

Surviving Apostles?

by Bill McKeever

B.H. Roberts, an LDS Seventy and LDS Church historian, in his introduction to the *History of the Church*, stated that the LDS Church is founded upon this very premise. He wrote, “Nothing less than a complete apostasy from the Christian religion would warrant the establishment of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints” (vol. 1:XL). If however, the Book of Mormon or the Doctrine and Covenants were true, it would be difficult to arrive at such a conclusion.

In chapter 21 of the Gospel of John, the resurrected Christ spoke with His disciples. In verse 18 He told Peter how he would die at the hand of others. When Peter asked the Lord what would become of the Apostle John, Jesus said, “If I will that he tarry till I come, what is that to thee? follow thou me.”

What appears to be a mild rebuke seems to have been misconstrued by Mormonism’s founder as a promise that John would never die. Though not a subject talked about much in public, it is taught very clearly in section seven of the Doctrine and Covenants that the Apostle John is still alive somewhere on the earth. The introduction to section seven states, “The revelation is the translated version of the record made on parchment by John and hidden up by himself.”

Joseph Smith claims that when John was asked by the Lord what he desired, John responded by saying, “Lord, give me power over death, that I may live and bring souls unto thee” (vs.2). To this the Lord supposedly said, “Because thou desirest this thou shalt tarry until I come in my glory, and shalt prophesy before nations, kindreds, tongues and people.”

Scholars outside of the LDS Church tend to agree that John, though not having died the death of a martyr, lived out his days, perhaps in Ephesus. The LDS Church, however, maintains that John made a personal appearance to Joseph Smith sometime around 1830.

Joseph Smith claimed the Apostle John (as well as Peter and James) appeared to him and Oliver Cowdery and bestowed upon them the Melchizedek priesthood. Just when this took place is not exactly known although LDS historians insist that it had to have taken place after Smith claimed to have seen John the Baptist on May 15, 1829. Mormon historian B.H. Roberts estimates that it took place sometime between May 15, 1829 and April of 1830. Not only is the time in which John made his appearance a matter of debate, but the manner in which John appeared also seems to be one of confusion among LDS leaders.

Tenth LDS Prophet Joseph Fielding Smith states that Peter and James appeared as resurrected beings, but John is not so described. He wrote,

“There is a statement in the Gospel of John, written of his gospel account, which intimates that the Lord gave him power to remain until the second coming. There is a revelation in the Doctrines and Covenants, Section 7, which confirms this thought” (*Answers to Gospel Questions* 3:93).

Despite the fact that D&C 7 states that John was to have “power over death,” he is described in the *Encyclopedia of Mormonism* as a “resurrected” being (see 1:388). Mormon presidents George Albert Smith and Spencer W. Kimball both describe John as a resurrected being who appeared to their founding prophet. During a general conference message in 1950, Smith, the eighth LDS prophet, said Peter, James and John were men who “lived upon the earth as we have lived, who have gone on and performed their part and have been resurrected and sent back to earth” (*Conference Reports*, April 1950, pg. 188). Kimball, meanwhile, described John as a resurrected being at the top of page 456 of his book, *The Teachings of Spencer W. Kimball*. LDS Apostle John Widtsoe added that it was “the resurrected apostles, Peter, James and John” that conferred the Melchizedek priesthood upon Smith and Cowdery (*Evidences and Reconciliations*, pp. 249-250).

Mormon Apostle A. Theodore Tuttle also claimed John was a resurrected being when he appeared with Peter and James (*Conference Reports*, October 1964, pp. 8-9). Meanwhile, Henry D. Moyle, the counselor to David O. McKay, retold the story of John’s visitation:

“Jesus Christ conferred his priesthood upon the apostles of old. Then Peter, James and John as resurrected beings conferred the same priesthood which they had received from the Lord upon Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery” (*Conference Reports*, April 1962, pg. 101).

A natural question to the above testimonies would be, “How could John be a resurrected being if he was promised that he would never die?” Though the word “resurrected” is not the most common adjective used to describe John, the phrase “heavenly messenger” or “heavenly

personage” is certainly used on numerous occasions by LDS leaders. General authorities such as James Talmage, Bruce McConkie, Orson Pratt, George Q. Cannon, Orson Whitney, Charles Callis, Joseph Wirthlin, Joseph F. Merrill, William Critchlow, and Milton R. Hunter all used the word “heavenly” when speaking of John’s visitation to Smith and Cowdery. Even Joseph Fielding Smith, while making a distinction in his book *Answers to Gospel Questions*, used this expression when he said, “That they [Smith and Cowdery] did obtain them [Priesthood and Keys], we know, and that the keys of the kingdom were conferred by these heavenly messengers, we have evidence to show” (*Doctrines of Salvation* 3:98). In the book titled *Meet the Mormons* (1965) published by the LDS Church, Peter, James, and John are called “heavenly messengers” (p. 47).

If D&C 7 is to be believed, John could not die until Jesus returned. Thus, either Jesus’ promise to John failed or the Second Coming has taken place. Since neither are plausible, how could John have become a “heavenly” messenger? This title seems odd for someone who was not going to get to heaven until after Jesus returned.

Mormon Apostle Bruce McConkie denied that John was resurrected. Rather, he claimed that John appeared as a translated being. McConkie wrote, “At that appearance, Peter and James were resurrected beings; John was translated.” (*Mormon Doctrine*, pg. 572). How McConkie arrives at this conclusion is not clear, but it certainly is not supported by D&C section seven. The word “translated” gives the impression of going from one place to another; this would contradict the specifics of Jesus’ alleged promise which tells us John was to remain on earth. Section seven gives every indication that John would remain on earth as an earthly messenger, not as a translated or heavenly one.

John Not Alone?

The Book of Mormon, touted by Joseph Smith to be the most correct of any book on earth (See *History of the Church* 4:461 and *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, p. 194), claims that the resurrected Jesus Christ came to the American continent and promised three Nephite disciples that they also would live until the Lord’s coming. Although the Book of Mormon does not specifically call them apostles, fourth LDS President Wilford Woodruff referred to them as such on September 15, 1869:

“The first quorum of apostles were all put to death, except John, and we are informed that he still remains on the earth, though his body has doubtless undergone some change. Three of the Nephites, chosen here by the Lord Jesus as his apostles, had the same promise—that they should not taste death until Christ came, and they still remain

on the earth in the flesh” (Journal of Discourses 13:320. See also The Discourses of Wilford Woodruff, p. 95).

Bruce McConkie, in his *The Mortal Messiah*, 4:392, also speaks of the Nephites as Apostles, when he wrote, “But back to our Nephite setting. After Jesus had spoken the wondrous words which burn with eternal conviction in our heart, he touched the nine apostles, but not the three, with his finger, and then he departed.”

Third Nephi 28:7-9 makes it very clear that these three would remain alive to bring souls unto the Lord “while the world shall stand.” The prophecy states:

“Therefore, more blessed are ye, for ye shall live to behold all the doings of the Father unto the children of men, even until all things shall be fulfilled according to the will of the Father, when I shall come in my glory with the powers of heaven. And ye shall never endure the pains of death; but when I shall come in my glory ye shall be changed in the twinkling of an eye from mortality to immortality; and then shall ye be blessed in the kingdom of my Father. And again, ye shall not have pain while ye dwell in the flesh, neither sorrow save it be for the sins of the world; and all this will I do because of the thing which ye have desired of me, for ye have desired that ye might bring the souls of men unto me, while the world shall stand.”

How these mere men could maintain this longevity is explained in verses 37 and 38. Here, the writer inquires of the Lord how these three are able to live so long. Verses 38-40 state:

“Therefore, that they might not taste of death there was a change wrought upon their bodies, that they might not suffer pain nor sorrow save it were the sins of the world. Now this change was not equal to that which shall take place in the last day; but there was a change wrought upon them. . . And in this state they were to remain until the judgment day of Christ.”

Verse 31 claims these three would perform “great and marvelous works,” yet neither the Jews or the Gentiles would know them (verses 27,28).

Conclusion

It is difficult to give credence to a complete apostasy when you have four apostles roaming the earth. Though no specific promise of success is given to John, such a promise was allegedly given to the three Nephites. 3 Nephi 28:29 states most clearly that they “shall bring out of them unto Jesus many souls.” If this is the case, why was Joseph Smith supposedly told in his first

vision that all the churches were wrong? Wouldn't those who converted under the tutelage of these men be considered a part of the true church? Since we have no evidence that John, or these three Nephites, ever worked in harmony with Joseph Smith to build his new church, are we to assume that their converts are a part of "the church of devil" as described in 1 Nephi 14:10 of the Book of Mormon?

If Mormons choose to go with the complete apostasy theory, they must conclude that the efforts of John and the three Nephites were frustrated and yielded no fruit. To hold this view casts doubt on the truthfulness of the Book of Mormon and even Christ Himself.

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