
Brigham Young

1793-1876

Denver C. Snuffer, Jr.
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Brigham Young was a carpenter, joiner and glazier who converted to Mormonism in 1832, later becoming a member of the twelve apostles of the Church of Latter Day Saints, now known as The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

As a member of the twelve, Young was a missionary, traveling in the United States and England, to bring others into the faith. He remained faithful when other apostles left the faith and the church. Following the murder of Joseph and Hyrum Smith, Young campaigned for the twelve apostles to be elected to serve as the highest leadership body. Winning that vote he and his fellow apostles proceeded to stabilize the society and organize for a departure from Nauvoo, Illinois to the American West.

Young and fellow apostles led approximately 16,000 Latter-day Saints to the Salt Lake basin and colonized an intermountain area from Mexico to Canada. He was responsible for founding over 200 settlements, many of which continue as cities today in Mexico, Arizona, Utah, Nevada, Idaho, Wyoming, Montana and Canada. That accomplishment could only have been done by a man of practical wisdom. He solved problems and seemed comfortable in the role given to him by the people he led. He oversaw construction of an entire society out of a wilderness.

Young practiced and publicly advocated polygamy. He had 20 wives and fathered 47 children. For him, polygamy was an essential, saving practice. He taught, "Now if any of you will deny the plurality of wives, and continue to do so, I promise that you will be damned."

He claimed polygamy was taught to him by Joseph Smith, although Joseph Smith publicly condemned the practice and had those who practiced it brought before the Nauvoo High Council for misconduct. Responding to

criticism about the practice, Young advocated giving the vote to women to counter his critics. Utah was among the first territories to grant women the right to vote in 1870.

Brigham Young was the Territorial Governor from 1851 to 1858. He was previously elected as the church's president in 1847 and remained in that role until his death in 1877. While he was governor and president, the church and state of territorial Utah combined under Young's complete dominance. His fiery rhetoric during a revival period of 1856-57, called the "Mormon Reformation," led to violence as he advocated the practice of "blood atonement" for sins. During the Reformation he said, "I will tell you what this people need, with regard to preaching; you need, figuratively, to have it rain pitchforks, tines downwards, from this pulpit, Sunday after Sunday. Instead of the smooth, beautiful, sweet, still, silk-velvet-lipped preaching, you should have sermons like peals of thunder, and perhaps we then can get the scales from our eyes." And rain pitchforks in sermons it did. He and other leaders were indirectly responsible for the Mountain Meadows Massacre, when over 120 members of a passing wagon train were killed on their way to California. This led to President Buchanan sending the US Army to seat a new governor. Although no longer in control of the governorship, he nevertheless controlled his territory until his death.

The respect Young had from his followers was not merely based on deference to the church founded by Joseph Smith, he was also a charismatic leader who dispensed practical advice. He warned, "He who takes offense when no offense is intended is a fool, and he who takes offense when offense is intended is a greater fool." He also said, "If you have a bad thought about yourself, tell it to go to hell because that is exactly where it came from."

Although he is viewed today as insensitive to women, he had high regard for the accomplishments of women who served in a critical role for society. "If I had a choice of educating my daughters or my sons because of opportunity constraints, I would choose to educate my daughters." He also said, "You educate a man; you educate a man. You educate a woman; you educate a generation."

Brigham Young also warned about the deference Mormon leaders were given. He said, "I am more afraid that this people have so much confidence in their leaders that they will not inquire for themselves of God whether they are led by Him. I am fearful they settle down in a state of blind self-security,

trusting their eternal destiny in the hands of their leaders with a reckless confidence that in itself would thwart the purposes of God in their salvation, and weaken that influence they could give to their leaders, did they know for themselves, by the revelations of Jesus, that they are led in the right way. Let every man and woman know, by the whispering of the Spirit of God to themselves, whether their leaders are walking in the path the Lord dictates, or not. This has been my exhortation continually.”

Brigham Young University in Provo, Utah was named after him, and is supported by the church he led for 31 years as its president. His statue is on the Capitol Rotunda in Washington, DC.