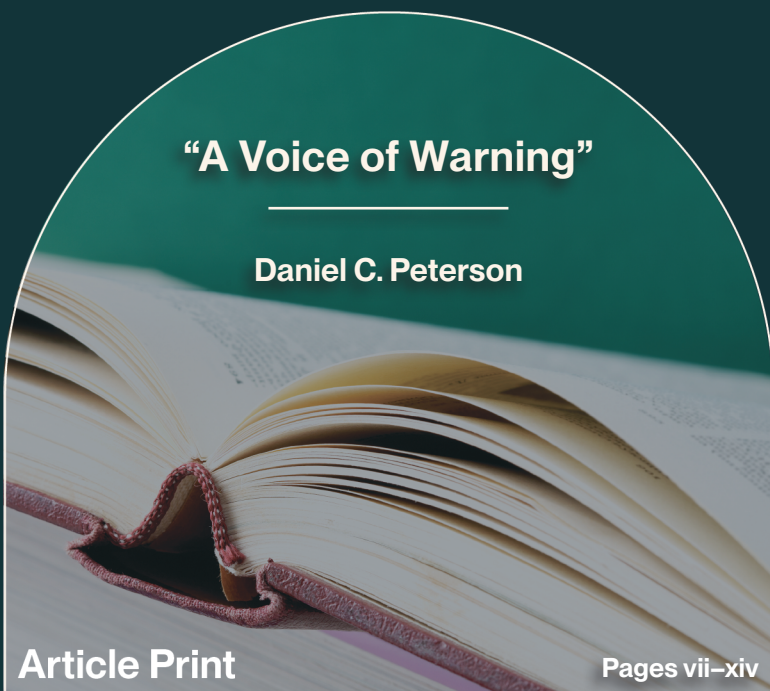


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“A Voice of Warning”

Daniel C. Peterson



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“A Voice of Warning”

Daniel C. Peterson

Abstract: *The Restoration of the Gospel began in an atmosphere of ardent and urgent expectations of the Second Coming of Christ. We are, after all, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Those expectations were shared far beyond the ranks of those who eventually joined the Church. But the early nineteenth-century men and women who did become Latter-day Saints were commanded that, having been warned, they should warn their neighbors. However, nearly two full centuries since the founding of the Church, and more than two centuries since Joseph Smith's First Vision, the Lord's Second Advent has still not arrived. Does that mean that this isn't a time for warning? That the time to warn our neighbors hasn't yet come? No, not at all. We remain under the divinely given obligation to spread the word and, yes, to warn. And there are many ways to do so.*

The most important of the Latter-day Saint missionary tracts of the nineteenth century, by a considerable distance, was Parley P. Pratt's *A Voice of Warning*. By that time a member of the still-new Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, Elder Pratt wrote the lengthy text over a two-month period while on a mission to New York, and it was published in 1837. Eventually, it appeared in more than thirty English editions and was translated into several other languages. In it, Elder Pratt detailed differences between the still-developing doctrines of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and those of other Christian denominations. He used biblical texts to explain the Restoration, described the recovery of the Book of Mormon, proclaimed the Latter-day Saint belief in modern-day revelation, and outlined some of the events that would precede the Second Coming of Christ.

It's perhaps a little bit difficult for us, now a quarter of the way

through the twenty-first century and drawing ever nearer to the dawn of the Church's third hundred years, to appreciate the significance of *A Voice of Warning*. But Latter-day Saints had created only a small body of writing by 1837, so it loomed large for that reason alone. And, even physically, it wasn't small: Printed editions of it range between 133 and 248 pages in length; the audiobook version of it runs nearly five-and-a-half hours.

The English Book of Mormon was less than a decade old by 1837, the Doctrine and Covenants had only been published in 1835, and the Pearl of Great Price was still decades in the future. However, *A Voice of Warning* was important for far more than its relative literary bulk within the nonscriptural literature of the fledgling Restoration. In it, Parley Pratt set forth an orderly account of Latter-day Saint beliefs as they stood at the time and created many of the scriptural arguments that members of the Church have used ever since to elucidate, justify, and defend their faith. They're familiar to us now, but they were once new.

I'm interested here, though, in the title that he chose for his pioneering work: *A Voice of Warning*. It's fairly clear that the first Latter-day Saints expected the Second Advent of the Savior to come much sooner than it has — every meteor shower seemed to be a sign that the Lord's coming was very near at hand — and I think it safe to say that our sense of the imminence of that event has lessened quite a bit. Perhaps, indeed, a bit too much. For “the day of the Lord so cometh as a thief in the night” (1 Thessalonians 5:2). The Second Epistle of Peter exhorts its audience

That ye may be mindful of the words which were spoken before by the holy prophets, and of the commandment of us the apostles of the Lord and Saviour: Knowing this first, that there shall come in the last days scoffers, walking after their own lusts, And saying, Where is the promise of his coming? for since the fathers fell asleep, all things continue as they were from the beginning of the creation. . . .

But, beloved, be not ignorant of this one thing, that one day is with the Lord as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day. The Lord is not slack concerning his promise, as some men count slackness; but is longsuffering to us-ward, not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance. But the day of the Lord will come as a thief in the night; in the which the heavens shall pass away with a great noise, and the elements shall melt with fervent

heat, the earth also and the works that are therein shall be burned up.

Seeing then that all these things shall be dissolved, what manner of persons ought ye to be in all holy conversation and godliness, Looking for and hasting unto the coming of the day of God, wherein the heavens being on fire shall be dissolved, and the elements shall melt with fervent heat?

Nevertheless we, according to his promise, look for new heavens and a new earth, wherein dwelleth righteousness. Wherefore, beloved, seeing that ye look for such things, be diligent that ye may be found of him in peace, without spot, and blameless. And account that the longsuffering of our Lord is salvation. (2 Peter 3:2–4, 8–15)

As the Lord himself says,

Behold, I come as a thief. Blessed is he that watcheth, and keepeth his garments, lest he walk naked, and they see his shame. (Revelation 16:15)

But of that day and hour knoweth no man, no, not the angels of heaven, but my Father only. But as the days of Noe were, so shall also the coming of the Son of man be. For as in the days that were before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day that Noe entered into the ark, And knew not until the flood came, and took them all away; so shall also the coming of the Son of man be. Then shall two be in the field; the one shall be taken, and the other left. Two women shall be grinding at the mill; the one shall be taken, and the other left.

Watch therefore: for ye know not what hour your Lord doth come. But know this, that if the goodman of the house had known in what watch the thief would come, he would have watched, and would not have suffered his house to be broken up. Therefore be ye also ready: for in such an hour as ye think not the Son of man cometh. (Matthew 24:36–44)

We have been right, though, I think, to settle in for the long haul. (It has, after all, genuinely *been* a long haul since 1830 — both figuratively and, with the long pioneer treks of our history, literally.) We have gathered the Saints from and within all nations, built settlements, and erected temples. We have opened new and previously unimaginable

places to the preaching of the Gospel and the establishment of congregations of the Church.

After all, even in Matthew 24, that powerful chapter about the Last Days, the Lord didn't counsel us to hunker down and simply wait for the Apocalypse, scanning the heavens for signs and counting the minutes until his coming. He advised us, rather, to continue to work and to live as we should be living, however long the time:

Who then is a faithful and wise servant, whom his lord hath made ruler over his household, to give them meat in due season? Blessed is that servant, whom his lord when he cometh shall find so doing. Verily I say unto you, That he shall make him ruler over all his goods. . . .

The lord of that servant shall come in a day when he looketh not for him, and in an hour that he is not aware of. (Matthew 24:45–47, 50)

I have heard that Elder Bruce R. McConkie, of the Quorum of Twelve, used to say that the Second Coming of Christ was not imminent, not just around the corner. In his opinion, he supposedly said, Jesus would not return within the lifetime of anyone present in his audience. Unfortunately, I've been unable to locate an actual text or quotation to that effect.¹ But this statement of his seems consistent with such a position:

The revelations expressly, specifically, and pointedly say that when the Lord comes the second time to usher in the millennial era, he is going to find, in every nation, kindred, and tongue, and among every people, those who are kings and queens, who will live and reign a thousand years on earth. (Revelation 5:9–10.)

That is a significant statement that puts in perspective the preaching of the gospel to the world. . . . What is involved is that the elders of Israel, holding the priesthood, in person have to tread the soil, eat in the homes of the people, figuratively put their arms around the honest in heart, feed

1. The closest I've come to a definite account is a second-, third-, or even fourth-hand report of his having made such a statement while addressing the assembled presidencies and bishops of the then-fourteen Brigham Young University stakes during a leadership meeting on 31 October 1981. See "A Different Bruce R. McConkie," *Wheat & Tares* (website), 4 February 2024, wheatandtares.org/2024/02/04/a-different-bruce-r-mcconkie/.

them the gospel, and baptize them and confer the Holy Ghost upon them. Then these people have to progress and advance, and grow in the things of the Spirit, until they can go to the house of the Lord, until they can enter a temple of God and receive the blessings of the priesthood, out of which come the rewards of being kings and priests. The way we become kings and priests [and queens and priestesses] is through the ordinances of the house of the Lord.²

I wonder whether, if Elder Pratt were publishing his tract today while knowing how many decades have passed since the re-opening of the heavens in 1820 and the founding of the Church in 1830, he would have titled it *A Voice of Warning*. Might it not have been called something more gentle, a little less breathlessly urgent, like *A Voice of Invitation*?

Perhaps. And yet a voice of warning is still appropriate. The Apocalypse will come. The Savior will return. In such an hour as we think not, an hour of which we are currently unaware. Surely it is closer to us now than it was in 1837.

Moreover, our individual returns to him are never more than a few decades off, no matter how young we are, how closely we watch our nutrition, or how much time we spend in the gym. And some of us will return much sooner than the actuarial tables would suggest.

I returned, and saw under the sun, that the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, neither yet bread to the wise, nor yet riches to men of understanding, nor yet favour to men of skill; but time and chance happeneth to them all. (Ecclesiastes 9:11)

So, there is still a place, even in our time, for the admonitory voice:

For this is a day of warning, and not a day of many words. For I, the Lord, am not to be mocked in the last days. (Doctrine and Covenants 63:58)

Now, obviously, the call to warn applies especially to those who have been especially set apart for such a role—including prophets

2. Bruce R. McConkie, “To the Koreans, and All the People of Asia,” in Spencer J. Palmer, *The Expanding Church* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1978), 142, archive.org/details/expandingchurch0000palm/page/142/mode/2up. The dramatic recent surge in temple construction takes on special meaning in the light of Elder McConkie’s statement.

and apostles and missionaries. They are called to serve full-time in the assignment. But the call to warn predates the formal ordination of apostles in this modern dispensation, and it applies to every Latter-day Saint. On 30 August 1831, the Prophet Joseph Smith received the revelation that we now know and have canonized as Doctrine and Covenants 88. Included in that wonderful and lengthy section of scripture are the following two verses:

Behold, I sent you out to testify and warn the people, and it becometh every man who hath been warned to warn his neighbor. Therefore, they are left without excuse, and their sins are upon their own heads. (Doctrine and Covenants 88:81–82)

The obligation to warn, to speak up for the claims and the standards of the Restored Gospel, rests upon every member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. And, since that is so, we should give serious consideration to a classic passage in the Hebrew Bible in which the role of a warner is set forth:

Again the word of the Lord came unto me, saying, Son of man, speak to the children of thy people, and say unto them, When I bring the sword upon a land, if the people of the land take a man of their coasts, and set him for their watchman: If when he seeth the sword come upon the land, he blow the trumpet, and warn the people; Then whosoever heareth the sound of the trumpet, and taketh not warning; if the sword come, and take him away, his blood shall be upon his own head. He heard the sound of the trumpet, and took not warning; his blood shall be upon him. But he that taketh warning shall deliver his soul. But if the watchman see the sword come, and blow not the trumpet, and the people be not warned; if the sword come, and take any person from among them, he is taken away in his iniquity; but his blood will I require at the watchman's hand.

So thou, O son of man, I have set thee a watchman unto the house of Israel; therefore thou shalt hear the word at my mouth, and warn them from me. When I say unto the wicked, O wicked man, thou shalt surely die; if thou dost not speak to warn the wicked from his way, that wicked man shall die in his iniquity; but his blood will I require at thine hand. Nevertheless, if thou warn the wicked of his way to turn from

it; if he do not turn from his way, he shall die in his iniquity; but thou hast delivered thy soul. . . . Say unto them, As I live, saith the Lord God, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked; but that the wicked turn from his way and live: turn ye, turn ye from your evil ways; for why will ye die, O house of Israel? (Ezekiel 33:1–9,11)

There are innumerable places and ways in which we can raise a warning or admonitory voice, or even an inviting voice. One of them, I believe, is through the work of the Interpreter Foundation, through *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship*. Parley Pratt clearly saw writing and publishing as an important part of his calling to warn. Why shouldn't we?

This volume of the Journal—its sixty-sixth—provides a varied wealth of insights from a range of Latter-day Saint thinkers. I'm thankful for their offerings. I believe that they provide solid grounds for taking the message of the Restoration seriously, for accepting its invitation to come unto Christ, and for heeding its warnings and admonitions. As I customarily do in every introduction that I write, I also wish to thank the reviewers, source checkers, editors, and donors who have made this volume possible. In particular, I thank Allen Wyatt, Godfrey Ellis, Brant S. Gardner, and Rebecca Reynolds Lambert for their dedicated editorial work on the contents of this volume. It may not be apparent, but it's always there. The Interpreter Foundation as a whole and this journal in particular have been created and are largely sustained by the devoted contributions of volunteers and unpaid authors. I am grateful to them for all that they do for Interpreter and, for that matter and much more fundamentally, toward the building of the Kingdom.



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theology. He is the author, among other things, of a biography entitled Muhammad: Prophet of God (Eerdmans, 2007).

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