

# A Critical Look

A Study of the Overstreet "Confession"  
and the Cowdery "Defence."

By Jerald and Sandra Tanner

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# INTRODUCTION

One of the most serious problems facing a student of Mormon history today is the fact that those who have gone before us have not always been honest. Both Mormon and anti-Mormon writers have sometimes been guilty of deceit. This makes it very difficult to determine what the truth is with regard to some issues.

The two purported documents which we will deal with in this study are entitled “A Confession of Oliver Overstreet” and “Defence in a Rehearsal of My Grounds for Separating Myself from the Latter Day Saints.” The “Defence” was supposed to have been written by Oliver Cowdery in 1839. The purported confession of Oliver Overstreet was supposed to have been written before April 7, 1857. Both documents are connected with the life of Oliver Cowdery—one of the three witnesses to the Book of Mormon.

We have spent a good deal of time trying to learn the truth concerning these documents, and although we are not pleased with the results of our research, we feel that it would be dishonest and unfair to the Mormon people to suppress our findings.

In Part 1 of this pamphlet we will deal with the “Overstreet Confession.” In Part 2 we will deal with the “Defence.”

April 7, 1967

# PART I

## THE OVERSTREET "CONFESSION"

The following is taken from a typed copy of the Oliver Overstreet "Confession":

### A CONFESSION OF OLIVER OVERSTREET THE OVERSTREET LETTER

I personated Oliver Cowdery at Council Bluffs, Iowa, on the 21st day of October, 1848, in a conference at which Brother Orson Hyde presided.

The circumstances need not all be detailed, as the very memory of them has become bitter to me. The facts are these: Bro. R. Miller came to me with an offer from Bro. Brigham Young, of \$500.00 cash in hand paid, to pose as Oliver Cowdery, the first of the three Witnesses to the Book of Mormon.

He told me there were many Saints who set much store on his (Cowdery's) testimony, who owing to his apostacy, had become disaffected themselves, and that nothing would reassure these like the conviction that Cowdery had reaffirmed his calling as a **Witness** to the Holy Priesthood and the Book of Mormon.

He insisted that I resembled Cowdery so much in form and features, notwithstanding our differences in tone of voice that I could easily personate him without danger of being caught and exposed, and told me that Bro. Brigham regarded such a piece of state as exceedingly well warranted as a plan for "Milking the Gentiles," who had so wrongfully slain the Prophet Joseph and driven his people from Nauvoo, Ill. The presence of the money, \$500.00, helped to quell my scruples.

To enable me to know what to say and do, Bro. Miller had me read some articles written by Cowdery and also gave me some voice drill, assuring me that he would make a **verbatim record** of my remarks, while personating Mr. Cowdery to be preserved for future use under Bro. Brigham Young's direction; and that my part in the matter he was confident would never be known or suspected.

I received the money and carried out the device and allowed my conscience to be lulled to sleep until I found that Bro. Brigham Young and his Elders were handling out as Mr. Cowdery's words, since his death, **what I was Bribed to say**, in his name at Council Bluffs and then my conscience began to trouble me. This is true. It is a pitiful confession to make. I hope for forgiveness from One higher than man. But my inability to silence my conscience after years of trial shows that duty is plain.

**I confess the fraud and that I received five hundred dollars for it.** Bro. Miller told me that Bro. Brigham Young furnished the money. I have no doubt he did. You are at liberty to use this confession in whatever way it seems best

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to you, taking care to not so implicate yourselves to put yourself in any peril of Bro. Brigham's vengeance, which I think will never be able to reach me.

Oliver Overstreet.

### CERTIFICATE OF CHIROGRAPHY

We the undersigned who are familiar with the handwriting of Oliver Overstreet from having corresponded with him state that the above confession, (shown to us by its recipient in strict confidence that we will not disclose his identity without first obtaining his permission) it is Mr. Overstreet's own handwriting.

Having heard of Mr. Overstreet's death a few days after he penned the confession given above, we certify to his chirography as well known to us.

John M. Bowlwinkle  
Jesse W. Fox  
H. McEwan

Territory of Utah  
County of Great Salt Lake

I, E. S. Smith, Judge of Probate Court, for the County aforesaid certify that the signers of the above certificate, all three are personally known to me, appeared before me this (7) day of April, A. D. 1857, and severally acknowledged their respective signatures as attached by themselves to the same.

E. S. Smith.

Mormon writers claim that the Oliver Overstreet "Confession" is a spurious document, and that Oliver Cowdery did return to the Church and died in full fellowship. We have not taken any position in regard to this issue since we were not sure who was telling the truth.

We have known several people who have been interested in the Overstreet "Confession," but no one has been able—to our knowledge—to find the original copy. We have heard that it began to be circulated shortly after the turn of the century. We do not know of any early reference to it.

The research we have done has led us to the conclusion that Oliver Cowdery did return to the Mormon Church, although he may not have died in full fellowship.

The Mormon writer Francis W. Kirkham quotes two letters which were published during Oliver Cowdery's lifetime which indicate that he returned to the Church. One of the letters was written by Wilford Woodruff and was published in the *Millennial Star* on February 1st, 1849. In this letter we find the following:

Dear Brother Pratt—I received a letter from Elder Hyde saying that Oliver Cowdery had come to the Bluffs with his family; and made satisfaction to the Church who had voted to receive him into the Church by baptism; and Elder Hyde expected to baptize him the next day. . . . I was truly glad to hear he had returned to the fold. (*Millennial Star*, vol. 11, page 43, as quoted in *A New Witness For Christ in America*, 1951, pages 72-73)

There are at least three other references which, we feel, seem to show that Oliver Cowdery did return to the Church at Council Bluffs.

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The first is by David Whitmer. In an interview with Orson Pratt and Joseph F. Smith he stated Oliver Cowdery had told him that he returned to the Church:

Upon inquiry, Mr. Whitmer informed us that Oliver Cowdery had told him **all about his visiting the Church** at Council Bluffs and of his **having been rebaptized**. (*Millennial Star*, vol. 40, page 774)

It may be argued that this is from a Mormon source, but David Whitmer published a pamphlet in 1887 which shows that he believed that Cowdery did return to the Church. In this pamphlet he stated:

In the winter of 1848, **after** Oliver Cowdery had been baptized at Council Bluffs, he came back to Richmond to live, and lived here until his death, March 3, 1850. (*An Address to Believers in the Book of Mormon*, April 1, 1887, page 1)

It must be remembered that David Whitmer was very opposed to the teachings of the Mormon Church at the time he made this statement. He would have had no reason to make this statement unless he really believed that Cowdery was rebaptized at Council Bluffs.

The leaders of the Reorganized Church of Latter-day Saints are also opposed to the teachings of the Utah Church, yet in 1884 they admitted that Oliver Cowdery did go to Council Bluffs. In the *Saints' Advocate* for June, 1884, they quoted both David Whitmer and Oliver Cowdery's sister as saying that he was at Council Bluffs. We quote from this article:

The writer is in possession of facts which show Elder Cowdery to have been, up to the hour of his death, sternly and uncompromisingly opposed to the peculiar doctrines, policy, and practices endorsed and advocated by the Utah leaders.

David Whitmer, Sen., of Richmond, Mo., said to the writer and a company of near twenty, at his own house, April 4th, 1883, when questioned as to why Elder Cowdery was baptized by some of the Utah ministers in 1847 at Council Bluffs, Iowa, that he did so in order to reach his relatives and others among the Brighamites, and redeem them from the errors and evils of polygamy, etc., etc. He said Elder Cowdery "did not endorse their peculiar doctrines—did not believe in polygamy nor anything like it—but he died like a man of God." (This we take from notes made at the interview. Ed.)

In a letter said to have been written by Elder Cowdery to Daniel Jackson, and Phebe, his (Cowdery's) sister, from Tiffin, Ohio, July 24th, 1846, he said alluding to polygamy:

I can hardly think it possible that you have written us the truth; that, though there may be individuals who are guilty of the iniquities spoken of—yet no such practice can be preached or adhered to as a public doctrine. Such may do for the followers of Mahomet; it may have been done some thousands of years ago; but no people professing to be governed by the pure and holy principles of the Lord Jesus can hold up their heads before the world at this distance of time, and be guilty of such abomination. It will blast, like a mildew, their fairest prospects, and lay the ax at the root of their future happiness — *Saints' Advocate*, vol. 1. pps. 112, 113.

In this Elder Cowdery uses almost the exact language against polygamy found in the Book of Mormon, page 116, which he penned nearly twenty

End of sample pages.  
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