

REMARKS

By President George Q. Cannon, and President Wilford Woodruff, at the Sixty-first Semi-Annual Conference of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Oct. 6th, 1890, immediately following the adoption by the General Assembly of the Manifesto issued by President Wilford Woodruff in relation to Plural Marriages.

President George Q. Cannon.

On the 19th of January, 1841, the Lord gave His servant Joseph Smith a revelation, the 49th paragraph of which I will read:

"Verily, verily, I say unto you, that when I give a commandment to any of the sons of men, to do a work unto my name, and those sons of men go with all their might, and with all they have, to perform that work, and cease not their diligence, and their enemies come upon them, and hinder them from performing that work; behold, it behoveth me to require that work no more at the hands of those sons of men, but to accept of their offerings."

The Lord says other things connected with this, which I do not think it necessary to read, but the whole revelation is profitable, and can be read by those who desire to do so.

It is on this basis that President Woodruff has felt himself justified in issuing this manifesto.

I suppose it would not be justice to this Conference not to say something upon this subject; and yet everyone knows how delicate a subject it is, and how difficult it is to approach it without saying something that may offend somebody. So far as I am concerned, I can say that of the men in this Church who have endeavored to maintain this principle of plural marriage, I am one. In public and in private I have avowed my belief in it. I have defended it everywhere and under all circumstances, and when it was necessary have said that I considered the command was binding and imperative upon me.

But a change has taken place. We have, in the first place, endeavored to show that the law which affected this feature of our religion was unconstitutional. We believed for years that the law of July 1, 1862, was in direct conflict with the first amendment to the Constitution, which says that "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof." We rested upon that, and for years continued the practice of plural marriage, believing the law against it to be an unconstitutional one, and that we had the right, under the Constitution, to carry out this principle practically in our lives. So confident was I in relation to this view that in conversations with President Grant, and with his Attorney General, ex-Senator Williams, of Oregon, I said to them that if my case were not barred by the statute of limitations I would be willing to have it made a test case, in order that the law might be tested. We were sustained in this view not only by

our own interpretation of the amendment to the Constitution, but also by some of the best legal minds in the country, who took exactly the same view that we did—that this law was an interference with religious rights, and that so long as our practices did not interfere with the happiness and peace of society, or of others, we had the right to carry out this principle. In fact, it is within six or eight months that, in conversation with two United States Senators, each conversation being separate from the other, both of them expressed themselves, though not in the same language, to this effect: "Mr. Cannon, if this feature that you practice had not been associated with religion, it might have been tolerated; but you have associated it with religion and it has aroused the religious sentiment of the nation, and that sentiment cannot be resisted. So far as the practice itself is concerned, if you had not made it a part of your faith and an institution sanctioned by religion, it might have gone along unnoticed." I do not give the exact language; but these are the ideas that they conveyed to me. Now, we were very confident that this law was an unconstitutional one. President Daniel H. Wells will remember how he and I tried to get a case to test the constitutionality of the law during the lifetime of President Brigham Young. We wanted to get Brother Erastus Snow. It is the last thing that we should have thought of to put a man like he was in the gap if we had not been firmly convinced that the law was unconstitutional and would be declared so by the United States Supreme Court. We telegraphed to Brother Erastus in the south, thinking that his case would not be barred by the statute of limitations. He replied to us concerning it, and we found that it was barred. Brother A. M. Musser proposed himself, if I remember aright, to be a test case; but there was a defect in his case. We wanted this case, whenever it was presented, to be presented fairly, that there should be no evasion about it, but that it should be a case that could be tested fairly before the courts of the country. Finally, Brother George Reynolds was selected. I said to myself, when I learned the result, "It is the last time that I will ever have anything to do with a test case again which will involve the liberty of anybody." I was promised when he was sentenced, by one high in authority and who had the right to make the promise, that he should be released, when the circumstances were told to him; for they were laid fairly before him, and he was told that the evidence had been furnished by Brother Reynolds himself, and that everything had been done to make it a test case; the government had been aided in the securing of witnesses, and no difficulty thrown in the way. Afterwards, on the second trial, I believe Brother Reynolds' lawyers got frightened, and there was something occurred then that gave it a different appearance. But when the facts were related, as I stated, to one

high in authority, he promised me that George Reynolds should be pardoned. There were those, however, in this city who were determined that he should not escape imprisonment, and the prosecuting attorney wrote a letter which changed the mind of this high official, as he afterward told me, and he declined to carry out that which I had received as a promise. But even then there were circumstances connected with this decision that made us reluctant to accept it.

Since that time the history of proceedings is before you and before the world. We have felt as though this command of God was of such importance to us, involving so many serious consequences, that we should do all in our power to have the world know the position that we occupied. There may be men among us who believed they would be damned if they did not obey this, accepting it as a direct command from God. Therefore, you can understand how tenaciously we have protested, and how vigorously we have endeavored, as far as we could, to make public our views upon this subject.

I suppose there are two classes here today in this congregation—one class who feel to sorrow to the bottom of their hearts because of the necessity of this action that we have now taken; another class who will say: "Did I not tell you so?" "Did I not tell you it would come to this?" "Did I not say to you that you ought to take advantage of and comply with this years ago, instead of enduring that which you have suffered since that time?" There may be men here today who pride themselves on their foresight, and who take credit to themselves because they foresaw, as they allege, that which we have done today, and would lead others to believe that if their counsel had been adopted, if the views that they presented had been accepted by the people, it might have saved very serious consequences to us all and left us in a better position than that which we occupy today. But I, for one, differ entirely with this view. I believe that it was necessary that we should witness unto God, the Eternal Father, unto the heavens and unto the earth, that this was really a principle dear to us—dearer, it might be said, in some respects, than life itself. We could not have done this had we submitted at the time that those of whom I speak suggested submission. We could not have left our own nation without excuse. It might have said, "Had we known all that you tell us now concerning this, we should have had very different views about this feature of your religion than we did have." But now, after the occurrences of the past six years have been witnessed by this entire nation and by the world, and by God the Eternal Father and the heavenly hosts, no one can plead as an excuse that they have been ignorant of our belief and the dearness of this principle to us. Upwards of thirteen hundred men have been incarcerated in prison, going there for