

Comments on Doctrine & Covenants 51

This section deals with matters that are seemingly secular to us, namely the apportionment of lands. However, the Lord indicates this issue is one where the people must be organized according to His laws or be cut off. The underlying issue is the imparting of your substance to those in need, an issue which receives considerable treatment in the D&C (cf. D&C 40:30-55). Those who have lands deeded to them (secular law) and donate it to the Church for reapportionment to those in need (spiritual law) will be found faithful, wise and just stewards. Thus, the matter of apportionment of lands is a spiritual one when dealt with internal to the ecclesia (v. 3). When dealing with the rebellious or those outside the ecclesia, the matter reverts to secular law (v. 4-6, also cp. D&C 48:4).

The historical context is the Saints from Colesville, NY had left the persecution there to move to Ohio. They settled onto the land of Leman Copely, who shortly thereafter left the Church and insisted the settlers move off his land.

It also provides some underlying theological explanation for why Edward Partridge has a rough time through these sections. As the first Bishop of the Church, Edward had to deal with a lot of ugly, unpleasant details of day-to-day life, like portioning out land to members and reclaiming it from them when the original owner apostatized. This is difficult, and trying to keep an eye on religion while dealing with this kind of unpleasantness has got to be challenging.

1 HEARKEN unto me, saith the Lord your God, and I will speak unto my servant Edward Partridge, and give unto him directions; for it must needs be that he receive directions how to organize this people. 2 For it must needs be that they be organized according to my laws; if otherwise, they will be cut off.

v1-2 The introduction, wherein the Lord indicates the ecclesia is to organize according to His laws or be cut off. Note this compliments the conclusion in v. 18-20 where the just stewards are granted eternal life.

v2 "cut off", i.e., excommunicated, cp. 50:8.

3 Wherefore, let my servant Edward Partridge, and those whom he has chosen, in whom I am well pleased, appoint unto this people their portions, every man equal according to his family, according to his circumstances and his wants and needs. 4 And let my servant Edward

Partridge, when he shall appoint a man his portion, give unto him a writing that shall secure unto him his portion, that he shall hold it, even this right and this inheritance in the church, until he transgresses and is not accounted worthy by the voice of the church, according to the laws and covenants of the church to belong to the church. 5 And if he shall transgress and is not accounted worthy to belong to the church, he shall not have power to claim that portion which he has consecrated unto the bishop for the poor and needy of my church; therefore, he shall not retain the gift, but shall only have claim on that portion that is deeded unto him. 6 And thus all things shall be made sure, according to the laws of the land.

v3-6 Lands apportioned by the Church remain the Church's but are granted to individuals. If the original owner of the land breaks faith with the Church the lands apportioned to him revert to the Church in the absence of a deed. However, any lands the individual had deeded to him (i.e., had a legal secular claim to) remain his.

7 And let that which belongs to this people be appointed unto this people. 8 And the money which is left unto this people--let there be an agent appointed unto this people, to take the money to provide food and raiment, according to the wants of this people. 9 And let every man deal honestly, and be alike among this people, and receive alike, that ye may be one, even as I have commanded you. 10 And let that which belongeth to this people not be taken and given unto that of another church. 11 Wherefore, if another church would receive money of this church, let them pay unto this church again according as they shall agree; 12 And this shall be done through the bishop or the agent, which shall be appointed by the voice of the church.

v7-12 The Lord instructs them to do things on a unit basis and not to try and aggregate all of the variously located branches under a central administration.

v9 "that ye may be one", cp. Jacob 2:17, 4 Ne. 1:3, D&C 49:20.

13 And again, let the bishop appoint a storehouse unto this church; and let all things both in money and in meat, which are more than is needful for the wants of this people, be kept in the hands of the bishop. 14 And let him also reserve unto himself for his own wants, and for the wants of his family, as he shall be employed in doing this business.

v13-14 The Bishop's Storehouse is endorsed and the people are instructed to bring all of their excess above that which is necessary for their maintenance to the Storehouse. Note this requires much more soul searching on the part of the individual than a straightforward tithe.

v14 Inasmuch as operating and administering the Storehouse prevents him from supporting himself and his family, the Bishop

is permitted to provide for them from the Storehouse, cp. D&C 42:70-73.

15 And thus I grant unto this people a privilege of organizing themselves according to my laws. 16 And I consecrate unto them this land for a little season, until I, the Lord, shall provide for them otherwise, and command them to go hence; 17 And the hour and the day is not given unto them, wherefore let them act upon this land as for years, and this shall turn unto them for their good.

v15-17 While their current location is temporary, they are to act as though they will be there for years. This sets the commandments of this section up as "practice" for bigger things to come, namely the United Order.

18 Behold, this shall be an example unto my servant Edward Partridge, in other places, in all churches. 19 And whoso is found a faithful, a just, and a wise steward shall enter into the joy of his Lord, and shall inherit eternal life. 20 Verily, I say unto you, I am Jesus Christ, who cometh quickly, in an hour you think not. Even so. Amen.

v18-20 The section concludes by indicating the commands in this section are a type to be followed by all the other branches (v. 18). Verse 19 provides a positive benediction complimenting the opening admonition (v. 2). And, verse 20 closes with a warning that when the Lord arrives, He will be arriving swiftly, with little or no warning, when people will not expect it.

v20 "who cometh quickly", this phrase is similar to the often repeated "I come quickly", cp. Rev. 22:20, D&C 33:18, D&C 87:8. The KJV is ambiguous enough to allow the reader to interpret it to mean the Second Coming is imminent, but a better translation into contemporary English (using the Greek of Rev. 22:20) would be "I am arriving swiftly", meaning "when I do come, you won't have much warning". This is substantiated by v. 20 when it says, "who cometh quickly, in an hour you think not".

Historical Material Pertaining to Doctrine & Covenants 51

The Law of Consecration was established in D&C 42. Here, the Bishop responsible for administering it gets more specific guidance when the time arrives to put it into practice.

The covenants made by landowners, Leman Copely in specific, who donated land for the member's use, were largely broken and resulted in the revelation of D&C 54.

However, there was also a case of man donating money to the Church and then wanting it back because he didn't like the way the Church used the money, and sued at Court and won the case (see the comment by Harper below).

This revelation was first published in the Kirtland edition Doctrine and Covenants in 1835, pages 150-151. It was then published in Times and Seasons, volume 5, number 3, page 416, dated February 1, 1844. It was published in the Millennial Star, volume 5, number 7, pages 97-98, dated December, 1844.

Excerpt from History of the Church

Not long after the foregoing [e.g., D&C 50] was received, the Saints from the State of New York began to come on, and it seemed necessary to settle them; therefore at the solicitation of Bishop Partridge, I inquired, and received the following:

[D&C 51 quoted]

(Joseph Smith, History of the Church, volume 1, page 173)

Excerpt from Book of John Whitmer

About these days the disciples arrived from state of New York to this place Kirtland, state of Ohio. They had some difficulty because of some that did not continue faithful, who denied the truth and turned into fables. (John Whitmer, Book of John Whitmer, chapter 7, paragraph 1)

Excerpt from Doctrine and Covenants Commentary

Shortly after the Revelation recorded in Section 50 had been received, the Saints from Colesville, N.Y., began to arrive in Ohio. They had been directed to gather in that locality (Sec. 37:3) and they had been promised that there they would receive The Law (Sec. 38:32). The Saints in Ohio had been instructed to divide their land with their Eastern brethren (Sec. 48:2), and

it was the duty of Edward Partridge, who had been appointed Bishop (Sec. 36) to take care of the newcomers, as far as possible. Under the circumstances, Bishop Partridge asked for divine guidance. The Prophet inquired of the Lord for him, and received this answer to his prayers. (Hyrum M. Smith and Janne M. Sjodhal, Doctrine and Covenants Commentary, page 296)

Excerpt from Millennial Star

In the spring of 1831 this Branch, the Colesville Branch, with others gathered to a place called Thompson, thirteen miles from Kirtland. There was a man there who joined the Church, named Leman Copely, who owned a large piece of land. Joseph went there, and, on the request of the people, inquired of the Lord, and received two revelations, found in the Book of Doctrine and Covenants, which gave directions to Edward Partridge, who was then the only Bishop of the Church, how to organize the people according to the laws of the Lord, otherwise the people would be cut off.

[...]

This revelation was given before anything was known about the land of Zion in Jackson County, or of the law of consecration. Leman Copely having covenants with the Lord that he would do as he should command, shortly after apostatized, and the Colesville Branch were commanded to flee the land, and a woe was pronounced upon him who had broken his covenant. Shortly after, this Branch were commanded to move a thousand miles, into the State of Missouri.

Elder Pratt said he was present when this revelation was given. No great noise of physical manifestation was made; Joseph was as calm as the morning sun. But he noticed a change in his countenance that he had never noticed before, when a revelation was given to him. Joseph's face was exceedingly white, and seemed to shine. The speaker had been present many time when he was translating the New Testament and wondered why he did not use the Urim and Thummim, as in translating the Book of Mormon. While this thought passed through the speaker's mind, Joseph, as if he read his thoughts, looked up and explained that the Lord gave him the Urim and Thummim when he was inexperienced in the Spirit of inspiration. But now he had advanced so far that he understood the operations of that Spirit, and did not need the assistance of that instrument. (Conference Minutes of Orson Pratt, Millennial Star, August 11, 1874, pages 498-499)

Excerpt from Regional Studies in LDS History Series: Missouri

Originally, the Colesville Branch, from Broome and Chenango Counties, New York, had intended to settle in Ohio and participate in the general gathering of the Saints to that state. However, problems arising between certain members of the Colesville Branch and Leman Copley greatly interfered with their becoming established in Ohio, and they were sent on to settle in the Kaw Township in Jackson County, Missouri.

Leman Copley had been associated with the United Society of Believers in Christ's Second Appearing, commonly known as Shakers, until his conversion to The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in March 1831. Though living apart on his farm in Thompson Township (now Madison), Ohio, he and his wife Sally had enjoyed close ties with the Shaker settlement of North Union (present-day Cleveland suburb of Shaker Heights), just 15 miles west of Kirtland. As a newly ordained LDS elder, Leman accompanied Sidney Rigdon and Parley P. Pratt on a proselyting mission to that Shaker community in March 1831 (see D&C 49). Their visit turned into a confrontation between the Mormon missionaries and Elder Ashbel Kitchell, who was avidly protecting his Shaker flock in his capacity as first disciplinarian and gospel organizer of North Union, a position which he had held since the spring of 1826. Rejected by Kitchell and his fellow Shakers, the brethren withdrew.

Leman was among those adherents to the Church who volunteered the use of his holdings to Bishop Edward Partridge under the law of consecration and stewardship. The Copley property, in Thompson Township, totaling 759 acres, became the initial location for the members of the Colesville Branch to settle upon their arrival from New York. Apparently the first of these immigrants were Joseph Knight, Sr., his wife Polly, and their daughter Lucy, who had come to Kirtland with the Prophet in January and February 1831. Emily Coburn, a sister to Sally Coburn Knight, may have also been at Thompson with the Knights, for she had likewise journeyed to Kirtland that same winter from Colesville, perhaps with Joseph Knight, Sr. They subsequently settled at the Copley farm the following March. The majority of the Colesville Branch, under President Newel Knight, did not arrive in Ohio until the middle of May 1831. Jared Carter and a few other members of the Colesville Branch came to Kirtland slightly before the main body by circumventing the ice freshet which held the others bound in Buffalo harbor. Boarding a

steamboat at Dunkirk, New York, they sailed to Fairport Harbor, Ohio. Then, as Jared explained, from Fairport "we went to Kir[t]land where we found Joseph, the se[e]r. Here we found that preparations was made for the Church from which we were to settle in Thompson. We went from here to Thompson and there continued until the body of the Church arrived to Fairport and then we moved our things and families to Thompson. Here we had some severe trials." Newel Knight related that a contract was agreed upon with Copley, and they began to work the property in good faith. At the same time, Joseph Knight, Jr., observed, "[We] commenced preparing houses on a brother's land who had a thousand acres.... We planted and sowed a great deal."

Carrying out his assigned duties (see D&C 51), Bishop Edward Partridge settled as many as 100 Saints on the Copley farm. The majority of this number were from the Colesville Branch, but apparently not all. Ezra Thayre, a convert from Ontario County, New York, had previously come to Ohio, seemingly in company with the Prophet Joseph Smith, and was then settled on land consecrated by Copley in Thompson. Expectations for an amicable relationship were shattered by the emergence of serious internal problems. Deep divisions arose over the nature of the consecration of property among Leman Copley, Ezra Thayre, Newel Knight, and others at the site. Unable to bear certain criticisms leveled against him relative to the failure of the earlier mission to the Shakers and to irregularities in his observance of the law of consecration, Copley let his faith in the enterprise quickly wane. John Whitmer said that Leman's rebellion "confused the whole church."

In the latter part of May or in early June 1831, Leman enlisted the aid of his former mentor, Elder Ashbel Kitchell, in an effort to repossess his land. He likewise begged to be reunited with the Shakers. Kitchell remarked, "After some consultation we concluded to give him [Leman] union, and help him through; and to accomplish this, I went home with him, and held a meeting in the dooryard, among the Mormons." A lively exchange ensued between Elder Kitchell on one side and Newel Knight and his father, Joseph Knight, Sr., on the other. Newel Knight simply specified, "We had not labored long before the above named Copley broke the engagement which he made with us. At this time I went to Kirtland to see Brother Joseph and to attend a conference which had been appointed to commence on the sixth of June 1831 [June 3-5, 1831]."

When faced with the dilemma of the Colesville Saints, the Prophet sought divine assistance and was directed to instruct

the branch to leave the Thompson area and move immediately to Missouri (D&C 54). (Excerpt from an essay entitled "The Colesville Branch in Kaw Township, Jackson County, Missouri, 1831 to 1833" by Larry C. Porter, published in Regional Studies in LDS History Series: Missouri, edited by Arnold K. Garr and Clark V. Johnson, pages 281-283)

Excerpt from Making Sense of the Doctrine & Covenants

In the spring of 1831, Bishop Edward Partridge had a problem. It was his job to organize and settle the saints who were gathering from New York to Ohio. Leman Copley was a member of the United Society of Believers in Christ's Second Appearing when he converted to the restored gospel in Ohio. He offered to let the Colesville saints settle on some of his 759 acres in Thompson.[1] Bishop Partridge asked Joseph how to organize the immigrant saints. Joseph asked the Lord, who gave Section 51, "A revelation given to the Bishop at Thompson Ohio May 20th 1831 concerning the property of the Church."

This revelation begins to implement the law of consecration. Initially it instructed Bishop Partridge to obtain a deed from Leman Copley for his land "if he harden not his heart." Copley returned to his former faith, however, and rescinded his offer for the gathering saints to settle on his land. He did not give consent to Bishop Partridge obtaining the title to it. When Section 51 was first published in 1835, its instructions about Bishop Partridge obtaining a deed to Copley's land were long since irrelevant, and were omitted from the published version.

The saints who had gathered on Copley's property were told by the Lord to gather to Missouri instead (section 54). Bishop Partridge implement section 51 in Missouri. He purchased hundreds of acres and established a storehouse to supply the needs of the saints. He was sued by a fellow named Bates who had donated fifty dollars to purchase land, then decided he wanted it back.[5] The suit was granted, apparently on the grounds that the bishop did exactly what Section 51 originally said. He purchased the land in his own name and then leased parts of it to individual stewards while he remained, on behalf of the Lord, the legal owner.

Bishop Partridge must have felt like the law of the land prohibited him from carrying out Section 51. Joseph wrote to Bishop Partridge in Missouri in May 1833 to counsel him what to do, explaining much of Section 51 in the process. Bates had

expected something tangible in return for his fifty dollars. Joseph assured the bishop that he remained bound by the law of the Lord to receive consecrated property to purchase inheritances for the poor. Joseph emphasized that such offerings were legal and in no way coerced. "Any man has a right . . . agreeable to the laws of our country, to donate, give or consecrate all that he feels disposed to give." Joseph counseled the bishop to ensure that all offerings were legal by making sure that donors understood they were giving money freely for the poor, not in exchange for anything temporal. "This way no man can take advantage of you in law," Joseph wrote.

He also counseled the bishop to apply Section 51 by deeding pieces of land to saints as their "individual property." Joseph called this "private stewardship," not ownership. Bishop Partridge issued several such deeds based on Section 51. (See Titus Billings example.) When Section 51 was first published in 1835, much of verse 5 was added to keep folks like Bates from suing the Lord's bishop. Joseph wrote to Bishop Partridge that the revelation in D&C 51:5 was given so "that rich men cannot have power to disinherit the poor by obtaining again that which they have consecrated." (Steven C. Harper, 2008, Making Sense of the Doctrine & Covenants, entry for D&C 51, Deseret Books, pages 184-185, see also author's [website](#))

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