

# FAIR

## John C. Bennett and D&C

### 124:16–17

June 18, 2009 by [Mike Parker \(https://www.fairlatterdaysaints.org/blog/author/mparker\)](https://www.fairlatterdaysaints.org/blog/author/mparker).

The rise and fall of John C. Bennett is one of the great cautionary tales of early Latter-day Saint history.

Bennett was a Massachusetts native who had had several encounters with Mormonism during the 1830s. During that time he was a member of Alexander Campbell's Church of Christ, the same movement from which Sidney Rigdon had emerged. Bennett was a medical doctor, specializing in gynecology, and had risen to high office in the Illinois state militia by 1840. He came to Nauvoo in September 1840 after an exchange of correspondence with Joseph Smith.

In Nauvoo, Bennett helped craft and pass the [Nauvoo city charter \(http://en.fairmormon.org/Nauvoo\\_city\\_charter\)](http://en.fairmormon.org/Nauvoo_city_charter), which gave the city council near-autonomous powers. Bennett used his contacts in the state legislature and his status in the state militia to move the charter through to approval. His efforts secured for him the confidence of Joseph Smith.

By February 1841 he had been elevated to three of the highest leadership posts in the city: mayor, chancellor of the Nauvoo University, and major general of the Nauvoo Legion. In April 1841 general conference he was sustained as a counselor in the First Presidency.

Eventually, however, rumors began to swirl that Bennett was involved in widespread sexual immorality. Eventually he was caught having secret sexual relationships with women in the city. He told the women that the practice, which he called "spiritual wifery," was sanctioned of God and Joseph Smith, that these women were now his wives, and that [Joseph did the same \(/Misc/Polygamy\\_Prophets\\_and\\_Prevarication.html\)](#).

When discovered, he privately confessed his crimes, and produced an affidavit that Joseph Smith had no part in his adultery. Although he vowed to change, he was caught again. His indiscretions were publicly exposed and he was excommunicated from the Church and stripped of public office.

His rise and fall took place over just 13 months.

After leaving Nauvoo in May 1842, he wrote a tell-all book, *The History of the Saints; or, An Exposé of Joe Smith and Mormonism* ([http://books.google.com/books?id=WGUoAAAAYAAJ&dq=the+history+of+the+saints+or+an+expose+of+joe+smith+and+mormonism&printsec=frontcover&source=bl&ots=O8lEkcXo5l&sig=\\_RjaDFs7igTOl2En9ZzxZKcqq6o&hl=en&ei=6r46SoquL8metwe5p5nSDA&sa=X&oi=book\\_result&ct=result&resnum=2](http://books.google.com/books?id=WGUoAAAAYAAJ&dq=the+history+of+the+saints+or+an+expose+of+joe+smith+and+mormonism&printsec=frontcover&source=bl&ots=O8lEkcXo5l&sig=_RjaDFs7igTOl2En9ZzxZKcqq6o&hl=en&ei=6r46SoquL8metwe5p5nSDA&sa=X&oi=book_result&ct=result&resnum=2)), and went on a nationwide book tour.

Unlike others who had joined the Church in good faith and then later fell away, Bennett had been a fraud from the start. All his efforts in Nauvoo had merely been a means to an end: To get in the good graces of the Prophet Joseph and thereby obtain power, influence, and (later) sex.

So how, then, do we explain this revelation to Joseph Smith, received 19 January 1841?

*Again, let my servant John C. Bennett help you in your labor in sending my word to the kings and people of the earth, and stand by you, even you my servant Joseph Smith, in the hour of affliction; and his reward shall not fail if he receive acounsel. And for his love he shall be great, for he shall be mine if he do this, saith the Lord. I have seen the work which he hath done, which I accept if he continue, and will crown him with blessings and great glory. (D&C 124:16–17 (<http://scriptures.lds.org/en/dc/124/16-17#16>)).*

First, it strikes me that Joseph Smith was a poor judge of character. He wanted to see the best in people, and when there were “wolves in sheep’s clothing,” he was typically unwilling to believe negative reports about them. This changed somewhat after the Bennett episode; he became more suspicious and took to “testing” individuals’ faithfulness (many of these tests involved [introducing them to plural marriage](http://en.fairmormon.org/Plural_marriage_spiritual_manifestations) ([http://en.fairmormon.org/Plural\\_marriage\\_spiritual\\_manifestations](http://en.fairmormon.org/Plural_marriage_spiritual_manifestations))).

In reading D&C 124:16–17, it strikes me how conditional all of Bennett’s blessings were (note the thrice-repeated use of “if”). Contrast that with [124:15](http://scriptures.lds.org/en/dc/124/15#15) (<http://scriptures.lds.org/en/dc/124/15#15>), where Hyrum was unconditionally blessed “because of the integrity of his heart, and because he loveth that which is right before me.” No such statement was made of Bennett.

Bennett was told that the Lord had “seen the work which he hath done, which I accept if he continue.” This is probably a reference to Bennett’s work on the Nauvoo charter, which benefited the Saints enormously after the privations they had suffered in Missouri. Were it not for Bennett, Nauvoo would not have gotten off the ground as a city. It’s possible that the Lord was willing to use Bennett for His purposes, and, once they were done, allow Bennett either come clean or self-destruct.

God does not reveal everything to his prophet all the time, only what He needs to advance the kingdom. Sometimes He withholds information because the prophet needs to figure it out on his own, or the prophet needs to be tested, or because the fallout will cause a necessary [separation of wheat and tares](http://scriptures.lds.org/en/matt/13/24-30#24) (<http://scriptures.lds.org/en/matt/13/24-30#24>), within the Church, or because the prophet didn’t ask, or for other reasons. Prophets do not walk around with a “spiritual earpiece” that constantly feeds them information about people they encounter.

The [Mark Hofmann](http://en.fairmormon.org/Mark_Hofmann) ([http://en.fairmormon.org/Mark\\_Hofmann](http://en.fairmormon.org/Mark_Hofmann)) affair was similar: Hoffman presented documents he had forged to the First Presidency, who accepted them graciously and turned them over to scholars for analysis. There was no reason to

mistrust Holman, so they didn't bother to ask. In the end, the Church survived, and we're a little wiser for the experience.

So with Bennett's betrayal: As difficult as it was, he served his purpose. If the Lord had revealed Bennett's true intentions to Joseph in January 1841, any help he was after that would have been preempted and Joseph probably would not have learned a valuable lesson about vetting close associates.

## Comments

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Ryan says

[June 19, 2009 at 8:19 am](#)

<https://www.fairlatterdaysaints.org/blog/2009/06/18/john-c-bennett-and-dc-12416-17#comment-24449>

Very interesting piece. Truly, the Lord's ways are not our ways, because foolish and short-sighted men will take the facts presented here at face value and draw hasty and incorrect conclusions.

I often find myself addressing the matter of prophetic fallibility to critics. In their eyes, a prophet must be more akin to a psychic or a mind-reader. Any bit of information that slips by under his nose, or mistake that he makes is considered a condemning act, when all scriptural evidence of the true nature of prophets tells otherwise.



Thomas says

[June 19, 2009 at 12:30 pm](#)

<https://www.fairlatterdaysaints.org/blog/2009/06/18/john-c-bennett-and-dc-12416-17#comment-24461>

The guarantee is only that the Lord will never let the prophet lead the Church "astray," which I understand to mean "into complete apostasy." That backstop is set a long way back from the plate. There's plenty of room to get the everyday details wrong.

Interestingly, this is similar to the Catholic doctrine of "sensus fidei," whereby the Church and/or Pope is supernaturally prevented from mucking things up too much. The odd inquisition, Galileo affair, etc., is excused as peripheral to the Church's core mission; what matters — the central Christian truths, and the Church's authority — remain intact.



Greg Smith says

[June 21, 2009 at 4:47 pm](#)

(<https://www.fairlatterdaysaints.org/blog/2009/06/18/john-c-bennett-and-dc-12416-17#comment-24614>)

Pres. Boyd K. Packer sees it similarly:

...even with the best of intentions, [Church government and leadership] does not always work the way it should. Human nature may express itself on occasion, *but not to the permanent injury of the work*. – Boyd K. Packer, “I Say unto You, Be One,” in *BYU Devotional and Fireside Speeches, 1990-1991* (Provo, Utah: University Publications, 1991), 84; italics added.



[Brian Duffin \(http://millennialstar.org\)](http://millennialstar.org), says

[June 22, 2009 at 9:52 am](#)

(<https://www.fairlatterdaysaints.org/blog/2009/06/18/john-c-bennett-and-dc-12416-17#comment-24681>)

Mike,

I really enjoyed reading your post. Thank you for your scholarly works!! I'm going back and re-reading *Rough Rolling Stone* on this very subject.



[Michaela Stephens \(http://scriptoriumblogorium.blogspot.com\)](http://scriptoriumblogorium.blogspot.com), says

[June 25, 2009 at 10:28 pm](#)

(<https://www.fairlatterdaysaints.org/blog/2009/06/18/john-c-bennett-and-dc-12416-17#comment-25041>)

It is really no surprise that Joseph Smith would be slow to believe negative reports about John C Bennett (or anyone for that matter) considering that the Joseph Smith manual in the chapter on Forgiveness notes that he made a covenant that he would not believe any negative reports or gossip about any of his associates without talking to them about it first. (Remember, he had a very difficult life of suffering from others' gossip about him that he was determined not to subject anyone else to that same pain.)



Thomas says

[September 22, 2009 at 7:15 am](#)

(<https://www.fairlatterdaysaints.org/blog/2009/06/18/john-c-bennett-and-dc-12416-17#comment-28603>)

Can you give your sources for the behaviors of Mr. Bennett?



Mike Parker says

September 22, 2009 at 10:28 am

(<https://www.fairlatterdaysaints.org/blog/2009/06/18/john-c-bennett-and-dc-12416-17#comment-28605>)

Thomas,

I largely wrote this from memory. You can read up on Bennett in *Rough Stone Rolling*. There's a [Wikipedia article on Bennett](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_C._Bennett) ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John\\_C.\\_Bennett](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_C._Bennett)) that's sadly under-documented. I was surprised to find that there's no entry for him in the *Encyclopedia of Mormonism* ([http://eom.byu.edu/index.php/Encyclopedia\\_of\\_Mormonism](http://eom.byu.edu/index.php/Encyclopedia_of_Mormonism)).

There are also [draft chapters of Greg Smith's forthcoming book on polygamy](http://en.fairlatterdaysaints.org/Polygamy_book/John_C._Bennett) ([http://en.fairlatterdaysaints.org/Polygamy\\_book/John\\_C.\\_Bennett](http://en.fairlatterdaysaints.org/Polygamy_book/John_C._Bennett)) hosted on the FAIR web site. And the University of Illinois published [a biography of Bennett](http://books.google.com/books?id=BWM7yHulyAUC&printsec=frontcover) (<http://books.google.com/books?id=BWM7yHulyAUC&printsec=frontcover>) back in 1997. (I haven't read either of these last two.)

Oddly enough, a Google search for "[John C Bennett](http://www.google.com/search?hl=en&q=john+c.+bennett)" (<http://www.google.com/search?hl=en&q=john+c.+bennett>) lists this very blog post third in rank, behind Wikipedia and a summary of the UofI bio.



Shelly says

September 25, 2009 at 10:47 am

(<https://www.fairlatterdaysaints.org/blog/2009/06/18/john-c-bennett-and-dc-12416-17#comment-28644>)

Mike thank you for this post, it was very helpful. may I add: "The Journal of Joseph" A Personal Diary of a Modern Prophet, Brother Joseph refers to Bennett 5 times that I found, April 6 Bennett & other dignitaries in attendance at Temple 1st cornerstone placement, May 7 1842 something about the "Sham Battle"..., May 17th Bennett resigned as mayor, May 19 city council accepts Bennett's resignation... May 25 Bennett was disfellowshipped...May 26 Bennett acknowledged licentious conduct begs again for forgiveness...May 28 High Council investigating men influenced by Bennett (possibly Bennett himself)several "cut-off" some forgiven on confession... Jan.18 1843 Bennett's letter to Merrs obtained by Mr.Pratt, April 17 Elder Webb writes from Kalamazoo county and finds Bennett lecturing, in fear claims "he is one on one of Joe Smith's destorying angels come to kill me;"...Nov. 25 High Council Meeting, Sagers is compared to Bennett... Also in the Encyclopedia of Latter-Day Saint History by: Garr,Cannon, Cowan there is 1 1/2 pgs on Bennett that is very helpful. Also Orson Scott Card in 1978-1980 in his 2nd volume

dramatizations of Church history gives several accounts of Bennett's actions, his declarations of innocence, and finally his (groveling for understanding).

I also want to THANK THOSE who have commented thus far in this forum.



[The Saint Joseph Mo DJ \(http://www.myspace.com/stjosephmissouridj\)](http://www.myspace.com/stjosephmissouridj), says  
**February 6, 2010 at 10:58 pm**  
<https://www.fairlatterdaysaints.org/blog/2009/06/18/john-c-bennett-and-dc-12416-17#comment-31582>

Well, the last time I tried to post a note, I screwed up twice and gave up. So, here goes again, Nice Site. I wish you would do mine! 😊



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