuel to the flame, it has spread with increasing rapidity. Proud of the cause which they have espoused, and conscious of our innocence, and of the truth of their system, amidst calumny and reproach, have the Elders of this Church gone forth, and planted the Gospel in almost every state in the Union; it has penetrated our cities, it has spread over our villages, and has caused thousands of our intelligent, noble, and patriotic citizens to obey its divine mandates, and be governed by its sacred truths. It has also spread into England, Ireland, Scotland, and Wales, where, in the year 1840, a few of our missionaries were sent, and over five thousand joined the Standard of Truth; there are numbers now joining in every land.

“Our missionaries are going forth to different nations, and in Germany, Palestine, New Holland [Australia], the East Indies, and other places, the Standard of Truth has been erected; no unhallowed hand can stop the work from progressing; persecutions may rage, mobs may combine, armies may assemble, calumny may defame, but the truth of God will go forth boldly, nobly, and independent, till it has penetrated every continent, visited every clime, swept every country, and sounded in every ear, till the purposes of God shall be accomplished, and the Great Jehovah shall say the work is done.

**The Articles of Faith describe fundamental doctrines
and principles of our religion.**

“We believe in God the eternal Father, and in His Son Jesus Christ, and in the Holy Ghost.

“We believe that men will be punished for their own sins, and not for Adam’s transgression.

“We believe that through the atonement of Christ all mankind may be saved by obedience to the laws and ordinances of the Gospel.

“We believe that the first principle and ordinances of the Gospel are: (1) Faith in the Lord Jesus Christ; (2) Repentance; (3) Baptism by immersion for the remission of sins; (4) Laying on of hands for the gift of the Holy Ghost.

“We believe that a man must be called of God by prophecy and by the laying on of hands, by those who are in authority, to preach the Gospel and administer in the ordinances thereof.

“We believe in the same organization that existed in the primitive Church, viz.: apostles, prophets, pastors, teachers, evangelists, etc.

“We believe in the gift of tongues, prophecy, revelation, visions, healing, interpretation of tongues, etc.

“We believe the Bible to be the word of God, as far as it is translated correctly; we also believe the Book of Mormon to be the word of God.

“We believe all that God has revealed, all that He does now reveal, and we believe that He will yet reveal many great and important things pertaining to the kingdom of God.

“We believe in the literal gathering of Israel and in the restoration of the Ten Tribes; that Zion will be built upon this [the American] continent; that Christ will reign personally upon the earth; and that the earth will be renewed and receive its paradisiacal glory.

“We claim the privilege of worshiping Almighty God according to the dictates of our own conscience, and allow all men the same privilege, let them worship how, where, or what they may.

“We believe in being subject to kings, presidents, rulers and magistrates, in obeying, honoring, and sustaining the law.

“We believe in being honest, true, chaste, benevolent, virtuous, and in doing good to *all men*; indeed we may say that we follow the admonition of Paul, We believe all things, we hope all things, we have endured many things, and hope to be able to

endure all things. If there is anything virtuous, lovely, or of good report, or praiseworthy, we seek after these things. [See Articles of Faith 1:1–13.]

“Respectfully, etc.,

“JOSEPH SMITH.”⁴

Suggestions for Study and Teaching

Consider these ideas as you study the chapter or as you prepare to teach. For additional help, see pages vii–xii.

- Joseph Smith wrote the Wentworth Letter in response to a request from John Wentworth and George Barstow (page 437). When have people asked you about the history or beliefs of the Church? As you study or discuss this chapter, think about how you might respond to such questions in the future. What can we learn from Joseph Smith’s words in the Wentworth Letter about how to respond to such questions?
- Read what the Prophet said about his First Vision (page 438). The next time you tell someone about the First Vision, how might you help that person understand the First Vision and what it means to you?
- Read the Prophet’s description of the coming forth of the Book of Mormon (pages 439–41). What difference has the Book of Mormon made in your life? What are some ways we can share our testimonies of the Book of Mormon?
- On pages 441–44, Joseph Smith gives a brief history of the beginnings of the Church and then testifies of the Church’s destiny. What are your feelings as you study the second full paragraph on page 444? Why do you think persecution is unable to stop the Church’s progress? What are some examples of people progressing despite opposition? (Consider examples from the scriptures, Church history, and your own life.)
- Review the Articles of Faith (pages 444–46). In what ways have the Articles of Faith helped you? Why do you think we ask Primary children to memorize them? Consider organizing a schedule so you can study or memorize the Articles of Faith.

Related Scriptures: Joseph Smith—History 1:1–75

Notes

1. “To Subscribers,” an editorial published in *Times and Seasons*, Feb. 15, 1842, p. 696; capitalization modernized; Joseph Smith was the editor of the periodical.
2. *History of the Church*, 4:535–36; from a letter from Joseph Smith written at the request of John Wentworth and George Barstow, Nauvoo, Illinois, published in *Times and Seasons*, Mar. 1, 1842, p. 706. Mr. Barstow’s last name is incorrectly spelled “Bastow” in *History of the Church* and *Times and Seasons*.
3. Though the letter was apparently never published by John Wentworth or George Barstow, the same account, with some additions and revisions, was published nationally in 1844 by I. Daniel Rupp in “Latter Day Saints,” *He Pasa Ekklesia [The Whole Church]: An Original History of the Religious Denominations at Present Existing in the United States*, pp. 404–10.
4. *History of the Church*, 4:536–41; bracketed word “about” in first paragraph on p. 438 in original; bracketed words in eighth paragraph on p. 445 in original; spelling and punctuation modernized; from a letter from Joseph Smith written at the request of John Wentworth and George Barstow, Nauvoo, Illinois, published in *Times and Seasons*, Mar. 1, 1842, pp. 706–10. On several different occasions the Prophet Joseph Smith wrote or dictated a detailed account of the First Vision. The account in the Wentworth Letter is one of these accounts. The official scriptural account is found in Joseph Smith—History in the Pearl of Great Price. Also, a number of minor changes were made to prepare the Articles of Faith for publication in the 1981 edition of the Pearl of Great Price. Therefore, there are a number of small differences between the current version of the Articles of Faith and the version published in this chapter.