

Succession in the Presidency

President Wilford Woodruff (1807–98) recalled:



“I remember the last speech that [Joseph Smith] ever gave us before his death. . . . He stood upon his feet some three hours. The room was filled as with consuming fire, his face was as clear as amber, and he was clothed upon by the power of God. He laid before us our duty. He laid before us the fullness of this great work of God; and in his remarks to us he said: ‘I have had sealed upon my head every key, every power, every principle of life and salvation that God has ever given to any man who ever lived upon the face of the earth. And these principles and this Priesthood and power belong to this great and last dispensation which the God of Heaven has set His hand to establish in the earth. Now,’ said he, addressing the Twelve, ‘I have sealed upon your heads every key, every power, and every principle which the Lord has sealed upon my head.’ . . .

“After addressing us in this manner he said: ‘I tell you, the burden of this kingdom now rests upon your shoulders; you have got to bear it off in all the world’ ” (quoted in *Teachings of Presidents of the Church: Joseph Smith* [2007], 532).

Sidney Rigdon’s Claim

Sidney Rigdon, First Counselor in the First Presidency, arrived in Nauvoo from Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, on August 3, 1844. He called for a special meeting to be held on Tuesday, August 6, so that Church members could choose a guardian for the Church. It appeared as though Sidney Rigdon tried to hold this meeting so Church members could ratify his position as guardian of the Church before all of the Twelve Apostles would return from their missions to the eastern United States. Fortunately, because of the efforts of Elder Willard Richards and Elder Parley P. Pratt, the meeting was moved to Thursday, August 8, 1844, by which time most of the Apostles had returned to Nauvoo.

Sidney Rigdon claimed that because he had previously been called and ordained as a spokesman for Joseph Smith (see D&C 100:9), it was his responsibility to “see that the church is governed in a proper manner” (in *History of the Church*, 7:229).

James Strang’s Claim

After Joseph Smith’s death, James Strang, who had been baptized in February 1844, claimed to have received a letter from Joseph Smith stating that Joseph had appointed Strang as his successor. The letter was a forgery, but it appeared

to include Joseph Smith’s signature, and it deceived some members of the Church when Strang showed it to them. Strang also said that he had been visited by an angel, who had given him keys.

August 7, 1844

Elders John Taylor, Willard Richards, Parley P. Pratt, and George A. Smith were already in Nauvoo when Sidney Rigdon arrived. Most of the rest of the Apostles, including Brigham Young, returned to Nauvoo on the evening of August 6, 1844. The next day, August 7, the Apostles met in council at the home of John Taylor. Later that afternoon, the Twelve Apostles, the high council, and the high priests met together. President Young asked Sidney Rigdon to state his message to the Saints. Sidney Rigdon boldly declared that he had seen a vision and that no man could succeed Joseph Smith as President of the Church. He then proposed that he be appointed as the guardian of the people.

After Sidney Rigdon concluded his remarks, Brigham Young (1801–77) said:



“I do not care who leads the church, . . . but one thing I must know, and that is what God says about it. I have the keys and the means of obtaining the mind of God on the subject. . . .

“Joseph conferred upon our heads all the keys and powers belonging to the Apostleship which he himself held before he was taken away, and no man or set of men can get between Joseph and the Twelve in this world or in the world to come.

“How often has Joseph said to the Twelve, ‘I have laid the foundation and you must build thereon, for upon your shoulders the kingdom rests’ ” (in *History of the Church*, 7:230).

August 8, 1844, 10:00 A.M.

On August 8, 1844, the Saints in Nauvoo gathered at 10:00 a.m. to hear Sidney Rigdon make his claims as guardian of the Church. He spoke to the thousands of assembled Saints for an hour and a half, explaining why he should be guardian of the Church. Several people described his speech as uninspiring.

President Brigham Young spoke briefly and said that he would have preferred to come back to Nauvoo to mourn for the Prophet than to have to appoint a new leader. He announced that an assembly of leaders and members

would be held later that day at 2:00 p.m. Several members of the Church later testified that as Brigham Young spoke, they saw his appearance change and heard his voice change, and he took on the appearance and voice of the Prophet Joseph Smith.

Emily Smith Hoyt remembered: “The manner of reasoning, the expression of the countenance, the sound of the voice thrilled my whole soul. . . . I knew that Joseph was dead. And yet I often startled and involuntarily looked at the stand to see if it was not Joseph. It was not, it was Brigham Young” (quoted in Lynne Watkins Jorgensen, “The Mantle of the Prophet Joseph Passes to Brother Brigham: A Collective Spiritual Witness,” *BYU Studies*, vol. 36, no. 4 [1996–97], 142).

Wilford Woodruff wrote, “If I had not seen him with my own eyes, there is no one that could have convinced me that it was not Joseph Smith, and anyone can testify to this who was acquainted with these two men” (in *History of the Church*, 7:236).

August 8, 1844, 2:00 P.M.

At 2:00 p.m., thousands of Saints gathered for what they knew would be a significant meeting. Brigham Young spoke frankly about the proposed guardianship of Sidney Rigdon and his alienation from Joseph Smith during the previous two years and then said:

“If the people want President Rigdon to lead them they may have him; but I say unto you that the Quorum of the Twelve have the keys of the kingdom of God in all the world.

“The Twelve are appointed by the finger of God. Here is Brigham, have his knees ever faltered? Have his lips ever quivered? Here is Heber [C. Kimball] and the rest of the Twelve, an independent body who have the keys of the priesthood—the keys of the kingdom of God to deliver to all the world: this is true, so help me God. They stand next to Joseph, and are as the First Presidency of the Church” (in *History of the Church*, 7:233).

Many Saints commented that Brigham Young looked and sounded like Joseph Smith as he spoke that afternoon. In addition to this miracle, many of the Saints also felt the Holy Ghost witness to them that Brigham Young and the Quorum of the Twelve were called by God to lead the Church. At the conclusion of this meeting, the Saints in Nauvoo voted unanimously to sustain the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, with Brigham Young at their head, to lead the Church. However, not all the members of the Church ultimately chose to follow the Apostles. Some of the people chose instead to follow individuals such as Sidney Rigdon and James Strang, who formed their own churches.

