

# JOSEPH SMITH AND SIDNEY RIGDON: CO-FOUNDERS OF A MOVEMENT

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With the recent push by President Russell M. Nelson to refer to The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints by its proper name and stop using the term “Mormon,” perhaps the time has come to advocate for a more objective term for the academic study of the larger movement than “Mormon Studies,” which has tended to focus solely on the Utah-based branch. Students and scholars need a more objective name for the movement, one that is based in the history of its foundations. The studies they do must be done with a broader rubric of interpretation—not one that is focused on telling one side of the story.<sup>1</sup> For historical and theological purposes, then, I argue that the academic community should adopt the term “Smith-Rigdon Movement” in their studies and publications.

To call the movement “Mormonism” is confusing, even though “Mormon” and “Mormonite” are among the earliest nicknames to appear in history. A French scholar proposed referring to the movement as “Mormonisms.” His argument is that because Mormonism is widely understood,

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The author presented on this topic at the thirty-ninth annual meeting of the John Whitmer Historical Association in Nauvoo, Illinois, Sept. 23, 2011. This is an updated and expanded version.

1. For a catalog of almost five hundred expressions of the movement, see the author’s *Divergent Paths of the Restoration*, 5th edition, Greg Kofford Books, forthcoming.

making the word plural signals there is more than one brand.<sup>2</sup> However, many denominations within the movement do not identify with the term.<sup>3</sup>

Furthermore, the term “Latter Day Saint movement” is anachronistic, regardless of whether the beginning of the movement is counted from 1820, 1829, or 1830.<sup>4</sup> The phrase was not introduced to the movement until 1833.<sup>5</sup> The name was formalized in 1834.<sup>6</sup> But, as with “Mormonism,” many of the denominations in the movement do not identify with the phrase.<sup>7</sup>

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2. Chrystal Vanel, interview with author, May 9, 2011.

3. Eber D. Howe, in early 1831, popularized the terms. “Mormonism,” *Painesville Telegraph*, Jan. 18, 1831, 3.

4. Joseph Smith reported a powerful conversion experience as having occurred in 1820. Baptisms were taking place in 1829, following a reported visit from John the Baptist. Smith legally organized a “church” in 1830.

5. Mark Lyman Staker, *Hearken, O Ye People: The Historical Setting of Joseph Smith’s Ohio Revelations* (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2009), 74.

6. Richard S. Van Wagoner, *Sidney Rigdon: A Portrait of Religious Excess* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1994), 149. See also Mark A. Scherer, “Called by a New Name: Mission, Identity and the Reorganized Church,” *Journal of Mormon History* 27, no. 2 (Fall 2001): 40–63. The minutes of a May 3, 1834 “conference of the elders of the church” were published in *The Evening and the Morning Star*. The conference met to consider “names and appellations.” Joseph Smith Jr. was chosen as moderator. Sidney Rigdon made a motion, seconded by Newell K. Whitney, that the church be called “The Church of the Latter Day Saints.” The motion passed unanimously (*The Evening and the Morning Star* 2, no. 20, May 1834, 160).

7. There are also the two spelling conventions, British and American. When the British is chosen, the name favors the LDS Church in Utah with “Latter-day Saint.” If the American convention, Latter Day Saint, though used by some others in the movement, confuses the issue. For a brief summary of the hyphenation conventions, see Wikipedia, s.v. “American and British English spelling differences; Compounds and hyphens,” last modified Sept. 18, 2019, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/American\\_and\\_British\\_English\\_spelling\\_differences#Compounds\\_and\\_hyphens](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/American_and_British_English_spelling_differences#Compounds_and_hyphens).

The label “restoration movement” is a retrospective gloss that introduces confusion as well. Anachronistic application of later or contemporary understanding to historical circumstances leads to fundamental misunderstanding. Joseph Smith commonly called the Church “a great and marvelous work,” but rarely used the term “restoration” in his earliest writings.<sup>8</sup> Many followers often talked about the “new revelation” when speaking of the Book of Mormon. In the rare times that we find *restoration* in Smith’s revelations, the Book of Mormon, or other writings, the term speaks of other ideas. Smith uses the word to talk about future events, about the Jewish people, or in general terms. In no case did he use the term to suggest that he understood himself to be “restoring” either the gospel or an organization.<sup>9</sup>

The use and meanings of *restore* and *restoration*, as has become commonplace in the Smith-Rigdon Movement, was borrowed from Reform Baptist (the Stone-Campbell movement) language in use from the early 1820s. Sidney Rigdon and those leaders who came with him when they merged with Smith introduced the language.<sup>10</sup> Joseph Smith’s appellation “the restorer,” the term “restored gospel” as applied to Smith’s message, and the unique definition of *restoration* all postdate Smith’s founding experiences. Interestingly, the earliest Ohio members of the new movement continued to call themselves “disciples” at least until the church name was formally changed in 1834.

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8. For instance, see D&C 6. See also *Evening and the Morning Star* 1, no. 1, June 1832, 6.

9. For example, see D&C 84, 85; SLC 77, 86, 88 (SLC 77 does not appear in Community of Christ editions of the book). Doctrine and Covenants section and paragraph numbers in this article refer to editions published by Community of Christ. SLC denotes editions published by The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. A thorough study of the use of the terms *restore* and *restoration* in the early years of the movement is needed.

10. Staker, 19ff. Staker has an excellent outline and background history of the Stone-Campbell movement’s earliest years. Alexander Campbell introduced the language “restoration of the ancient order of things” in the 1820s.

The Churches of Christ, and independent Christian Churches and Churches of Christ use the phrase “restoration movement” when writing and talking about themselves, but the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) long ago stopped using such language.<sup>11</sup> Academics in that tradition have long used “Stone-Campbell movement” to discuss their broader history because styles and definitions of *restoration* are varied.<sup>12</sup>

For example, Joseph Smith and Sidney Rigdon each sought restorations that were charismatic and experiential, revelational restorationism. Alexander Campbell was noted for rational restorationism.<sup>13</sup> This idea is based on the belief that the Bible contains concrete facts, rather than abstract truths, and Campbell advocated a scientific method to understanding the teachings of the book. Campbell felt that by relying only on the facts contained in the Bible, Christians could come to a unity of agreement.<sup>14</sup> Further, the restoration vision was widely known as it had already emerged with great strength in the sixteenth century and was foundational for much of the Reformation throughout Europe.<sup>15</sup>

Sidney Rigdon’s importance to the movement cannot be overemphasized. When Smith and Rigdon met late in 1830, they formed a partnership, resulting in a merger of two independent movements. This had been several months in the making, from the time some of Rigdon’s

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11. Ralph G. Wilburn, “A Critique of the Restoration Principle,” in *The Renewal of Church: The Panel of Scholars Reports*, vol. 1 (St. Louis: Bethany Press, 1963).

12. Douglas A. Foster, “Community of Christ and Churches of Christ: Extraordinary Distinctions, Extraordinary Parallels,” *Restoration Studies XIV* (2013): 2.

13. John L. Morrison, “A Rational Voice Crying in an Emotional Wilderness,” in *The Stone-Campbell Movement: An International Religious Tradition*, edited by Michael W. Casey and Douglas A. Foster (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2002), 163–76.

14. C. Leonard Allen and Richard T. Hughes, *Discovering Our Roots: The Ancestry of Churches of Christ* (Abilene, Tex.: ACU Press, 1988), 84.

15. Richard T. Hughes, “Historical Models of Restoration,” in *The Encyclopedia of the Stone-Campbell Movement* edited by Douglas A. Foster, et al. (Grand Rapids, Mich., and Cambridge, UK: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2004), 635.

followers began to believe in the new revelation represented by the Book of Mormon. Smith's was a loosely organized collection of fewer than three hundred people scattered around the border area of upstate New York and Pennsylvania;<sup>16</sup> Rigdon's was a network of several congregations and hundreds of members.<sup>17</sup>

The Doctrine and Covenants and other sources clearly demonstrate that Sidney Rigdon was not second to Joseph Smith, but an equal partner. The problem from our modern perspective is that by the time Joseph Smith was killed, he had become disenchanted with Rigdon. Likewise, Rigdon had become disenchanted with Smith, due largely to the cancellation of the common stock association, the Kirtland Bank debacle, and the repeated failures to establish Zion. Nevertheless, prior to this, Rigdon had remained loyal and largely hid his discouragement and frustration. His belief in Smith's revelations and the testimony of the Book of Mormon remained strong until Rigdon's death.<sup>18</sup>

Not long after Joseph Smith's death, Sidney Rigdon was written out of the Church's history by Brigham Young and others who disagreed with Rigdon's position. Ever after, those writing the history of the movement

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16. Wikipedia, s.v. "The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints membership history: LDS Church membership numbers," last modified Sept. 27, 2019, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The\\_Church\\_of\\_Jesus\\_Christ\\_of\\_Latter-day\\_Saints\\_membership\\_history#LDS\\_Church\\_membership\\_numbers](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Church_of_Jesus_Christ_of_Latter-day_Saints_membership_history#LDS_Church_membership_numbers).

17. Richard S. Van Wagoner, *Sidney Rigdon: A Portrait of Religious Excess* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1994), 49–67, details the extent of Rigdon's influence in the "Western Reserve."

18. Lloyd Knowles, "Sidney Rigdon: A Frustrated Restorationist in Pursuit of 'The True Church,'" manuscript, dated June 29, 2012, in author's possession, 16–17.

have ignored Rigdon's significant contributions that shaped the identity and message of the movement.<sup>19, 20</sup>

James J. Strang and those who formed Community of Christ had little or no knowledge of Sidney Rigdon's true role in forming the movement. Many of them were latecomers and not located at the center. The same is true for Granville Hedrick. Rigdon's legacy lived on, but only in part, through William Bickerton's Church of Jesus Christ.<sup>21</sup>

Joseph Smith's religious work began taking shape by May of 1829 in New York and Pennsylvania with the first baptisms, although the foundations were several years in the making. The founding event was the Book of Mormon. Reliance on the First Vision as founding event did not happen until decades after Smith's death.<sup>22</sup>

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19. Rigdon was also written out of the Stone-Campbell Movement history in earlier years, but recently his contributions have been more widely acknowledged. See Staker, 24, n. 3.

20. Van Wagoner, 165–66. The beginning of the end of the Smith-Rigdon partnership was the disruption over the Kirtland Bank. A caustic meeting held in the temple at Kirtland in December 1837 tried to deal with the serious leadership crisis that had developed.

21. W. H. Cadman, *A History of the Church of Jesus Christ* (Monongahela, Pa.: The Church of Jesus Christ, 1945), 4–9. Robert A. Watson, et al, *A History of the Church of Jesus Christ, Volume 2* (Monongahela, Pa.: The Church of Jesus Christ, 2002), 28–34. William Bickerton was unique among the many leaders during the Fragmentation Era. He had not belonged to the original church, nor had he met Joseph Smith Jr. or other leaders. He came into contact with Sidney Rigdon's Church of Christ in the Pittsburgh area, was baptized, ordained, and became a member of Rigdon's "Grand Council" (similar to Council of Fifty). When Rigdon's lack of administrative skill failed the church, Bickerton and a few elders continued in their local branches until the late 1850s when they reorganized the first presidency and other leadership councils. See Daniel P. Stone, *William Bickerton: Forgotten Latter Day Prophet* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2018).

22. Richard P. Howard, *The Church Through the Years, Volume 1* (Independence, Mo.: Herald Publishing House, 1992) 111–12.

What Smith and his followers did on April 6, 1830, was organize a religious association to be legally recognized to perform marriages. They were not incorporating, nor were they forming a denomination in the modern understanding. Such an idea was counter to the ideas of Smith, Rigdon, and many others.<sup>23</sup> They were organizing a church in the local sense.<sup>24</sup> I think that is why the word “branch” emerged to refer to the scattered congregations.

Meanwhile, Adamson Bentley, Sidney Rigdon’s brother-in-law, introduced Rigdon to Alexander Campbell in 1821. Historians consider that meeting to be the beginning of the movement. Rigdon and Campbell quickly became close associates. Rigdon was known as one of the most successful and eloquent leaders in Campbell’s movement.<sup>25</sup>

Some scholars consider Sidney Rigdon, Walter Scott, Adamson Bentley, and Alexander Campbell as co-founders of the movement that gave birth to what is now known as the Stone-Campbell Movement.<sup>26</sup> The Mahoning Baptist Association, which they formed in 1820, was an alliance of like-minded ministers and congregations that were the nucleus for the later development of the Disciples movement with Campbell.<sup>27</sup> In the earliest years, they were called Reformed Baptists. The Mahoning Association functioned in some ways as a micro-denomination. It was geographically localized over a relatively small area. There were dozens of such associations in the United States at the time. They held annual

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23. Douglas A. Foster, “Denominationalism,” in *The Encyclopedia of the Stone-Campbell Movement*, edited by Douglas A. Foster, et al. (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2004), 267–69.

24. David Keith Stott, “Legal Insights into the Organization of the Church in 1830,” *BYU Studies* 49, no. 2 (2010): 121–48.

25. Staker, 19–26, 31, 34, 38, 40, 47, 279, 320–21, 405.

26. Staker, 24, n. 3.

27. Lloyd Alan Knowles, *In Pursuit of the True Church: The Attraction of Restorationism on the Nineteenth Century American Frontier: Sidney Rigdon, the Disciples of Christ, and the Mormons* (Deer Park, N.Y.: Linus, 2007), 78–86.

conferences, appointed ministers to certain tasks, and declared common doctrinal statements. Sidney Rigdon was one of the bishops, supervising several congregations northwest of Warren, Ohio.<sup>28</sup>

By 1828, Bentley was the leader supervising several congregations near Warren, Ohio, Scott was in charge southwest of Warren, Rigdon was the leader northwest of Warren, and Campbell was the scholar and writer.<sup>29</sup> Walter Scott claimed to have restored the “ancient gospel,” but Campbell rejected that claim.<sup>30</sup>

Rigdon and Campbell parted company in the summer of 1830 over issues dealing with the role of charismata and setting up communitarian societies.<sup>31</sup> Eventually, Rigdon found the prophetic impulse to be powerful in his life of faith. As one scholar declared, “few sources could be more authoritative than direct revelation from God.”<sup>32</sup>

Historian F. Mark McKiernan explained:

Rigdon disagreed with Campbell over whether the so-called “manifestations of Spiritual Gifts” and miracles had a place in the restoration. The gifts of the spirit were the speaking and interpretation of foreign tongues, prophecy, visions, spiritual dreams, and the discernment of evil spirits. Campbell declared that the miraculous work of the Holy Ghost

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28. Phil McIntosh, “Mahoning Baptist Association,” in Douglas A. Foster, et al., eds. *The Encyclopedia of the Stone-Campbell Movement*. (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2004), 501–02. Also, Richard McLellan, “Sidney Rigdon’s 1820 Ministry: Preparing the Way for Mormonism in Ohio,” *Dialogue* 36, no. 4 (Winter 2003): 155.

29. Richard McClellan, “Sidney Rigdon’s 1820 Ministry: Preparing the Way for Mormonism in Ohio,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 36, no. 4 (Winter 2003): 151–59.

30. Staker, 321. Interview with Douglas A. Foster, Stone-Campbell movement scholar, Nov. 11, 2015.

31. Thomas W. Grafton, *Alexander Campbell* (St. Louis, Mo.: Christian Publishing Company, 1897), 127.

32. Grant Underwood, *The Millenarian World of Early Mormonism* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1993), 20.



was “confined to the apostolic age, and to only a portion of the saints who lived in that age.” Rigdon, however, sought “to convince influential persons that, along with the primitive gospel, supernatural gifts and miracles ought to be restored.”<sup>33</sup>

Sidney Rigdon has been identified by some historians as one of the “Three Witnesses to the Restoration of the Ancient Order of Things.” The primary holders of the title are Alexander Campbell and Walter Scott.<sup>34</sup> When Rigdon met Joseph Smith Jr., Smith declared that Rigdon was like John the Baptist and appointed him as a spokesperson. Interestingly, the same language was already being used to describe Barton Stone.<sup>35</sup> Sidney Rigdon is mentioned by name in dozens of sections of the Doctrine and Covenants; many sections were jointly received by Smith and Rigdon.

Some of the earliest believers in the Book of Mormon message had been Disciples trained by Sidney Rigdon as ministers and church leaders. They introduced their beloved leader and teacher Rigdon to the message, who finally accepted rebaptism late in 1830. By December, Rigdon traveled to New York to meet Joseph Smith Jr. and stayed for several weeks through the winter.<sup>36</sup>

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33. F. Mark McKiernan, *The Voice of One Crying in the Wilderness: Sidney Rigdon, Religious Reformer, 1793–1876* (Independence, Mo.: Herald House, 1971 [1990]), 27. An explanation of how this idea played out in the experiential primitivism, as shaped by nineteenth-century American romanticism, espoused by Joseph Smith and the early years of his church is found in Foster, et al., 637. See also Richard T. Hughes, “Two Restoration Traditions: Mormons and Churches of Christ in the Nineteenth Century,” in Casey and Foster, 356; and Gregory A. Prince, *Power from on High: The Development of Mormon Priesthood* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1995), 63–64.

34. Staker, 24, n. 3.

35. Quoted in Staker, 19ff.

36. Lloyd Knowles, “Sidney Rigdon: A Frustrated Restorationist in Pursuit of ‘The True Church,’” manuscript dated June 20, 2019, in author’s possession, 13–14.

Even though Smith and his missionaries rebaptized Rigdon and his followers, this does not suggest that Rigdon and his followers felt they were in submission to Smith or did not have authority to baptize previously. Rather it was that Smith claimed to be able to give the gift of the Holy Spirit. That was important to Rigdon and his followers. Rigdon disagreed with Alexander Campbell on this issue, which was one reason leading to their separation.<sup>37</sup>

The Smith-Rigdon partnership merged two distinct religious bodies and created a new one that contained features of both. They built on those foundations. Neither leader gave up cherished basic principles. Rigdon brought communalism and a fervent belief in gifts of the Spirit. Smith had the “new revelation” and oracles from God. Rigdon also brought a refined understanding of the Bible and theology. Each leader contributed to the newly shaped church body ideas and skills the other lacked.

Sidney Rigdon was well-spoken, educated, and experienced as a church leader. He was appointed to be Smith’s principal adviser and spokesperson by revelation.<sup>38</sup> He brought hundreds of his followers into the movement, including Orson Pratt, recognized as the first systematic theologian of the movement.<sup>39</sup> I believe that without Rigdon’s contributions, Joseph Smith’s church would likely not have developed its several distinct teachings and practices. Indeed, much of the theology was founded on Disciples doctrine, which Rigdon and his followers brought with them.

When Sidney Rigdon merged his faith community with that of Joseph Smith, the demographics of the movement shifted dramatically. Rigdon’s followers who were attracted to Smith’s message were at least double the New York and Pennsylvania membership to begin with, but within a few months, the newly merged church’s population in Ohio reached upwards

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37. Staker, 23.

38. Doctrine and Covenants 34; 35 SLC; 97; 100 SLC.

39. Breck England, *The Life and Thought of Orson Pratt* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1985). See also Leonard J. Arrington, “The Intellectual Tradition of the Latter-day Saints,” *Dialogue* 4, no. 1 (Spring 1969): 17.

of one thousand members.<sup>40</sup> These *new* members were not new. Most of them had been members of the various congregations of Disciples under Rigdon's bishopric in the Kirtland area and had followed him out of Campbell's movement.<sup>41</sup> Historian Mark Staker noted that former Disciples were the majority, had been taught by Sidney Rigdon, and that Smith built on that foundation.<sup>42</sup>

One scholar suggested that Rigdon's influence and importance in the merger with Joseph Smith included five key points:

First, Sidney was one of the most influential figures in northern Ohio. His reputation, visibility, and prestige created instant credibility for the fledgling [Church of Christ]. Second, Sidney's skill and fame as a religious orator provided ready audiences throughout northern Ohio. Third, Sidney brought with him a vast network of acquaintances—former Baptist and Disciple converts . . . Fourth, Sidney's experience as a religious organizer, trainer, minister, missionary, biblical scholar, and scriptioner far exceeded that of any other early convert. Fifth, Sidney had spent years grooming a number of individuals for the ministry: . . . Edward Partridge, Newell K. Whitney, Isaac Morley, Frederick G. Williams . . . Parley P. Pratt, John Murdock . . . Orson Hyde . . . Eliza R. Snow . . . Orson Pratt.<sup>43</sup>

Other former Disciples included John Corrill, William E. McLellan, John F. Boynton, Lyman Wight, Levi W. Hancock, Zebedee Coltrin,

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40. Lee Copeland, "Speaking in Tongues in the Restoration Churches," *Dialogue* 24, no. 1 (Spring 1991): 17. Richard S. Van Wagoner, "Mormon Polyandry in Nauvoo," *Dialogue* 18, no. 3 (Fall 1985): 67–83. McKiernan, 36. Van Wagoner, 87.

41. Richard McLellan, "Sidney Rigdon's 1820 Ministry: Preparing the Way for Mormonism in Ohio," *Dialogue* 36, no. 4 (Winter 2003): 157–59. See also Staker, 61–62.

42. Staker, 335.

43. Richard McClellan, "Sidney Rigdon's 1820 Ministry: Preparing the Way for Mormonism in Ohio," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 36, no. 4 (Winter 2003): 159. See also Scott Kenney, "Sidney Rigdon: The Baptist Years (1817–1830)," unpublished paper (copy on file) presented to Sunstone Symposium, Aug. 14, 2009, for a list of prominent Church leaders who had been Sidney Rigdon's followers.

Luke S. and Lyman E. Johnson, John Johnson, and Sylvester Smith. One-half of the original twelve apostles were Rigdon's people. In fact, many of them, including Orson Hyde and the Pratt brothers, had been Campbellite preachers.<sup>44</sup> Indeed, of the four people who were crucial in introducing new ideas and policies, and who helped articulate the theology of the fledgling church in the early years of the movement, three were Disciples, or Campbellites—Sidney Rigdon, Parley P. Pratt, and Orson Pratt. Moreover, Rigdon had trained both Pratts as ministers. The fourth was Joseph Smith Jr.<sup>45</sup>

Objective studies of the movement need to understand Sidney Rigdon's and others' contributions to the movement as it developed, rather than judging those contributions through retrospective gloss, discounting valid and important contributions based merely on later events. Sidney Rigdon's contributions to the original church<sup>46</sup> and the overall movement need to be written back into the history of the movement, regardless of what happened to his relationship with Smith in succeeding years.

Rigdon delivered every major speech and sermon in the first decade of the church's history, dealing with faith, repentance, baptism, spiritual gifts, the Millennium, and communitarianism. The early church's periodicals are replete with notes, prayers, texts, and comments by Rigdon. He outlined the basic theology of the movement in his *Lectures of Faith*<sup>47</sup> that were used for missionary training and canonized as equal to the revelations in the first edition of the *Doctrine and Covenants* in 1835.<sup>48</sup> He laid the foundations for what has become, for some denominations in the movement, essential temple ritual. To

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44. Staker, 34, 61, 320.

45. Arrington, 16.

46. "Original Church" refers to the organization up to Joseph Smith, Junior's death in 1844.

47. These are also referred to as the "Lectures on Faith."

48. Van Wagoner, 162. See also Arrington, 17.

discount or deny Rigdon's contributions because of his later, rockier relationship with Smith and his refusal to agree with Brigham Young and the Quorum of the Twelve would require a reinterpretation of the entire canon of scripture of the movement.<sup>49</sup>

Smith and Rigdon's first joint project was revising the Bible; although Smith had begun this a few months earlier, it had languished, but now consumed much of the attention of the partners. Not long after Smith and the New York/Pennsylvania group relocated to Kirtland, the Book of Abraham project began and continued concurrently with the Bible revision.

The idea of problems with the text of the King James Version of the Bible was commonplace. There is little question that Rigdon was well informed and likely made use of Alexander Campbell's 1826 revision of the New Testament. Scholars grounded in first-century Greek commonly agreed the King James Version was not inviolable. Between the late 1770s and the early 1830s, some five hundred different editions of the Bible or New Testament had been published in the United States.<sup>50</sup>

Richard S. Van Wagoner noted that Rigdon was "often called a 'walking Bible' by his peers in the Reformed Baptist Movement." "That Rigdon could have been merely Sidney the Scribe, a penman whose sole function was to take down dictation, is implausible. A biblical scholar with a reputation for erudition, he was more learned, better read, and more steeped in biblical interpretation than any other early Mormon, despite his common school education. Any number of Smith's followers could have served as clerk, but only Rigdon could have functioned as a scribe in the historical Jewish sense of the word: "a man of learning; one who read and explained the law to the people."<sup>51</sup> Before Rigdon's involvement

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49. This includes Doctrine and Covenants 34, 37, 40, 44, 71, 73, 76, 97; SLC 35, 37, 40, 44, 71, 73, 76, and 100; the Inspired Version of the Bible, revisions to the Book of Mormon text, and the Book of Abraham.

50. Van Wagoner, 72.

51. *Ibid.*

in the Bible revision project, only about seven chapters of Genesis had been written. Manuscripts were in the handwriting of Oliver Cowdery and John Whitmer. However, even those early manuscripts were revised and rewritten by Rigdon.<sup>52</sup>

During work on the Bible revision, while Rigdon was in New York with Smith, the idea of moving the entire church to Ohio came up. Joseph Smith's elaboration on the Prophecy of Enoch (Inspired Version of the Bible Genesis 7; Pearl of Great Price Moses 7) spoke directly to Rigdon's yearnings for what he believed to be a restoration of New Testament communitarianism. Rigdon's experience with communitarianism surely influenced Smith's revision of the idea. The communal ideas expressed in the Book of Mormon were different from Rigdon's and different from what developed after Smith and Rigdon merged their two movements.<sup>53</sup>

The church was struggling in New York but booming in Ohio. Many of the early church members in New York were prosperous landowners and farmers and were not keen on being uprooted. Persuasively, Smith pronounced a revelation in December 1830, directing church members to assemble in Ohio (D&C 37). Smith declared, "God is about to destroy this generation, and Christ will descend from Heaven in power and great glory."<sup>54</sup> F. Mark McKiernan noted, "Kirtland was Rigdon's city, and while the church's headquarters remained there the basic structure of the Mormon Church was developed."<sup>55</sup>

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52. Ibid., 73.

53. Thomas F. O'Dea, *The Mormons* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957), 37. Van Wagoner notes, "The prophet's syncretic ability to blend others' ideas with his own intuition was a conspicuous feature of his career. It was not surprising that Joseph Smith's communal vision began evolving within days of meeting Rigdon" (79). See also Van Wagoner, 74 and 85.

54. McKiernan, 45. The section number is the same in both Independence and Salt Lake City editions.

55. McKiernan, 66; Van Wagoner 82.

Richard S. Van Wagoner has described Smith and Rigdon as equals. He noted that Smith “used the term ‘having a revelation’ when referring to the statements he issued in response to specific questions or crises. Rigdon was privy to the same epiphanies, and several early revelations were given to both men simultaneously.”<sup>56</sup> These include Doctrine and Covenants 34, 37, 40, 44, 71, 73, 76, 97/SLC 35, 37, 40, 44, 71, 73, 76, and 100.

Doctrine and Covenants 76 (both editions), dated February 16, 1832, is important evidence of Rigdon’s equal status with Joseph Smith. Rigdon was the only other person besides Smith, who claimed to have conversed with Christ, and he and Smith were together at the time.<sup>57</sup> The vision contains teachings about the hereafter that were often a matter of debate. Those members who had not come out of the Disciples movement were the ones who questioned the vision’s teachings. However, the former Disciples understood the vision through the lens of their rational restorationism, as taught to them by Sidney Rigdon. They were the ones who explained the teachings of the vision to others.<sup>58</sup>

Further confirmation of Rigdon’s equal status is found in Doctrine and Covenants 87/SLC 90, dated March 8, 1833. The text declares that both Sidney Rigdon and Frederick G. Williams “are accounted as equal with [Joseph Smith] in holding the keys of this last kingdom.” Williams, as noted earlier, was also a former Disciple.

As Zion’s Camp was assembling at Kirtland in the spring of 1834, Rigdon preached a sermon to the recruits on May 3. Rigdon announced, “that the prophet and the high council had agreed to his suggestion to change the name of the church from ‘The Church of Christ’ to ‘The Church of the Latter Day Saints,’ emphasizing the proximity of the Millennium.”<sup>59</sup> It was by this name the church published the first edition of the Doctrine

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56. Van Wagoner, 74.

57. D&C 76. See McKiernan, 69. D&C IND 76:3a, 3b; SLC 76:11–14.

58. Staker, 331–33.

59. Van Wagoner, 149.

and Covenants in 1835. The name was inscribed on the entablature of the Kirtland Temple.<sup>60</sup>

Sidney Rigdon ordained Joseph Smith to the office of president of the high priesthood when the high priesthood was introduced into the church. The suggestion came from Sidney. His influence over the identity, mission, message, beliefs, and organizational structure of the church was disconcerting to those from Joseph's original group. David Whitmer complained, "Rigdon finally persuaded Brother Joseph to believe that the high priests who had such great power in ancient times, should be in the Church of Christ today. He had Brother Joseph inquire of the Lord about it, and they received an answer according to their erring desires."<sup>61</sup> Rigdon also ordained, or set apart, the members of the first high council at Kirtland, and was that body's presiding officer.<sup>62</sup>

Sidney Rigdon was one of the best-educated members of the church. Late in 1832, instruction was given to set up a school to teach the priesthood. Various called the School of the Elders or the School of the Prophets, Rigdon was the chief instructor. The curriculum included religious topics, but also grammar, reading, writing, history, geography, and foreign languages. None of this was new to Rigdon. He was an experienced teacher and trainer of ministers.

One of the most important contributions to the identity, mission, message, and beliefs of the young church "was Rigdon's preparation and delivery of a seven-part series of theological lectures to a group of prospective missionaries . . . during the 1834–35 winter term."<sup>63</sup> Rigdon's lectures were canonized in the 1835 edition of the Doctrine and Covenants and designated by the First Presidency as the "doctrine of the church." The

60. Scherer, 42.

61. Quoted in David John Buerger, "'The Fulness of the Priesthood': The Second Anointing in Latter-day Saint Theology and Practice," *Dialogue* 16, no. 1 (Spring 1983): 10–46.

62. Kenney, "Sidney Rigdon: The Baptist Years." See also Van Wagoner, 163.

63. Van Wagoner, 161.



lectures had equal scriptural status with the revelations in part two of the book until 1897 in Community of Christ, and 1921 in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.<sup>64</sup> Not only had Rigdon solidly laid the foundation for the importance of education in the movement, but he also produced the first written theology.

The Kirtland Temple was, perhaps, Sidney Rigdon's longest-lasting visible project. When the building was dedicated, Rigdon co-presided with Joseph Smith, gave a lengthy dedicatory address, and conducted the proceedings overall. The ordinance of washing of feet, first performed in the Kirtland Temple, was "a remnant of Sandemanian theology from Rigdon's late 1820s ministry with Walter Scott in Pittsburgh" and "Two days after the dedication [of Kirtland Temple], the foot washing ceremony, the only ordinance performed in the solemn assembly after the dedication of the temple, was performed." Rigdon "first washed the prophet's feet. Smith then reciprocated after with the ordinance was performed for the rest of the group by Smith and Rigdon."<sup>65</sup>

Richard S. Van Wagoner noted, "Mormonism in its purest distillation is the fused product of Joseph Smith's and Sidney Rigdon's revolutionary thinking condensed into the prophet's revelations."<sup>66</sup> To discount human-divine interaction in revelation or to see Joseph as merely a scribe for dictated communication from God simply does not fit with Smith's description and experience of revelation and prophecy.<sup>67</sup> Smith, with Rigdon, felt complete freedom to revise the texts of the Bible, the Book of Mormon, and the contents of the Doctrine and Covenants.

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64. *Ibid.*, 162. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, sometimes called the LDS Church, prefers "the" to be capitalized.

65. Van Wagoner, 169–73.

66. Van Wagoner, 142.

67. See Geoffrey F. Spencer, "A Reinterpretation of Inspiration, Revelation, and Scripture," in *The Word of God: Essays on Mormon Scripture*, edited by Dan Vogel (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1990), 19–27.

In summary, by the end of 1830, Joseph Smith and Sidney Rigdon effected a merger. Joseph brought only a handful of members to the merged organization but brought “the gifts of the Holy Spirit,” especially prophecy and revelation. Further, those in New York and Pennsylvania were scattered and endured persecution. Rigdon, better educated and better spoken, brought his experience as a spiritual leader and his biblical scholarship. Rigdon also brought a huge network of members who were located in settled communities that were free from persecution. Smith and Rigdon clearly brought to the merger what each other needed.

Rigdon laid the foundation for educational pursuits that became a hallmark of the original church and for many of its successor denominations. Smith and Rigdon blended their views of communitarianism. Rigdon proposed ideas, and Smith confirmed them by revelation. Sidney Rigdon was responsible for the basic articulation of the church’s identity, mission, message, and beliefs, with his *Lectures of Faith* having equal canonical standing with Smith’s revelations. His influence was far-reaching and gave shape and longevity to what otherwise may have been a short-lived religious experiment in upstate New York. Joseph Smith and Sidney Rigdon both had pivotal roles in shaping the movement that emerged from their partnership.

An academic name for the movement, then, should recognize their equal contributions. And the name of the study of this religious movement should recognize its roots and development and reads its history frontward rather than backward and avoid retrospective interpretive gloss.

I propose, then, that for historical and theological purposes, those in the academic community use “Smith-Rigdon Movement” in their studies and publications about the movement. Such a move will help bring objectivity to the study of the movement and broaden the lens through which the movement’s historical and theological development can be viewed and interpreted.