

Section 42

“We have received the laws of the Kingdom since we came here and the Disciples in these parts have received them gladly.”¹ Joseph had been in Ohio less than a month when he wrote those words to Martin Harris, who was still in Palmyra, New York, in February 1831. Prior to Joseph’s own move from New York, the Lord commanded him to gather the Church in Ohio and promised, “There I will give unto you my law.”² Shortly after Joseph’s arrival in Kirtland, he received the promised revelation. Early manuscripts call it “The Laws of the Church of Christ” (now Doctrine and Covenants 42:1–73).

The need for the revelation at this time was acute. Joseph found the Saints in Ohio to be sincere but confused about the biblical teaching that early Christians “were of one heart and of one soul: neither said any of them that ought of the things which he possessed was his own; but they had all things common” (Acts 4:32).

Many of the Ohio converts belonged to “the Family,” a communal group that shared the home and farm of Lucy and Isaac Morley in an effort to be true Christians. Their intentions were in keeping with the account Joseph himself had recently received of Enoch’s Zion, where the people had achieved the ideal “of one heart and one mind”

¹ Joseph Smith letter to Martin Harris, Feb. 22, 1831, 1, josephsmithpapers.org.

² “Revelation, 2 January 1831 [D&C 38],” in Revelation Book 1, 52, josephsmithpapers.org; see also Doctrine and Covenants 38:32.

and completely eliminated poverty (Moses 7:18). However, their practices undermined personal agency, stewardship, and accountability—though they were “striving to do the will of God, so far as they knew it.”³ As a result, the converts were, in the words of Joseph Smith’s history, “going to destruction very fast as to temporal things: for they considered from reading the scripture that what belonged to a brother belonged to any of the brethren.”⁴

Very shortly after Joseph arrived in Ohio, the Lord revealed that “by the prayer of your faith ye shall receive my law that ye may know how to govern my Church.”⁵ A few days later, Joseph gathered several elders and in “mighty prayer” asked the Lord to reveal His law as promised.⁶

The revelation Joseph received in response upheld the first great commandment, loving God wholeheartedly, as the motivation for keeping all the others, including the law of consecration, suggesting that love for God is the reason for the practice. To consecrate, the early Saints were taught, meant to make their property sacred by using it for the Lord’s work, including purchasing land on which to build New Jerusalem and crowning it with a temple. The law revealed that consecration was as much about receiving as it was about giving, since the Lord promised that each faithful Saint would receive “sufficient for him self and family” here and salvation hereafter.⁷

The law clarified that consecration did not necessarily mean communal ownership of property. Rather, it required willing souls to acknowledge that the Lord was the owner of all and that each of the Saints was to be a hardworking “steward over his own property”⁸ and thus accountable to the actual owner, the Lord, who required that the

³ Joseph Smith, “History, 1838–1856, volume A-1 [23 December 1805–30 August 1834],” 93, josephsmithpapers.org.

⁴ “John Whitmer, History, 1831–circa 1847,” 11, josephsmithpapers.org.

⁵ “Revelation, 4 February 1831 [D&C 41],” in Revelation Book 1, 61, josephsmithpapers.org; see also Doctrine and Covenants 41:3.

⁶ “John Whitmer, History, 1831–circa 1847,” 12.

⁷ “Revelation, 9 February 1831 [D&C 42:1–72],” 3, josephsmithpapers.org; see also Doctrine and Covenants 42:32.

⁸ “Revelation, 9 February 1831 [D&C 42:1–72],” 3.

Saints freely offer their surplus to His storehouse to be used to relieve poverty and build Zion.⁹

The Ohio converts' faith in Joseph's revelations led them to align their practices with the Lord's revealed plan. As Joseph's history put it, "The plan of 'common stock,' which had existed in what was called 'the family,' whose members generally had embraced the ever lasting gospel, was readily abandoned for the more perfect law of the Lord."¹⁰

As time went on, Bishop Edward Partridge implemented the law as best he could, and willing Saints signed deeds consecrating their property to the Church. But obeying the law was voluntary and some Saints refused. Others were untaught and many were scattered.¹¹ Some rebellious Saints even challenged the law in court, leading to refinements in its language and changes in practice.

Other early Saints understood that the eternal principles of the law—agency, stewardship, and accountability to God—could be applied in changing situations, as when Leman Copley decided not to consecrate his farm in Thompson, Ohio, sending the Saints gathered there on to Missouri to live the law, or again when a mob drove Church members from Jackson County in 1833, ending the bishop's practice of giving and receiving consecration deeds but not ending the law itself. Just as the law of consecration, though revealed in February 1831, did not begin then, it did not end when some refused to obey and others were thwarted in their attempts. President Gordon B. Hinckley taught that "the law of sacrifice and the law of consecration have not been done away with and are still in effect."¹²

In addition to expounding the law of consecration, section 42 answered many questions the Saints had. Joseph and the elders who gathered in February 1831 in pursuit of the revelation first asked if the Church should "come to gether into one place or continue in separate establishments." The Lord answered with what are now essentially the first 10 verses of Doctrine and Covenants 42, calling on the elders to preach the gospel in pairs, declare the word like angels, invite all to repent, and

⁹ See "Revelation, 9 February 1831 [D&C 42:1–72]," 3, 4.

¹⁰ Joseph Smith, "History, 1838–1856, volume A-1 [23 December 1805–30 August 1834]," 93.

¹¹ See "John Whitmer, History, 1831–circa 1847," 17.

¹² Gordon B. Hinckley, *Teachings of Gordon B. Hinckley* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1997), 639.

baptize all who were willing. By gathering Saints into the Church from every region, the elders would prepare for the day when the Lord would reveal the New Jerusalem. Then “ye may be gathered in one,” the Lord said.¹³

The Lord then answered a question that had troubled Christianity for centuries: Was Christ’s Church an orderly, authoritative institution or an unfettered outpouring of the Spirit and its gifts? Some people made extreme claims to spiritual gifts, and others responded with an equal and opposite reaction, stripping away the spontaneity of the Spirit, completely in favor of rigid rules. This dilemma existed in the early Church in Ohio, and the Lord responded to it with several revelations, including His law. The law did not envision the Church as either well ordered or free to follow the Spirit; rather, it required that preachers be ordained by those known to have authority, that they teach the scriptures, and that they do it by the power of the Holy Ghost.¹⁴

Other portions of the law restated and commented on the commandments revealed to Moses and included conditional promises of more revelation depending on the Saints’ faithfulness to what they had received, including sharing the gospel.¹⁵ “How,” the elders wondered, should they care for “their families while they are proclaiming repentance or are otherwise engaged in the Service of the Church?”¹⁶ The Lord answered with what has become verses 70–73, then elaborated further in later revelations, now found in Doctrine and Covenants 72:11–14 and 75:24–28.

Early versions of the law also include short answers to two additional questions: Should the Church have business dealings—especially get into debt—with people outside the Church, and what should the Saints do to accommodate those gathering from the East? The answers have been left out of later versions of the text, perhaps because Doctrine and Covenants 64:27–30 answers the first question, while the

¹³ “Revelation, 9 February 1831 [D&C 42:1–72],” 1–2.

¹⁴ See “Revelation, 9 February 1831 [D&C 42:1–72],” 2.

¹⁵ See “Revelation, 9 February 1831 [D&C 42:1–72],” 2–5.

¹⁶ See “Revelation, 9 February 1831 [D&C 42:1–72],” 1–5. This concept was further clarified in the 1835 edition of the Doctrine and Covenants.

answer to the second is so specific to a past place and time that it may have been considered unimportant for future generations.¹⁷

¹⁷ One question read, “How far it is the will of the Lord that we Should have dealings with the wo[r]ld & how we Should conduct our dealings with them?” The answer was, “Thou shalt contract no debts with them & again the Elders & Bishop shall Council together & they shall do by the directions of the spirit as it must be necessary.” The other question was, “What preperations we shall make for our Brethren from the East & when [another manuscript asks where] & how?” The Lord answered, “There shall be as many appointed as must needs be necessary to assist the Bishop in obtaining places that they may be together as much as can be & is directed by the holy Spirit” (“Revelation, 9 February 1831, [D&C 42:1–72],” 6).