
The Faith Healer's Pledge: How early Mormons Captured Audiences

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Abstract: *This paper explores the use of faith healing in attracting converts to early Mormonism, by investigating the diaries and autobiographies of both converts and missionaries. It argues that while faith healing was technically banned from being used to convert people, it still played a specific but essential role as a 'clincher' for those on the brink of conversion. It explores faith healing in relation to the Mormon conversion process as a whole, and resolves the theologically inconsistent position on magic and supernaturalism. It contends that the use of faith healing in the Mormon missionary process has gone largely unacknowledged because previous scholars have prioritised official Mormon documents over unofficial personal writings.*

Key Words: *Mormon, Joseph Smith, faith healing, conversion, nineteenth century America, missionaries, diaries, autobiographies, life writings.*

INTRODUCTION

In 1831, Gilbert Belnap travelled to Kirtland, Ohio. He had heard that a third temple was being built there by the Mormons and wanted to see it for himself.¹ In his autobiography, Gilbert wrote of the temple, "the architecture and the construction of the interior of this temple of worship surely must have been of ancient origin as the master builder has said that the plan thereof was given by revelation from God, and *I see no reason why this should not be credited for no one can disprove it.*"² He was enamoured

* I would like to thank my two anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments.

¹ While the Church would undergo several name changes before being named Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, this paper will use the informal term for members of the Church – Mormons - and will refer to their religion as Mormonism. To read more on the church's renaming see "Minutes of a Conference," *The Evening and Morning Star*, vol. 2, no. 20 (1834). For renaming to Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints in 1838, see Michael Marquardt and Wesley P. Walters, *Inventing Mormonism: Tradition and the Historical Record* (Utah: Signature Books, 1994), 160.

² Gilbert Belnap, "Autobiography of Gilbert Belnap," in *Book of Abraham Project collection of Journals, Diaries, Biographies, Autobiographies and Letters of Some Early Mormons and Others Who Knew*

by the new faith almost immediately, yet Gilbert did not immediately convert. In fact he did not convert soon after either. It would take him another two years of study to be convinced that Mormonism was the true faith, and even then he only, “determined at some future date to obey its principles.”³ This delay would eventually end via a miraculous healing through faith. In his diary Gilbert recounted a day when he was bedridden with illness. A Mormon Elder named Jeremiah Knight visited him and the two made a deal, a deal which I call *The Faith Healer’s Pledge*: “if he would raise me from this bed of affliction, I would obey his gospel.” He soon felt healed. Two years of spiritual limbo had been broken, and Gilbert finally embraced the Mormon faith.⁴

Mormonism was founded in 1830 by Joseph Smith. The small time farmer who had worked as a treasure hunter and necromancer started his church with just six members. Supposedly after being visited by an angel, he had found golden plates underground that chronicled an Israelite tribe that had migrated to and lived in America. News of the prophet Joseph Smith spread, and the church quickly grew out of its humble beginnings. Just thirty years later the church boasted eighty thousand members, and up to fifteen million today.⁵ This article investigates one small component of the missionary process, faith healing, which was a Mormon missionary technique that was so crucial to Belnap’s story, yet often neglected in scholarship. What is so fascinating about Gilbert’s story is how common it was. The diaries and autobiographies of both converts and missionaries reveal that many regularly developed cold feet on the brink of conversion. A miraculous healing from a Mormon Elder often broke this period. Faith healing is also particularly interesting because its role in conversion is somewhat a paradox: If converts like Gilbert were attracted to a religion that allowed for, and even encouraged extended intellectual inquiry and deliberation, why would they then be charmed by something as superstitious as faith healing? This article demonstrates that when we understand faith healing in its proper place within the missionary process, this seemingly paradoxical position is not just consistent with Mormonism’s other missionary techniques, but is the logical endpoint of Mormon proselytising efforts.

HISTORIOGRAPHY

Historians have proposed multiple explanations for Mormonism’s rapid growth in membership. Initially, scholars favoured socioeconomic causes, painting Mormonism as

Joseph Smith, Jr. and/or His Contemporaries, accessed November 2, 2014, <http://www.boap.org/LDS/Early-Saints/GBelnap.html>.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ The current Mormon population is controversial, as the LDS church’s calculations differ from the 2008 American Religious Identification Survey. See Rick Phillips et al., *Mormons in the United States 1990-2008: Socio-demographic Trends and Regional Differences* (Hartford: Trinity College, 2008), accessed June 30, 2015, <http://commons.trincoll.edu/aris/files/2011/12/Mormons2008.pdf>.

a refuge for America's forgotten. Though intuitively plausible, in recent times such explanations have been disregarded. We have since come to recognise that early Mormons were not particularly poor or uneducated.⁶ In fact, there are even proposals that Mormons were wealthier than their non-Mormon counterparts.⁷ Alternative explanations abound, but each ultimately focus on Mormonism's unique foundations within the environment of the Second Great Awakening. The specifics differ widely, but broadly speaking, historians generally agree that the period of 1790–1840, referred to as the Second Great Awakening, brought on the rapid foundation of new churches, the growth of others, and an abundance of sectarian disagreements between them. In the midst of this heavy competition, Joseph Smith was able to craft an attractive text that resolved most sectarian disagreements, all while invoked an ancient heritage and God's blessing.⁸

Scholarly work focusing specifically on missionaries has tended to analyse their skill at spreading news of Joseph Smith and his golden bible. Whether it be through their self-sacrificial dedication, their ability as preachers, or their work as authors and publishers, Mormon missionaries are recognised for disseminating the Mormon message across America and the world. Steven C. Harper makes passing reference to faith healing and missionaries, but only in the early 1830s and without recognising its prominence.⁹ Faith healing, however, continued playing an important role even on international missions in the 1850s. Faith healing has likely been neglected because Mormon were officially prohibited from wielding it to proselytise. After a string of failed healings, Smith declared in August 1831 that such signs “would follow those that believe”, rather than cause faith.¹⁰ Scholars have generally assumed that Smith's instructions were followed. For example, in *Men with a Mission*, a study of Mormon missionaries in Britain, the authors state that while the gifts of the spirit were widely used, “there is no evidence, however, that they encouraged the missionaries to pray for it or use it as a conversion tool. It was a sign that followed belief, not an evidence for unbelievers.”¹¹ On the other hand, the personal diaries and autobiographies of both Missionaries and their converts tell a different story. Though seemingly working against church policy, there is compelling evidence that Missionaries regularly employed faith healing as a missionary technique.

⁶ Marianne Perciaccante, “Backlash Against Formalism: Early Mormonism's Appeal in Jefferson County,” *Journal of Mormon History* 19, no. 2 (1993).

⁷ Stephen J. Fleming, ““Congenial to Almost Every Shade of Radicalism”: The Delaware Valley and the Success of Early Mormonism,” *Religion and American Culture: A Journal of Interpretation* 17, no. 2 (2007):131.

⁸ Sydney E. Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1972), 387; Winthrop S. Hudson, *Religion In America* (New York: Scribner, 1965), 172-173.

⁹ Steven C. Harper, “Missionaries in the American Religious Marketplace: Mormon Proselyting in the 1830s,” *Journal of Mormon History* 24, no. 2 (1998): 14.

¹⁰ Spencer J. Fluhman, “Anti-Mormonism and the making of religion in Antebellum America” (PhD diss., University of Wisconsin, 2006): 97-98; Doctrine and Covenants, 63:9.

¹¹ James B. Allen, Ronald K. Esplin, David J. Whittaker, *Men with a Mission 1837-1841: The Quorum of the Twelve Apostles in the British Isles* (Deseret Book: Salt Lake City, 2009), 92-93.

BACKGROUND

Since Mormonism grew out of the Second Great Awakening, it is necessary to take a closer look at Mormonism's relationship with the movement. Mormons may have wielded faith healing techniques in the international mission, however, these strategies were clearly forged within North America. Starting in the 1790s, the Second Great Awakening was a cultural movement striving to get more Americans into church. Christians could and did choose to attend a multitude of sermons, debates and lessons on top of regular church services. The Methodist church alone grew from fourteen thousand members in 1784 to over a million by 1844.¹² With the increase in churches, came an increase in preaching. The ratio of preachers per capita reached an all-time high, and Americans were presented with a lively religious marketplace of Christian options. It can be difficult to collectively summarise these religious movements, but on the whole we can say that these churches demanded direct and immediate contact with the divine, longed for complete sanctification and excitedly awaited an impending millennial age.¹³

This religious revival hit its height around 1820, and indeed it was around this time Joseph Smith claimed he had his 'first vision'. The 'first vision' is an account of Smith's teenage years. He claimed he had prayed in the woods to find an answer to which of the many churches he should join. The figures of God and Jesus appeared before him, advising that he join none of them, as they were all false. In other words, Mormonism's origin story depicts the Second Great Awakening as a crisis, and Mormonism as its solution.¹⁴ This places Mormonism at an odd relationship with the Second Great Awakening: Mormonism depicts itself in stark opposition to the religious pluralism it originated from.¹⁵

MISSIONARY WORK

What is quite interesting is that faith healing seems out of step with the process normally taken to spread the Mormon message. Unlike the emotional and mystical practice of something like faith healing, missionaries tended to favour careful, rational reasoning when searching for converts. The prolific Mormon pamphlet 'A Voice of

¹² Nathan Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity* (Yale University Press: New Haven & London, 1989), 220.

¹³ Winthrop S. Hudson, *Religion in America* (New York: Scribner, 1965), 172-173.

¹⁴ Christopher C. Jones, "The Power and Form of Godliness: Methodist Conversion Narratives and Joseph Smith's First Vision," *Journal of Mormon History* 37, no. 2 (2011): 90.

¹⁵ Contrast Hatch's *Democratization of American Christianity* with Marvin S. Hill, *Quest for refuge: The Mormon Flight from American Pluralism* (Signature Books: Salt Lake City, 1989), xi-xv.

Warning' perfectly illustrates the way Mormons shied away from emotional appeals.¹⁶ 'A Voice of Warning' was still being printed and disseminated years after the original, and its arguments copied over and over by later pamphleteers.¹⁷ The author, Parley Parker Pratt, opens the main body very clearly: "In order to prove anything from Scripture, it is highly necessary in the first place to lay down some certain, definite, infallible rule of interpretation." This lack of rule, he continues, is why there are so many opposing churches and sects, as well as why they are all invalidated: "the moment they departed from its [the bible's] literal meaning, one man's opinion, or interpretation, was just as good as another's."¹⁸ Pratt laughs at the inauthentic interpretive skills of Mormonism's competitors. He argues that non-literal interpretations are akin to the biblical character Noah thinking he had to build a spiritual ark to defend against a spiritual flood. He goes on to argue that any prophecy that has not yet been *literally* fulfilled, will at some point be fulfilled in the future.¹⁹ From here, Pratt demonstrates that Mormonism is the fulfilment of many of these prophecies. In other words, rather than appealing to faith and feelings, 'A Voice of Warning' claims that anyone who believes in the Bible must therefore accept the, divine wisdom of Joseph Smith, the new text he received, and even the Kingdom of earth being situated in America.

In the public mind, Mormonism was most famous for its more unique aspects: the Golden Bible, its American prophet, polygamy, and in contemporary times, 'temple garments' (sometimes derogatorily referred to as 'magical underwear'). However, missionaries shied away from these features. Instead, missionaries focused on the 'first principles': thoughtful arguments based on the Bible that resolved some of the most pressing sectarian controversies of that day. These focused on things such as Baptism by immersion, repentance of sins and the gift of the Holy Ghost.²⁰

Scholars also used to consider early Mormons to be particularly suspicious and gullible. Just as they assumed Mormons were poor and uneducated, it was assumed that they must have been attracted to magic and superstition. As historian Steven C Harper points out, "...one finds the word 'reasonable' and its relatives used frequently by writers trying to describe what it was in Mormon theology that caused conversion in them."²¹ Diaries like Robert Skelton's reflect the effort on the part of missionaries to attract such

¹⁶ Parley P. Pratt, *A voice of warning and instruction to all people. Or, An introduction to the faith and doctrine of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints*, 11th ed., (Salt Lake City: Deseret News company, Printers and publishers, 1881), first published 1846.

¹⁷ David J. Whittaker, "Early Mormon Pamphleteering" (PhD diss., Brigham Young University, 1982), 61-62.

¹⁸ Pratt, *A voice of warning*.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ Price Jr, Rex. "The Mormon missionary of the nineteenth century", (PhD Diss., University of Wisconsin, 1991), 314.

²¹ Steven C. Harper, "Infallible Proofs, Both Human and Divine: The Persuasiveness of Mormonism for Early Converts," *Religion and American Culture: A Journal of Interpretation* 10, no. 1 (2000): 101.

people: “He being a man of reason, gives me ample opportunity of laying before him; every subject connected with our holy religion. When one subject has been satisfactorily disposed of I introduce another.”²² Missionaries like Skelton clearly opted for carefully crafted arguments that appealed to people’s sense of reason. In fact, it was often superstition that drove Mormons from their previous faith, including Gilbert Belnap:

[I] had strove with all my might to obtain the same manifestations of the spirit with which they said they [The Methodist Ministers] were endowed. In spite of every exertion on my part in the honesty of my soul, I was compelled to acknowledge that I could not experience a similar manifestation to that which they, themselves professed to enjoy. From the deportment of this people, I soon became confirmed in the belief that the ministers only appealed to the feelings or the passions of the people, at least in many instances.²³

For those disillusioned by the appeals to ‘feelings and passions’ of Second Great Awakening practices, Mormonism’s approach gave the faith the exact legitimacy the converts felt was otherwise missing.

FAITH HEALING WITHIN THE MORMON COMMUNITY

Considering Mormon scepticism of magic and superstition, it is surprising that its followers could build such a strong culture around the supernatural doctrine of faith healing. While a few evangelical theologians flirted with faith healing in the 1830s, faith healing in America would not gain popularity until the 1880s.²⁴ Mormons meanwhile, were exploring faith healing as early as 1831. For them, faith healing was no folk magic: it was a metaphysical truth that was documented in the Bible, yet neglected by their contemporaries. Within the Mormon community, faith healing was so widely adopted it was a part of everyday life. Smith permitted every Mormon, man and woman, to wield this gift. Jonathan Crosby returned from a mission with small pox. His wife Caroline noted, “we often thought it a mercy that he...[was not] sent to some hospital.” Instead, they gladly sent for a Church Elder who claimed he had contracted small pox from

²² Robert Skelton, “Diary Entry November 12,” *Skelton, Robert Hodgson vol. 1, 1852-1856*, 1854, L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University.

²³ Gilbert Belnap, “Autobiography of Gilbert Belnap.”

²⁴ Jonathan A. Stapley and Kristine Wright, “Female Ritual Healing in Mormonism,” *Journal of Mormon History* 37, no. 1 (2011): 4; Raymond J. Cunningham, “From Holiness to Healing: The Faith Cure in America, 1872-1892,” *Church History* 43, no. 4 (1974): 502; Heather D. Curtis, “Houses of Healing: Sacred Space, Spiritual Practice, and the Transformation of Female Suffering in the Faith Cure Movement, 1870-90,” *Church History* 75, no. 3 (2006): 600.

vaccinations, but had overcome the disease on two occasions.²⁵ A fear of hospitals was hardly unique in nineteenth century North America, as the overcrowded hospitals were for the poorest of society who could not afford the one-on-one care of a home visitation.²⁶ Regardless, it is apparent that Mormons believed that spirituality and ritual could produce tangible results just as well, if not better, than conventional medicine. When Caroline joined a mission to Tahiti in 1850, she wrote of the ability of Mormon faith to protect the group from illness:

There was one of the sister[s], viz Sister Gilbert delivered prophesy in the name of Jesus that if the camp did not seek peace and union and strive to keep the commandments of God, we should be afflicted with sickness or some other trial. But if we maintained union and the love of God in our Midst we should be abundantly blest, it was confirmed by Captain Huntington who said it was true in the name of Jesus.²⁷

Caroline's sister, Louisa Barnes, who as mentioned above had already lost her life savings, was worried she could lose her children as well. Louisa feared they had contracted small pox when they visited Uncle Jonathan. Desperate to help them as soon as possible, she herself laid her hands upon them and healed them both.²⁸

One Mormon faith healer of note is the experienced Benjamin Brown. He performed far too many healings throughout his life to recount in this article, administering to the community, healing infectious wounds, poison victims, restoring sight, and when he was ill, was even healed by Joseph Smith himself. His accounts seem to be nothing short of miraculous:

I found her head, where the cancer had broken out, a dreadful sight, full of cancer worms, which were eating into the skull, three pieces of which had come out! I anointed her head with oil, and prayed the Lord in her behalf...The next time I saw her was the following Sunday, when I met her at the meeting. She pulled off her cap, and showed me her head. It was entirely healed, and the flesh was as sound as ever. She said that within half an hour after my administering to her, she felt all the pain,

²⁵ Caroline Crosby, "Memoirs, 1807 to September 1846," in *No Place to Call Home: The 1807-1857 Life Writings of Caroline Barnes Crosby, Chronicler of Outlying Mormon Communities*, edited by Edward Leo Lyman, Susan Ward Payne and S. George Ellsworth (Utah: Utah State University Press, 2005), 61.

²⁶ Charles E. Rosenberg, *The Care of Strangers: The Rise of America's Hospital System* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), 20.

²⁷ Caroline Crosby, "Journal, May 7 to August 16," in *No Place to Call Home*, 101, 149.

²⁸ Louisa Pratt, "History of Louisa Barnes Pratt", 74.

which had previously been intense, and, to use her expression, “like a thousand gimlets boring into her brain,” leave her entirely, and the wound healed up rapidly.²⁹

The very concept that such healings were possible had profound effects on Mormons. In fact, doctors were often turned away in favour of Mormon blessings. After Jesse Crosby had been struck by a falling branch in the woods, Brown recounts that Jesse’s non-Mormon father had first fetched a doctor, “who pronounced Jesse’s case desperate.”³⁰ The doctor evaluated that Jesse required an operation, however, Jesse’s Mormon mother never let the doctor perform it. Instead, she sent the doctor away and called on Benjamin Brown, the veteran faith healer. Brown successfully healed Jesse, “*In less than four days*, from the time of receiving this terrible accident, from which there seemed no human probability that he could recover, or, if he did, only to survive the loss of reason, he was again at work in the woods, hauling timber, the wound being entirely healed up.”³¹ However, it is interesting to note that this account differs from Jesse’s own autobiography. Jesse Crosby writes in his own account, “I was able in *about three weeks* to follow my former avocation and driving teams”, which is considerably longer than Brown’s insistence it took only four days.³² Inconsistencies aside, both Jesse and Benjamin view the healing as unquestionable evidence that their faith was more powerful than the medical knowledge of any man.

Though Mormon missionaries made intellectual rather than emotional appeals, it is quite clear that faith healing was a staple of the Mormon community. One could argue there are two different kinds of Mormons; those attracted to intellectual arguments and those attracted to supernaturalism, however the accounts of both Jesse Crosby and Caroline Barnes exemplify how early Mormons both praised faith healing while criticizing supernaturalism. Jesse for example, was not confident that a particular village would be open to conversion as “We had to clear the ground of heaps of superstition before any seed could be sown to advantage.”³³ Caroline meanwhile, scoffed at things like telepathic communication after having “an opportunity of proving the *fallacy* of the spiritual telegraph system.”³⁴ Jesse and Caroline both advocate faith healing while lambasting other forms of supernaturalism, as such; it would be a mistake to view emotional and intellectual attitudes as mutually exclusive. The conversion narratives that involve faith healing illuminate the complex relationship between Mormon rationalism and

²⁹ Benjamin Brown, *Testimonies for the truth a record of manifestations of the power of God, miraculous and providential, witnessed in the travels and experience of Benjamin Brown* (London: S. W. Richards, 1853), 11-12.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 14.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² Jesse Crosby, “The history and Journal of Jesse Wentworth Crosby,” in *Book of Abraham Project collection*.

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ Caroline Crosby, “Journal and Memoirs, August 1850 to September 1852,” in *No Place to Call Home*, 149.

supernaturalism: Mormons, and their converts, generally held certain intellectual assumptions, and would embrace any supernatural practice that logically followed from those assumptions.

FAITH HEALING WITHIN THE MISSIONARY PROCESS

Mormons were not purely outward focused. While on mission, proselytising was their priority, but by necessity missionaries took on multiple roles such as judges, arbitrators, publishers, advisers or accountants.³⁵ As a result, the internally focused faith healing and the outwardly focused proselytising frequently began to blend together. Reading Theodore Turley's diary of his mission in Britain, one would think that he spent the entire year doing nothing other than healing, preaching, and baptising. In April 1840 Turley was thrown in prison. Yet, so focused was Turley on preaching and healing, he neglects to note why he had he was actually jailed. Instead, he writes of his newfound opportunity to preach to inmates.³⁶ Most likely he was jailed for debt related reasons as he wrote "to some of the debtors the first Principls [sic] of the Doctrins [sic] of Christ", however, this also further illustrates how passionate he was to spread the Mormon message.³⁷ Unlike his preaching, healings were theoretically reserved for saints. However, Turley occasionally attended to gentiles who were ill, blurring the lines between proselytising and faith healing. Healing and preaching were often done at the same time. As Turley wrote on July 20th, 1840, "This Day I visited the saints in & about Bolton Laying hands on the sick & c. I Preached at night in the open are to a Large Congregation numbers believe I had 4 follow me to my lodgins [sic] to enquire after the truth I was on till twelve at night."³⁸ This interest would not lead to conversion, but created enough curiosity to give missionaries the chance to present their case.

There are often gaps, but missionary diaries still show a close link between faith healing and conversion in missionary diaries. For example, Abraham Owen Smoot confirmed a man named Dr. Young on the evening of December 12, 1841. The next day, Smoot's entry reads: "Dr. Young's, layed [sic] hands on him and rebuked the decease [sic], he was healed forwith [sic]."³⁹ In order to make sense of the entry, we can assume that decease should read as disease, but the relevant issue is that Smoot does not just bless

³⁵ William Mulder, *Homeward to Zion: The Mormon Migration from Scandinavia* (University of Minnesota press, Minneapolis, 1957), 49-51; Harper, "Missionaries in the American Religious Marketplace", 6-7.

³⁶ Theodore Turley, "Tuesday April 14th 1840," *Turley, Theodore vol. 1, 1839-1840*, 1840 L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University.

³⁷ Theodore Turley "Monday April 27th 1840," *Turley, Theodore vol. 1*.

³⁸ Theodore Turley "Monday July 20th 1840" *Turley, Theodore vol. 1*.

³⁹ Abraham Owen Smoot "December 12th, 13th 1841," *Smoot, A. O. vol. 1, 1836-1846*, 1840 Tom Perry Special Collections, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University.

the Doctor for his general health, but actively heals him the day after his confirmation. It seems likely that the topic of faith healing came up at some stage before the actual conversion. Dr Young was clearly interested in Mormonism, and it is plausible that Smoot may have offered healing as an option for the sick doctor.

If employed on non-believers, faith healing could easily backfire. Though attempts were made, a hostile audience was never turned by the otherwise powerful tool of faith healing. Oliver Huntington learned the hard way that the gifts of the spirit only appealed to the curious. One day after a lively sermon, some of the audience followed the preachers to the home in which they were staying. Oliver wrote, “they wanted a sign or a witness that Miracles could be done; and just then steps up a woman and testified [sic] of her being healed, and several more testified [sic] to that and other instances of the sick and lame being healed by the laying on of hands; but still they would not believe.”⁴⁰ Far from helping, the mob became more enraged. In the end the preachers resolved to simply ignore them.

Louisa, who as noted earlier healed her own children, had actually first heard of the Mormons in 1834 through the stories of their faith healing. One of her sisters, Lois, was deathly ill, right around the time she heard rumours of the Mormons visiting a neighbouring town. Apparently, these strange people could heal through faith. Louisa rushed there in search of the preachers she hoped would save her sister. On her way to find the missionaries, she discussed the purpose of her journey with some Presbyterians she had met on the road. They convinced her that the Mormons were nothing more than frauds and tricksters, and she went home disappointed. Lois died from tuberculosis later that year.⁴¹ The attraction of Faith healing could not withstand anti-Mormonism, even when a life was at stake.

In hindsight, we know that when Louisa finally did convert to Mormonism, she was quite passionate about faith healing. At first it seems surprising that she was so easily dissuaded from seeing the healers, but again, faith healing was not particularly convincing unless it rested on a theologically Mormon foundation. Louisa did not think about the Mormons for the year after Louis’s death. It was only a year later when she was visited by Caroline, that she would consider the subject again. The two had not seen each other in years, and there was much to catch up on. Louisa found out that Caroline had since married Jonathan, and that the two were now Mormons headed for Kirtland, Ohio, where the temple was still being built. Louisa had forgotten all about Mormonism and faith healing, but after discussing it with her sister for a month, and being presented with a book of Mormon to look over, Louisa was thoroughly convinced that the faith was true.⁴²

⁴⁰ Oliver Boardman Huntington “Diary entry, October 25th,” *Huntington, Oliver Boardman book 4*, 1846 Courtesy Special Collections, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University, Provo, UT 84602.

⁴¹ Louisa Pratt, “History of Louisa Barnes Pratt”, 48-51.

⁴² Louisa Pratt, “History of Louisa Barnes Pratt”, 55.

While Louisa converted after being convinced, many in similar situations would not take the step of identifying as Mormons. However, this is where faith healing would be employed to success. Up to this point, an interested convert had heard a little about Mormons, listened to preaching or read some pamphlets. They then had much of their more subtle questions answered by Mormon missionaries. Perhaps it was around this time that they started to closely analyse the Book of Mormon in order to corroborate all they had learned, however so few Mormons mention the book of Mormon in reference to their conversion that it is difficult to tell whether they read it at all. They were convinced of Mormonism's validity, yet still balked at officially declaring themselves Mormon. This is not too surprising, as the magnitude of conversion makes it an incredibly rare phenomenon.⁴³ It was at this point that Mormons helped converts warm up their cold feet by introducing them to faith healing. Previously missionaries had made their case, and the listener believed. Now was time for signs to be provided that logically followed from that faith.

Daniel Williams had first heard of Mormonism after reading a pamphlet. As with many other examples I have used, portions recounting his conversion clearly draws a link to faith healing. Like Gilbert, he found the faith appealing, except in his case, rumours scared him away for years from listening to Mormon preachers. Even when he finally met them, he did not convert immediately. In Daniel's account of his eventual conversion, though not stating it was due to faith healing, it is clear that his story about his healing is an integral part of his conversion narrative:

I was invalided when I was baptised and had been under the care of two doctors for five months previous to my baptism. My disease was Ulcerations of the Intestines, which had brought me nearly to the gates of Death -- After my Baptism the Doctors gave me up for dead declaring that they could do nothing more for me -- I then called for the Elders of the Church Elder W Davies came and anointed me with oil in the name of the Lord and laid his hands on me and prayed the Lord to heal me I felt the healing power of God pass through my whole frame in an instant like electricity driving before it every pain and disease which I had been suffering for so long.⁴⁴

While Daniel does not reference an actual pledge, his healing comes at the end of a long process of considering conversion to Mormonism.

⁴³ Henri Gooren, "The Religious Market Model and Conversion: Towards a new approach," *Exchange* 35, no.1, (2006): 51. While there are ongoing debates in sociology about conversion rates, there is no question that a vast minority of people actually convert to another religion.

⁴⁴ Daniel Williams, *Diary of Daniel Williams vol.1*, 1847, L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University.

Daniel Williams' story is not the only example that illustrates the pledge so bluntly. Long before his bout with smallpox, Jonathan Crosby had been resistant to conversion. He had been thoroughly convinced of Mormonism, explicitly referencing contemporary sectarianism, "If the Bible is true, why don't you preach, teach it all alike? Why all this division in the world?"⁴⁵ But on the day of his baptism, "...I supposed a good many people would obey the gospel. But how disappointed I was when I found that only one young man besides myself, and four females, received their teachings." In the end, Jonathan was not baptised that day. Surprised that so few had joined the Mormons, Jonathan second-guessed whether Mormonism was as obviously true as he had thought. He was however convinced that joining the Mormons would heal his physical ailments. He noted, "I had two sores on me; one was a burn, and the Spirit said, those sores will never get well if you do not obey the gospel. The sores had been on me a long time, and I could not heal them with anything I could put on them and they grew larger all the time, although quite small at first."⁴⁶ Upon being baptised on December 2nd 1833, Jonathan was not just emotionally changed, but claimed that the baptism changed him physically as well. He wrote that, "the burden left my mind and I felt free and light as air and my sores were soon healed."⁴⁷

Oliver Huntington made the same kind of deals to potential converts in England as those that were made to Jonathan and Gilbert by Mormon missionaries. During his British mission from 1846-1847, the saints fretted over whether they should turn away a gentile that outright asked for healing, and Huntington wrote in his diary, "Brother Dudley took me out doors & wanted council of me to know it would be wisdom to lay hands on her, as he expected that was what she wanted, for she had requested it before, and yet she had not been baptised [sic]. I told him to do it, if she would covenant to obey the Gospel if she was restored."⁴⁸ The spontaneity of this deal probably helps explain why it has remained somewhat hidden from scholarly view, especially since these accounts sit within a grey area of Mormon policy on the use of faith healing. Either way, this offer made by Oliver reflects the wider offer made by Missionaries to potential converts, in the hope of confirming the conversion.

CONCLUSION

This investigation of Mormon diaries and autobiographies has revealed that faith healing was not just an internal Mormon practice. Faith healing played a major role in the

⁴⁵ Jonathan Crosby, "A biographical sketch of the life of Jonathan Crosby written by himself," in *Book of Abraham Project collection*.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ Oliver Boardman Huntington "Diary Entry, October 9," Huntington, Oliver Boardman book 3, 1846 Courtesy Special Collections, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University, Provo, UT 84602.

Mormon conversion process, even if it was indirect and unofficial. Rather than being something contradictory to Mormonism's argument based proselytising efforts, acceptance of faith healing was in fact its logical endpoint. But the practice was only for those who had already accepted Mormonism's intellectual basis. As a result, faith healing straddled a line between internal and external Mormonism. Without a basis that believed in a logically consistent bible, faith healing failed to capture attention for long, or would even turn people against the faith.

These findings also have much wider implications. For example, the role of faith healing is just one small part of Mormonism that can only be illuminated through the analysis of personal writings. Placing a larger emphasis on Mormonism as it was actually practiced in everyday life, rather than how the religion was depicted theologically, can aid scholars in understanding the faith's rapid growth. In a sense, rather than thinking of Mormons as people who follow Mormonism, we should instead think of Mormonism as comprising a set of practices and ideas that that Mormons followed and believed in. While this can sound almost redundant, it is more useful to focus on what a group actually believes, rather than hold them up to a hypothetical standard that no one on the ground actually maintained. This sentiment can be applied to a wide range of group beyond the Mormons: studies of any group made up of people who voluntarily associate based on ideology, whether it be on a religious or political basis, could benefit greatly by reversing our focus. By understanding what people actually did, we can separate the practices from the rhetoric.

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