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Warren A. Jennings

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“What Crime Have I Been Guilty of?”: Edward Partridge’s Letter to an Estranged Sister

Edited by Warren A. Jennings

On 4 February 1831, Edward Partridge, hatter, was called to serve as the first Mormon bishop. Revelation said of him that “his heart is pure before me, for he is like unto Nathanael of old, in whom there is no guile” (D&C 41:11). Partridge had been in the Church less than two months, having been baptized by Joseph Smith in the Seneca River at Fayette, New York, on 11 December 1830. Though Partridge could not know this at the time, his expression of conversion (as the following letter proves) drove a wedge between him and many of his relatives.

Partridge was born in Pittsfield, Berkshire County, Massachusetts, on 27 August 1793, the son of William and Jemima Partridge. Apparently he had a number of brothers and sisters; the federal census of 1830 shows that William Partridge, then in his seventies, had residing in his household four males in their twenties and two females in their thirties. At sixteen Edward was apprenticed to a hatter. At twenty he became disgusted with the religious world and for the next fifteen years he was a seeker. Sometime during this period he moved to Painesville, Ohio, where he became a restorationist and a follower of Sidney Rigdon, who baptized him into the Campbellite Church in 1828.

He was prospering at his trade when the first Mormon missionaries stopped in the Western Reserve in the fall of 1830 on their way to Missouri. Partridge was captivated by what he heard and set out with Rigdon for New York to investigate the new religion and its Prophet. He was converted; his religious search was over. He would be an observer and participant in many of the exciting and painful events the Mormons would endure during the next decade: he was tarred and feathered and forced to flee from Jackson County; he saw some of his closest friends and associates expelled or voluntarily withdraw from the Church; he suffered the warfare in Missouri and the ensuing expulsion; and he saw the tragic and tentative beginnings of settlement at Nauvoo before he

Warren Jennings is professor of history at Southwest Missouri State University, Springfield, Missouri.
died from pleurisy on 27 May 1840. But his conviction that he had found the *true* Church never wavered. His obituary in the June 1840 issue of the *Times and Seasons* noted: "His life was one continual exhibition of the sincerity of his religious beliefs, and perpetual evidence of his confidence in a future state of rewards and punishments: in view of which he always acted."

The following letter contains evidence of this faith; it also discloses other aspects of Partridge's life and thought. He was obviously better educated than most of his contemporaries: the grammar and spelling are generally correct (we have left them as they appear in the original); the expression is forceful (much more so when discussing religion than when commenting on mundane matters); and, on one occasion at least, he employs a literary quotation. This letter also illustrates a common proselyting practice of that period (one which was developed perhaps more highly by the Mormons, since they tended to be pleaders, than other denominations which tended toward revivalism) of reasoning from scriptural authority in the fashion of canonical lawyers, "line upon line, precept upon precept."

This lengthy letter was written upon one side of a single sheet of paper which was then folded to make its own envelope. It was composed over a period of days. Begun on October 12, it was not postmarked at Far West until October 30. Though it was addressed to James Partridge, it was intended for Emily Dow, a widowed sister after whom Edward had named one of his daughters. This copy was made from a photostat in the Manuscript Collection, the State Historical Society of Missouri, Columbia, Missouri.

Far West Caldwell Co. Mo. Oct.¹ 12th 1837

Dear brother James:

I have directed this letter to you, for fear Sister Emily would not take it out of the office, you will please to see that she has the reading of it. I have no objection to anyones seeing it. I still live where I did when I wrote to you last fall or winter. I expect to move into the village this fall, our town or City is called Far West, it contains about 100 buildings—6 stores, a post office &c. &c. Br. Wm. W. Phelps is post master.¹ The town platt has been consecrated in part, and I have the care of it for the benefit of the church. I have reserved a lot or two for you if you want them. I hope that you will come up here, as soon as convenient, and see us, if you cannot make it convenient to tarry here.

Orders have come to this upper country, to raise 1000 Indians, and also 150 or 200 volunteers among the whites, all to go to Florida to fight the Semi-

¹William Wines Phelps (1792-1872), former editor of the *Evening and Morning Star,* was one of the leaders in the move into Caldwell County.
noles, also, of old volunteers one regiment is called to go. The officers of our [county] both civil and military are mostly [brethren]. We are measureably enabled to organize according to the laws of men, thus fulfilling one revelation. If you study law we want you here as a counsellor—we have no lawyer here, by coming here to study, you could be admitted at the bar, much sooner than you can there. The name of our county is "Caldwell". We have not had a frost as yet hard enough to kill pumpkin vines, much of our corn was planted late, and might have been cut down by early frosts; but a kind providence has ordered it otherwise. Corn is from 50 to 50 cts. pr. bush. and flour $4.25 pr hund. here. Wheat is for $1.00 in the settlements. Wages are high. Prospects before us are as good as could be reasonably expected. We are enjoying comfortable health, it is general time of health. I may say that it has been a healthy season. Remember us to our friends. I subscribe myself as usual your brother

Edward Partridge

Far West, Caldwell Co. Mo. Oct. 12th 1837

Sister Emily:

Many times I have been impressed upon to write you a letter since I last called upon you, to visit you; but, then, I would think upon the coldness and indifference, yea the insulting manner with which you treated me at that time, and it would so dampen my feelings that I would neglect writing.

But notwithstanding, the neglect shown to me by you, and other of my near relations, I am resolved to write, for this hatred proves the Saviors words true, that, "A man's foes shall be they of his own household" or kinfolks [Matt. 10:36]. I here refer you to Matthew 10th Chap. 34th verse, and to the end of the Chap. "He that receiveth a righteous man in the name of a righteous man shall receive a righteous man's reward" [Matt. 10:41]. I ask what crime have I been guilty of that I could not be received at all, neither as a Christian, a righteous man, or a natural brother?—I professed to be a disciple of Jesus Christ,—a Christian; and this you was not ignorant of, and yet you could tell me, when I called upon you, to make a friendly visit, that you had sent me word that you did not wish to see me, which, by the by, never got to my ears, or I should not have troubled you.—And further, notwithstanding you profess to be a follower of the meek and lowly Jesus, yet you actually did forbid me talking upon the subject of his Holy religion in your house. Now I ask, what have I done that makes you hate me? I want you to remember that he that hateth his brother is a murderer, and that no murderer hath eternal life abiding in him. 1st Epist. of John 3d—15th.

At the time you forbade me talking upon the subject of Christianity, in your house, I had just quoted, or was quoting, the Saviors words to Nicodemus, where he said "Except a man be born of water, and the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God" [John 3:5].

As I was not permitted at that time to say any thing upon the subject, I now feel to write upon it. And first, It appears evident that Nicodemus had faith in Jesus; for he testified saying "We know that thou art a teacher come

[These recruits were under the command of Colonel Richard Gentry and suffered severe losses, including the death of their commanding officer, at the Battle of Okeechobee on Christmas Day, 1837.]

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from God: for no man can do these miracles that thou doest, except God be with him” [John 3:2]. Notwithstanding this expression of faith, “Jesus answered and said unto him, Verily, verily I say unto thee, Except a man be born again he cannot see the kingdom of God” [John 3:3]. Here we discover that it is necessary to be born again to see the kingdom of God, and that too when a person has faith in Jesus. The birth spoken of here is evidently the enlightening influences of the Spirit of God, which all are enlightened with sooner or later, who arrive at the years of accountability. The natural birth is coming from darkness to light, so with the spiritual, the person comes from darkness to light.

The natural birth brings, those born, when they can see things as they are, so also with the Spiritual birth; it brings persons into the light of the Spirit, which if followed will guide into all truth. Persons born of the Spirit see things in their true colors; they can now see the kingdom of God, and if they will follow the light of that Spirit they can enter in, and be partakers of the blessings of the kingdom, even an inheritance there. It certainly is one thing to see a kingdom; and an other thing to be a subject of that kingdom. Persons might go in sight of Newyork, or any other place; they also might be much elated, and rejoice much, at what they saw, and yet never enter in, and receive an inheritance there.

The Savior proceeded and showed Nicodemus how a man could enter the kingdom, after he had got in sight of it. “He said Except a man be born of water, and the Spirit; he cannot enter into the kingdom of God” [John 3:5]. The Savior here makes use of a figure that is so plain that none need mistake it. He did not say except a man be baptized by water, and the Spirit; he cannot enter into the kingdom of God, had he said baptized instead of born, there might have been room for cavil; and also mistake.

This was a point of great importance, if the Savior is to be credited, for here was a certain something to be attended to, which if neglected would debar a person from the kingdom of God hence the Savior uses a figure to represent baptism which cannot be denied amounts to emersion. The figure is except a man is born of water: Now to be born naturally is to come forth from a woman, so also to be born of water is to come forth from the water, that is, they must be buried in the liquid grave, even the water. And this agrees with what Paul wrote to his Roman brethren, namely, We are buried with him (Christ) by baptism into death [Rom. 6:4].

Again, We have been planted together in the likeness of his death, we shall also be resurrected. Rome 6th Chap. [v. 5]. The only conclusion that I can honestly put upon the figures used by the Savior and Paul in the foregoing quotations, is that those who come to years of accountability, must be emersed in and come forth from water, or they cannot enter into the kingdom of God. You probably will now say to me as others have said before you: Then you believe baptism to be a saving ordinance do you? I answer that I believe what Jesus said to Nicodemus was true: And as he said that no man could enter into the kingdom of God without being born of water, and the Spirit, so it must stand; and if you do not like the doctrine, you must blame the Savior and not me; for it is him that hath declared it. I will assure you that if you are filled with the Spirit of Christ, you will not object to what he has laid down as way marks to heaven. I know that there are many, at the present day, who profess to believe, that there are things attached to the religion of Christ,
such as baptism, that are nonessential, or, not essential to salvation. Now, I do not believe that Jesus ever commanded his disciples to do things that were nonessential; and we certainly know, that he commanded them to be baptized all such as believed; and also said that men or adults must be born of water as well as spirit to gain admittance into the kingdom of God. The Savior taught, that men should not live by bread alone, but by every word which proceedeth forth out of the mouth of God [Matt. 4:4].

Now if we ought to live by every word of God, how careful should we be, and see, if we have attended to every word spoken by him who never spoke in vain. I will now tell you, what I believe to be nonessential, and it is that which causes many an honest soul to mourn before God, on account of the divisions amongst the professors of religion at the present day, not knowing what the difficulty is, or where it lies; and this is the thing, the teaching of the commandments of men for the doctrines of Christ: the traditions and superstitions of men that clash with the word of God, are the things which are nonessential, and ought to be thrown aside. The Savior cautioned the people to enter into the strait gate. Because, said he, strait is the gate, and narrow the way which leadeth to life, and few there be that find it [Matt. 7:14]. This being the case, how careful should we be, and search the written word, to see that we miss not the gate, nor any of the way marks? and, surely, there are many pointed out in the New Testament. It is said in the book of Mormon "That repentance and baptism, is the gate by which ye should enter" [2 Nephi 13:20]. The Savior said, "Not every one who saith unto me, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven; but he that doeth the will of my Father who is in heaven" [Matt. 7:21]. So that it is by doing the very things which the Lord requires, that will gain us an admission into the kingdom of heaven. Again, he said to some in his day, These things ye ought to have done, and not leave or have left the other undone [Matt. 24:23]. There are those that do many good works, but leave others which are equally necessary undone.

On the day of pentecost, the Apostle Peter preached to the multitude, who had assembled to see, and hear the strange things which had taken place; and while he was preaching, they were pricked to the heart.

What pricked them to the heart? I answer truth. Why did truth prick them to the heart more at that time, than it had done before? (for truth was just as much truth before, as it was at that time:) because God poured out his spirit upon them; and his Spirit convinced them of the truth, and that is one of its offices, to guide into truth; they now believed that Jesus, whom they had crucified, was truly the Christ, the Savior of the world; they were born again, they began to see that Christ was about to set up his kingdom, yea they saw the kingdom of God, and they cried out to the Apostles, men and brethren what shall we do? [Acts 2:37] Peter who had had the keys of the kingdom of God conferred upon him, immediately answered them saying "Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ, for the remission of sins, and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Ghost" [Acts 2:38]. We find that those who gladly received his word were baptized, and had the promise of the gift of the Holy Ghost, notwithstanding they had been previously born again, or so enlightened by the Spirit and word of God, as to be enabled to see the kingdom of God.

I have shown the way into the kingdom of God by the Saviors own words, and now, it may be profitable to compare some of his sayings respecting the
kingdom itself. And first: We frequently find, in the testimony concerning Jesus and his sayings, expressions like these, The kingdom of heaven is at hand. The kingdom of God is nigh unto you, &c. &c. The Savior conferred the keys of the kingdom of heaven upon Peter. Matt. 16th Chap. 18 & 19 verses. Keys signifies something to lock and unlock with, again, to explain things. When the Savior was about to leave his disciples, it was his will to appoint Peter, to take the lead; and also to confer upon him power to open the door into the kingdom which he was about to set up, or establish, among the children of men; And also power to bring forth the word of the Lord, unto the people; yea to unfold the hidden mysteries of the kingdom of heaven to the inhabitants of that age. There are certain things necessary to establish a kingdom: There must of necessity be a king, and many officers commissioned by the king, to see to the affairs of the kingdom; and there must also be subjects, as well as officers, to form a kingdom. Now we will look at the order of the kingdom of God. Jesus after his resurrection spoke to his disciples, saying "All power is given unto me in heaven and in earth. Go ye therefore and teach all nations, baptizing them &c. Matt. 28th Chap. [vs. 18-19]. Here we have the testimony of the Savior, of the world, that all power both in heaven, and on the earth was given to him; consequently he had power to confer authority on whom he would; and according to the above quotation from Matt.; and also what is recorded in the 16th Chap. of Mark, 15th verse, and to the end of the Chap., he did empower his Apostles to build up the kingdom of God.

In the kingdom of God, there is perfect order to be observed, as we may learn from the 49th verse of the 24th of Luke: For notwithstanding the Apostles were commissioned by the Savior, to go into all the world, and build up the kingdom of God, yet they were commanded to tarry at Jerusalem; till a certain something took place, and that was, they were to be endowed with power from on high, even to be baptized with the Holy Ghost: And then they were to begin their work at Jerusalem, by preaching repentance and remission of sins: And from that starting point in all the world; Luke 24th Chap. 27th verse. Also Acts 1st Chap. 9 first verse.

The Apostles had power to confer authority upon others, for we find that many were set apart for the ministry, and that Timothy in particular, had a certain gift, or gifts bestowed upon him, by the laying on of the Apostles hands. How far this authority was continued in the church, down the stream of time, I am not able precisely to determine; but I have no hesitancy in saying that the authority was lost, by the time the bishop of Rome declared himself universal bishop or pope: And I think almost all protestants will agree with me on this point. And if the church of Rome has lost the authority of God, I ask what authority have the protestants? Surely, they have received what authority they have from the church of Rome. Now if we admit, that the authority of the church of Rome is good, even then the authority of the protestants is not good, for they have been excommunicated from and by the church of Rome, and if it was done by good authority then of course they have no authority to act; so that let the authority of the church of Rome, be either good or bad it leaves the protestants in the same dilemma, having no authority from God, to build up his kingdom. I know that the baptists claim that they are an exception, saying that they have come round, and not through, the church of Rome; but this they cannot substantiate.

This is an error. Partridge was referring to the 47th verse.

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According to scripture the church was to apostatize and go into the wilderness. And that in the due time of the Lord, he was to set his hand the second time to recover his people.

Now in showing the situation of the world at this time, I do not say that there are not many, who honestly think that they have authority to build up the kingdom of God; and are striving with their might to do it; but their honesty and faithfulness will not give them the power, until they can obtain it in a legal way. To illustrate my idea let us bring up a case in our own government; for instance, a couple wish to get married, they go to a man who is not authorized by law, to solemnize marriage, yet he is equally capable with those who are; they stand up before him, and he repeats the very words that are necessary for a magistrate or clergyman to say to them, yet if they cohabit together they live in adultery according to our law. To confer authority seems to be a very small thing, yet small as it is, it is necessary to the preservation of order, in all good governments. There is two ways to obtain authority to build up the kingdom of God, and they are these, either direct from God, or by the laying on of the hands of those who have authority. The authority from God, I say, has been lost for ages, consequently the religious world have divided, and subdivided until the sects have become almost innumerable; scarce two individuals among the whole who see, precisely, eye to eye. The prayer of the Savior was, that his disciples might be one. I ask can so many sects ever be one, under so many heads or leaders? I say they surely cannot. Such a diversity of opinions and sects looks very much like a Babylon, and there is a command, in the revelations of John, to come out of her my people, that you be not partakers of her sins, and of her plagues [Rev. 18:4].

Now I say, that God has set his hand the second time to recover his people;—that he has sent forth Angels, and commissioned men, once more, to build up his kingdom. And the Saviors words will be fulfilled, in these last days, where he said “This gospel of the kingdom shall be preached in all the world, for a witness unto all nations and then shall the end come.” Matt. 24th Chap. 14th verse. I have now briefly gone through the subject. (I might have enlarged but being confined to a letter, I have necessarily been very short.) I have shown that, in all the religious world, God has not had a kingdom on the earth for ages, until of late he has commissioned, from on high, men to build up his kingdom again on the earth; and that too for the last time. Let you may think that I am uncharitable, and would fain damn all who have lived for ages, I will tell you what I believe about it. I believe that all who deal justly, love mercy, and walk humbly with God; yea all who live to the light they have, it will be well with them, whether professor or nonprofessor. I also believe that all who wilfully deny the truth, pervert the word of God, love the world more than they love God, or the principles of righteousness, that hate their brethren, and in short all who do not live to the light they have, and continue so to the end of their days, will be damned, whether professor or nonprofessor.

I feel for one resolved to gain heaven, even the third heaven, in the end, if it is at the loss of all things here below; and I would gladly meet you, and all my earthly connexions there; but I cannot even hope to meet you there, unless you have a greater regard for me hereafter than you had when I saw you last. We must love God with all our hearts, and our neighbors as ourselves, if we expect to be saved in the kingdom of God. It is a truth that God has one, and
not many ways to save people in his kingdom, and that way is as different from other ways, as the National road differs from other roads; and the way to the kingdom of heaven may be as clearly pointed out, understood, and the difference from others, known as well, by those who are willing to walk therein, as that road is from other roads; and surely that is so plain that a wayfaring man, though a simpleton, can not mistake the way, when once he has gotten into it.

Your testament to me has been such that I cannot fellowship you. Still I regard you as a sister; your unchristian conduct towards me, I hate; and unless you repent, and I learn the fact, I should be under the necessity of passing by, however painful it might be to me, and not call upon you, if I were to pass through the town where you live. I really wish that you had regard enough for me to write me a letter. Although my brothers, and sisters, and blood relations are numerous, yet for near seven years past, I have not received a letter from any of them, save my brother James H.: by this neglect, I learn in some degree the regard they have for me; for did they love me, and believe as they profess to, that I was deluded, led away, and had embraced a false religion, they certainly would try to reclaim me, by showing me my error or at least trying. If you or any of them, will show me that I am in error, that is, have embraced a false religion, I certainly will forsake it, for truth I am resolved to stick to, for I know that that is what I shall need in a coming day; it is that which will remain; the same though the earth should pass away; yea notwithstanding the "wreck of matter and the crush of worlds"5 take place, the soul that sticks to truth will, like it, remain steadfast and immovable.

I would rejoice if my brothers and sisters would carry on a friendly correspondence with me, and if we not see eye to eye, in the things of religion, let us try to enlighten each other, that perhaps we may hereafter. Let us follow the spirit of truth; and it will guide us into all truth. Let us examine ourselves carefully and prayerfully, and see if we have hitherto lived by every word of God; and if we find that we have not, let us double our diligence, and be resolved like Joshua of old, "As for me and my house we will serve the Lord" [Joshua 24:15]. Let us remember that it costs just as much to build an house upon the sand, as it does upon a rock; and if we are so unfortunate as to build upon a sandy foundation, surely when the rain descends, and the floods come, and the winds blow and beat upon our house, it must fall, and great will be our loss; yea, it will be an irreparable loss.

I now must draw my letter to a close. What I have written, I have written; and I hope that it may be profitable unto you; I surely have written out of the purest of motives; and with the best of feelings. I will not say by you as you did by me, that you did not wish me to call and see you; but I say this, if you can ever make it convenient to call upon me, I will endeavor to treat you as well as I know how to, and make you as comfortable as my circumstances will permit. If you have ought against me, be good enough to make it known to me, and I will endeavor to make you satisfaction. I now propose the following questions to you, for you to reflect upon, and answer if you feel willing. First, Are you sure, that you are not building your hopes of heaven upon a

4 Begun in 1806 and known as the Cumberland Road, this was the first federally-financed highway. It ran westward from Cumberland, Maryland, to Illinois.
5 Joseph Addison, Cato, Act 5, sc. 1, line 28. "Crush" should read "crash."
sand foundation? Secondly, Have you no desire to make me some satisfaction, for the way and manner you have treated me? or, (thirdly) are you willing to meet me at the bar of God, with a heart not willing to receive a friendly visit, from me, your natural brother, in this world, on account of my religion? Fourthly, Are you willing to die without being born of water, by being emersed, and that too by one who has authority from God to do it? Fifthly, Do you candidly believe, that I have embraced a false religion? If so, (Sixthly) will you be good enough to show me the true religion of Jesus Christ?

I now feel that I have discharged my duty to you, and whether you heed or not what I have written, I believe that I can go down to my grave in peace, that you will not be able, in the day of judgement, to rise up and condemn me, for not having done my duty to you, while I continue to pray for you: So I bid you farewell.

Edward Partridge