

Undaunted Witnesses Episode 1: Oliver Cowdery, Witness

Samuel: Joseph! Joseph! Joseph!

Joseph: Samuel. You brought someone with you.

Samuel: This is Oliver. Cowdery.

Oliver: Mr. Smith. I, uh, I've come for the purpose of writing for you.

JS: Have you? Well. let's talk it over after we get you cleaned up. Little brother, you smell like you've been on the road for a week.

Camrey Bagley Fox: Welcome to our series about the witnesses of the Book of Mormon. My name is Camrey Bagley Fox. And we are joined by Dr. Gerritt Dirkmaat, associate professor of Church history and doctrine at Brigham Young University. Gerritt has worked as a historian and writer on the Joseph Smith Papers project over the last decade.

I recently had the opportunity to play Emma Smith in the movie Witnesses. That experience was both fascinating and informative, but it also raised a lot of questions for me. And that's why I have invited Dr. Dirkmaat to join me. Thank you for being here.

Gerritt Dirkmaat: Thank you for having me.

CBF: So I want to talk about the witnesses, and their relationship with Joseph Smith. Let's start with Oliver Cowdery. What can you tell us about him?

GD: I think that Oliver Cowdery is one of those essential people in the restoration. If you read some of Joseph's early writings, and he is really struggling at the moment that Oliver Cowdery shows up. Suddenly out of nowhere, from God, Oliver Cowdery shows up at the door and says, 'Hey, I'm here to write for you.' And I think that beginning of the relationship was this miraculous aspect of it, and they VERY quickly became very close.

And you really see Oliver is part of all these early foundational events of the church—John the Baptist coming, Peter, James, and John coming—so early on Oliver Cowdery is essentially indispensable.

That kind of goes throughout their relationship. Oliver is essential, Joseph loves him, Oliver loves Joseph, but then there's going to be tensions that creep up, and those tensions are going to be exacerbated over the course of time by various events that happened in the church.

CBF: So I know, eventually, Oliver leaves the Church. What brings that about?

GD: The real tensions really come to a head in 1837 and early 1838. A lot of them surround the failure of the Kirtland Safety society; there's a gigantic financial crisis, and hundreds of banks all

over the country failed. And especially these banks on the frontier like theirs is, they are not well-funded, and it's going to collapse. And that causes an enormous amount of tension. Things start to kind of derail.

GD: Some people point to the ascendancy of people like Sidney Rigdon in the Church. Joseph loves and accepts people, I mean, I want to say RIDICULOUSLY quickly. I don't know if there's a wrong way to love people, but Joseph is that way. I mean, he meets people, and within DAYS, he takes them immediately into his confidence. He's giving them all kinds of authority and power in the Church, and you can see how that might really affect these early people, who had actually sacrificed to even get the Church going. 'Hey, it's great that Sidney Rigdon can give a good sermon; remember me, right? I'm the one who, like, wrote most of the Book of Mormon while you translated.'

So there's feelings of being pushed a little bit to the side.

CBF: There's some jealousy, maybe.

GD: Yeah! I mean, that's pretty natural. I feel like, you know, we say, we talk about that like, 'Oh yes, how could they possibly have been jealous?' How could they possibly NOT have been?

CBF: Yeah.

GD: If you sacrificed your entire life to this. If everyone you know is calling you names, and has thrown you aside, and you've given up everything, it's a pretty natural thing to expect something back, I think.

CBF: When he left the Church, he was excommunicated, correct?

GD: Yeah, well he actually is going to say he's leaving either way. But he's going to be cut off.

CBF: So he makes the choice, it wasn't just like, 'Bye. Oliver.'

GD: Look, excommunication's very different in 1838 than it is today. I mean, there were people who were excommunicated from the Church for falling asleep in a church meeting, which, I mean if that were the case we'd all be --

CBF: Like, I'd be in trouble!

GD: The reality is, we see excommunication as this incredibly stark THAT'S IT. I mean, it's going to be at least a year before you can get back in. They don't. For them, people can be cut off from the Church one day, and as soon as they say, 'Okay, I'm sorry,' they're back.

CBF: They're back in.

GD: They leave in a time of just incredible turmoil. You know, Kirtland is falling apart at the time that Martin Harris is cut off from the Church, and Missouri is just heading into the Mormon war

in Missouri when David Whitmer and Oliver Cowdery are excommunicated. And so in the months that follow, I mean, Joseph's, you know, imprisoned in Liberty Jail. And the Church is being driven from Missouri, and frankly, I'm not even sure how they would know where to go BACK TO at the moment, and in the months that followed.

Oliver Cowdery doesn't say, 'Oh yeah, Joseph Smith was never a prophet. He didn't say that. He simply feels like the Church is going the wrong direction, and that the Church is being led a different direction, and that it was unfair the way that he was treated. Well, after Joseph Smith's death, he will ask if he can be readmitted to the Church.

Oliver Cowdery: I never thought I'd have the opportunity to address a body of the Saints again. I will not waste it. I'm not currently affiliated with this honored company, something I hope to quickly rectify. I'm not here to seek power nor to interfere with the business or callings of those men who've borne the burden since the death of Joseph. My request is to be a mere member of Christ's church. I throw myself at your feet, and I ask to be one of your number. I, I, I wish only to be alive again with Brother Joseph and with God.

GD: And they will accept him and he will be re-baptized by Orson Hyde. And with the intention that he is going to go to Salt Lake. In fact, Brigham Young is so willing to welcome him back into the Church, that he's actually appointed to go TO Washington, D.C. to help defend the Latter-day Saints in their rights that are being challenged by the federal government.

GD: Unfortunately, he gets ill, and he goes back to Missouri, and he just never fully recovers and shortly thereafter he passes away.