

## **“Thou Wilt Remember the Poor”: Social Justice and a Radical Interpretation of “The Laws of the Church of Christ” (D&C 42)**

Russell Arben Fox  
Friends University

Embracing the Law conference, September 10, 2010, Souther Virginia University

### **Introduction**

The structure of my basic argument hinges upon explicating three key principles, all of which are important to the social justice teachings of the Catholic and Reformed Christian traditions. These principles are solidarity and equality, personalism and distributism, and the preferential option for the poor. It is my claim that Joseph Smith’s revelation of the laws of consecration and stewardship, as first articulated through the oft-revised and re-arranged text “The Laws of the Church of Christ,” may be understood as providing normative support for all of these principles. In short, D&C 42 may be read as a social justice document, one supportive of economic approaches conducive to these aims, and moreover I believe that the revelation *should* be so read. I say this so that fans of Glenn Beck may be forewarned.

It is, of course, a rather radical, not to mention audacious thing to take a text composed nearly 170 years ago by Joseph Smith (and possibly some others<sup>1</sup>), through a process which nearly all of us present would presumably affirm as having involved some sort of revealed language or guidance from God, and subject it to a reading which wrests from it claims to support a political, economic, and religious platform about which Smith himself almost certainly knew nothing about whatsoever. So be it. My aim is merely to explore a reading, not to definitively express a meaning. The practical, historical record of the early Saints’ various attempts at living the laws of consecration and stewardship, both when directly inspired by “The Laws of the Church of Christ”—in both its 1831 original and its 1835 revised versions—in Ohio and Missouri, and when later inspired by the sermons preached and the policies implemented by church leaders regarding the establishment of the United Order of Enoch in Utah during the 1870s, is and absolutely should be an important contribution to any reading of D&C 42. But that record is not, I think, the sole or deciding contribution to our understanding of it. Some acts of hermeneutical interpretation aim to recover an objective meaning of the text; this one aims to examine the language of the text under consideration so as to express and speculate about its possible applications.<sup>2</sup> That those possibilities are ones that I am, personally and politically, sympathetic

---

<sup>1</sup> As Grant Underwood observes in “‘The Laws of the Church of Christ’ (D&C 42): A Textual and Historical Analysis,” the phrase “as agreed upon by seven Elders,” which appears in the early Ryder manuscript of the revelation linking the February 9 section of the text to the February 23 section, suggests “something more than mere ratification of what Joseph Smith received....It is possible that the seven elders played an active role in helping the Prophet define the procedures recorded that day.” Underwood, “A Textual and Historical Analysis,” in *The Doctrines and Covenants: Revelations in Context*, Andrew H. Hedges, J. Spencer Fluhman, Alonzo L. Gaskill, eds. (Provo and Salt Lake City: Religious Studies Center and Deseret Books, 2008), 112.

<sup>2</sup> For the philosophical ideas guiding me here, see Charles Taylor, “Language and Human Nature,” in *Human Agency and Language: Philosophical Papers 1* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 215-247.

to, doesn't undermine the validity of my suggestions, I think; our own pre-judgments are inseparably a part of what we bring to any reading, and sometimes it is those prejudices which make possible some speculative which might otherwise have never been attempted.<sup>3</sup>

Are there reasons not to take seriously this obviously self-interested interpretive possibility? Some would argue that, as the fundamental message of any text which the body of Saints has accepted as inspired is dependent upon the guidance of "the living oracles" of the church, the only form of interpretation which is likely to have any kind of legitimacy would be one which turns to the sustained prophets and apostles, and attempts to identify "the inchoate normative logic" of the "practices and institutions" which they direct.<sup>4</sup> Doing so in connection with the laws of stewardship and consecration arguably suggests a very strong denial of the appropriateness of approaching it by way of a social justice or liberation theology reading. For example, there are the numerous and often vehement defenses of free market economics and condemnations of organized labor and welfare policies given by church leaders past and present<sup>5</sup>; moreover, there are the emphatic denials by those closer to the original reception of the Laws of the Church of Christ of the notion that the communitarianism suggested by the revelation was a form of "Socialism" or "French Communism."<sup>6</sup> It is worth noting, however, that the specific forms of communitarian economics which these 19<sup>th</sup>-century church leaders were mostly referring to when they disavowed any connection between such systems and the laws of consecration and stewardship were anarchist and communalistic experiments in the tradition of Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, Robert Owen and others, which were quite different from what the social justice tradition teaches; also, it is worth noting that the interpretation of the early church's experiments with communitarian economics which focused fiercely upon distinguishing such practices from 20<sup>th</sup>-century state socialism and communism were likely driven far more by the ideologically-shaping global political realities which confronted leaders like J. Reuben Clark and Ezra Taft Benson, than by a thorough knowledge of the actual history of those experiments.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, the argument can be made that the relative absence of social justice-friendly prophetic readings of the laws of consecration and stewardship was more a historical accident than anything else.<sup>8</sup>

---

<sup>3</sup> For more on this argument, see Hans-Georg Gadamer, "The Problem of Historical Consciousness," in *Interpretive Social Science: A Reader*, Paul Rainbow and William M. Sullivan, eds. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979), 148-152 and passim.

<sup>4</sup> Nathan B. Oman, "'The Living Oracles': Legal Interpretation and Mormon Thought," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 42, no. 2 (Summer 2009), 3-6 and passim.

<sup>5</sup> See Duance Boyce, "Do Liberal Economic Policies Approximate the Law of Consecration?," *FARMS Review* 21, no. 1 (2009), 197-213, and Phillip J. Bryson, "In Defense of Capitalism: Church Leaders on Property, Wealth, and the Economic Order," *BYU Studies* 38, no. 3 (1999), 89-107.

<sup>6</sup> John Taylor, *The Government of God* (London: Latter-day Saint Book Depot, 1852), 23, and Lorenzo Snow, *Journal of Discourses*, 26 vols. (Liverpool: Latter-day Saint Book Depot, 1854-1886), 19:349.

<sup>7</sup> James W. Lucas and Warner P. Woodworth, *Working Toward Zion: Principles of the United Order for the Modern World* (Salt Lake City: Aspen Books, 1996), 132-133, 140-142, and passim.

<sup>8</sup> Ethan Yorgason, "No Grounds for Conversation: The Regional Construction of Fundamental Differences between Mormonism and Socialism," *Antipode: A Radical Journal of Geography* 34, no. 4 (2002), 707-729.

But even given all those historical considerations, I believe my argument is worth consideration. Not only am I not suggesting the recovery of an original or objective meaning of the revelation in question, I am not even seeking to develop of reading of the text which aspires to any binding legitimacy upon the faith of members of the church. This is, first and last, an act of speculation and persuasion, nothing more. Such open-ended speculation, when confronted with as influential and as ambiguous a text as the Laws of the Church of Christ, and particularly the laws of consecration and stewardship first articulated therein, is, I would argue, the only reasonable response. Two Mormon scholars wrote, years ago, that while gospel teachings do not “outline a theory of economic justice...in any operational manner,” the principles contained within the revelations—principles which, among other things, “condemn the ostentatious consumption of the rich and encourage Saints to care for the poor”—make it incumbent upon us “to struggle with the dilemma of economic justice.”<sup>9</sup> In this, these scholars were following the argument made by prophets from Brigham Young to Marion G. Romney, who claimed that the Lord “has not the least objection” to His children, in all times and in all places, attempting to construct the United Order of Enoch, and that “the united order,” in all its various versions and applications, is “the gospel in its perfection,” and should be the goal “toward which we move.”<sup>10</sup> Writing this essay is an act of adding my voice in support of one additional, frequently beleaguered, possible route towards the achievement of that goal.

## **Principles of Social Justice**

While the teachings of on social and economic justice within the Catholic and Reformed Christian traditions are enormously broad and multifaceted, they can be fairly accurately summarized through the following three, interlocking moral demands<sup>11</sup>:

1. Solidarity and equality—within social justice thought, the equal dignity and respect of persons is seen as dependent upon, and a function of, tightly bound and mutually supporting communities, whose twin overarching aims are, first, providing for the essential needs of those who lack the civil liberties, material resources, education, health care, or opportunities for work by which dignity is made possible, and second, maintaining the integrity and balance of the community which the members of it identify with, thereby enabling the degree of trust and solidarity which supporting and sacrificing on behalf of one another requires.
2. Personalism and distributism—any true esteem of one’s fellow person is inseparable from a prior granting to them of the ability to freely labor and develop themselves in a mutually beneficial and personally satisfying vocation; consequently, as important as guaranteed rights to individual persons are, an economic system which (to a degree) levels and distributes property and work opportunities through stewardships, apprenticeships, and the like is also essential to the

---

<sup>9</sup> J.R. Kearl and Clayne Pope, “The Church in the Secular World,” unpublished paper in possession of author, BYU Conference on Mormonism and Economics, 1975.

<sup>10</sup> Young, *Journal of Discourses*, 16:8, and Romney, “Welfare Services,” *Ensign* 5 (November 1975), 127.

<sup>11</sup> These four points are adapted from documents accessed from the websites for the Center for Public Justice (<http://www.cpjustice.org/>) and the Office for Social Justice (<http://www.osjspm.org/default.aspx>).

maintenance of the common good.

3. Option (or “preference”) for the poor—this final moral demand, unlike the prior ones, does not necessarily fit into an interlocking description of the proper form, structure, and purpose of social life; it is, instead, a declaration that, in the midst of tending to all other political, economic, and social matters of concern to individual persons and communities, the centrality of the poor is a constant: they will always have a prior moral claim on our conscience, and all decisions should be made with the standpoint of the needs of the powerless and weak in mind.

The aim of the remainder of this paper will be to present my case for reading the Laws of the Church of Christ as being supportive of, or at the least suggestive of, these basic moral demands.

### **Solidarity and Equality**

The textual linking of solidarity and equality in the revelations composed by Joseph Smith begin even before the Laws of the Church of Christ were received. On January 2, 1831, at the third conference of the church, Smith gave “a revelation to guide and instruct the church” to the members assembled together in the home Peter Whitmer, Sr., in Fayette, New York.<sup>12</sup> That revelation, which eventually became D&C 38, set the stage for subsequent egalitarian thinking amongst the early members by issuing at least two crucial edicts. First, that the whole body of the church was to relocate to Ohio—a prospect which prompted “divisions among the congregation,” and required “great sacrifices of property”<sup>13</sup>—at which point, the Lord declared, “I will give unto you my law” (D&C 38:32). Second, that this relocation, and presumably the sacrifice it entailed, as well as the promised law which it would result in, both depended upon and necessitated a high degree of unity amongst the members of the church: “let every man esteem his brother as himself...if ye are not one ye are not mine” (vs. 25, 27). The poor members of the congregation were to be assisted in making this journey; all members, whether elder or priest or teacher, were to equally give of the “labor of [their] hands”; the result would be a prepared and covenanted community, mild and meek, separated out from the wicked, with all things gathered “unto the bosom of the church” (vs. 38-42).

A month later, Smith and others had made the move to Ohio. Some major influences on Smith’s mind at this time—to whatever degree the state of a prophet’s mind is important to understanding the inspired texts which such individuals create—must be noted. There was his work on his “New Translation” of the Bible, which began with Genesis in the summer of 1830 and by December of that year had brought him to the story of Enoch and the city of Zion, in which all were “of one heart and one mind, and dwelt in righteousness,” with “no poor among them” (Moses 7:18-19).<sup>14</sup>

---

<sup>12</sup> As recollected by Orson Pratt, *Journal of Discourses* 7:372.

<sup>13</sup> John Whitmer and Newel Knight, both cited in *The Revelations of Joseph Smith*, Lyndon W. Cook, ed. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1985), 56.

<sup>14</sup> See Joseph Smith, *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, 7 vols. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1957), 6:57, and Robert L. Millet, “Joseph Smith’s Translation of the Bible: A Historical Overview,” in *The Joseph Smith Translation: The Restoration of Plain and Precious Things*, Monte S. Nyman and Millet, eds.

There was also the “Family,” a communalistic order of Christians attempting to live by lights of Acts 2:44-45—which describes early Christians living in close proximity to each other and having “all things in common”—centered around the farm of Isaac Morley outside Kirtland, practicing a rough communism of all possessions, and exercising significant influence over both the members of and those sympathetic to the church in that part of Ohio.<sup>15</sup> These and other matters must have complemented Smith’s thinking as he petitioned the Lord on February 9, 1831, for direction in how to organize the Mormon faithful. In response to a question put to him regarding “the Law regulating the Church in her present situation till the time of her gathering,” Smith dictated several passages dealing with the authority to teach and reiterating the Biblical commandments against murder, theft, and adultery, and then gave the following:

*If thou lovest me thou shalt serve me & keep all my commandments and behold thou shalt consecrate all thy property that which thou hath unto me with a covenant & deed which cannot be broken and they shall be laid before the Bishop of my Church & two of the Elders such as he shall appoint and set apart for that purpose and it shall come to pass that the Bishop of my Church after he has received the properties of my Church that it cannot be taken from you, he shall appoint every man a steward over his own property or that which he hath received inasmuch as it shall be sufficient for himself & family and the residue shall be kept to him that hath not, that every man may receive according as he stands in need, & the residue shall be kept in my Store House to administer to the poor & needy as shall be appointed by the Elders of the Church & the Bishop & for the purpose of purchasing lands & the building up the New Jerusalem which is hereafter to be revealed that my Covenant people may be gathered in me in the day that I shall come to my Temple this do for the salvation of my people and it shall come to pass that he that sinneth and repenteth not shall be cast out and shall not receive again that which he hath consecrated unto me for it shall come to pass that which I spake by the mouth of my prophets shall be fulfilled for I will consecrate the riches of the Gentiles unto my people which are of the House of Israel and again thou shalt not be proud of heart, let all thy Garments be plain & their beauty the beauty of the work of thine own hands & let all things be done in decency before me.<sup>16</sup>*

There is, in this early version of the revelation, an awareness of the poor—“him that hath not,” “the poor and needy,” etc.—very much in line with the statements composed by Smith in New York two months earlier. However, the primary focus of this passage is clearly the building up of a self-sufficient, enclosed, separate, simple, devotional, plain, humble community. The goal is the creation of a covenant people that will be gathered to the Lord’s temple and receive salvation, one that will give all that they have to the achievement of this end—and that giving is an all-or-nothing proposition, one which is suggestive of the parable of the ten virgins: if one disobeys the commandments or otherwise is cast out for unrighteousness, all that has been

---

(Provo: Religious Studies Center, 1985), 27-28.

<sup>15</sup> See Mark Lyman Staker, *Hearken, O Ye People: The Historical Setting for Joseph Smith’s Ohio Revelations* (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2009), 37-48, 93-118, and passim.

<sup>16</sup> In *The Joseph Smith Revelations: Text and Commentary*, H. Michael Marquardt (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1999), 108-109.

devoted to the community stays with the community, and any opportunity to benefit from or share in that which had been consecrated is lost.

The reason for this firmness was the desire to see all members of the church “on an equal economic footing, considering their respective family obligations, circumstances, needs, and ‘just wants’ ....The system aimed at equality in consumption but not in the capital controlled or managed by individuals.”<sup>17</sup> In other words, a degree of sacrifice, consecration and redistribution was commanded of the saints, not to achieve a perfect economic equality amongst them, but to give them grounds for *living together as rough equals*. It was not imagined that all would produce equal amounts of goods and services, nor that all would manage their affairs in the same way. But all would, as members of the church community, consecrate their property to the whole church, accept the rule of recognizing the proper limits of their own and families’ needs and concerns, content themselves with life within those circumscribed limits as defined by the stewardship they were assigned, and donate whatever surplus came from their individual labors and genius to whole once again. The particular focus on dignity, respect, mutual support and co-existence is made even more clear in the specific phrasing of a call for equality amongst the Saints in a revelation which Smith dictated a month later: in a wide-ranging set of statements regarding the relations between the sexes and between human beings and the natural world, the word of God was that “it is not given that one man should possess that which is above another, wherefor the world lieth in sin” (D&C 49:20).

Too often, the understanding associated with the teachings of social justice, and whatever elements of leveling and redistributing which it may entail, is one that turns on the frankly impossible quest to achieve some sort of perfect equality amongst all members of a society. That this flawed understanding has taken root so broadly is perhaps understandable; the legacy of totalitarian governments and fanatical cults which have used “equality” as a club to oppress and destroy individual differences is too widespread to be easily dismissed. Nonetheless, the fact remains that the central concern of almost all serious efforts to construct mutually supporting communities is not, and has never been, simple, strict, economic equality. This is clearly manifest in the Catechism of the Catholic Church<sup>18</sup>; it is also manifest in the writings of Karl Marx. For him, the central normative problem with capitalism was not the poverty or powerlessness of the proletariat or the inequality between the classes; the central problem was

---

<sup>17</sup> Leonard J. Arrington, Feramorz Y. Fox, Dean L. May, *Building the City of God: Community and Cooperation among the Mormons*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1992), 16. The reference to “just wants” is to D&C 82:17, which is part of a revelation received on April 26, 1832, in Independence, Missouri.

<sup>18</sup> “The equality of men rests essentially on their dignity....’[T]alents’ are not distributed equally. These differences belong to God’s plan, who wills that each receive what he needs from others, and that those endowed with particular ‘talents’ share the benefits with those who need them....Excessive economic and social disparity between individuals and peoples of the human race is a source of scandal, and militates against social justice, equity, human dignity, as well as social and international peace....[Thus is the] principle of solidarity...a direct demand of human and Christian brotherhood.” “Equality and Differences Among Men” and “Human Solidarity,” *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (<http://www.vatican.va/archive/catechism/p3s1c2a3.htm>).

alienation—a feeling separateness from one’s own work and one’s own fellow man.<sup>19</sup> I would argue that it was, in essence, this problem—though capitalism in its fullest modern sense was only still emerging on the American frontier in the early 1830s—that Smith aimed to resolve. The community of Saints would give support to one another, they would “live together in love” (D&C 42:45), treat another as equals and with respect (which included paying for whatever one received from another as a service or an exchange—v. 54), and none would have the kind of social power<sup>20</sup> over another which uncircumscribed economic expansion and consumption unfortunately makes possible. Instead, social power would be shared, between individual members of the Mormon community with their mutually determined stewardships, the bishop to whom, as administer of the storehouse, members’ properties would be consecrated both prior to and following the further development of their stewardships, and the whole body of the church as a source of counsel and consent. The end result would be a system which granted both personal dignity and an equality in “social status...the esteem, deference or prestige connected with one’s position in the social order.”<sup>21</sup>

In reflecting upon this principle in later years, Brigham Young knew clearly that the point was never to create an economic uniformity of property or talent amongst the Saints<sup>22</sup>; the point was to create a social equality, wherein the differences between rich and poor were mitigated, and all could enjoy a degree of solidarity with one another. No prophet has stated this better than Lorenzo Snow did:

*Zion cannot be built except on the principles of union required by celestial law. It is high time for us to enter into these things. It is more pleasant and agreeable for the Latter-day Saints to enter into this work and build up Zion, than to build up ourselves and have this great competition which is destroying us. Now let things go on in our midst in our Gentile fashion, and you would see an aristocracy growing amongst us, whose language to the poor would be, “we do not require your company; we are going to have things very fine; we are quite busy now, please call some other time.” Your would have classes established here, some very poor and some very rich. Now, the Lord is not going to have anything of that kind. There has to be an equality; and we have to observe these principles that are designed to give every one the privilege of gathering around him the comforts and conveniences of life. The Lord, in his economy of spiritual things, has fixed that every man, according to his perseverance and faithfulness, will receive exaltation and glory in the eternal worlds—a fullness of the Priesthood, and a fullness of*

---

<sup>19</sup> This is best detailed in Marx’s essay “On the Jewish Question.” In that essay, his sole reference to equality is a somewhat contemptuous one, that sees the obsessive with equal rights or equal treatment as incapable of appreciating the collective problem of alienation created by industrial capitalism, instead contenting itself with the goal of describing every person as “equally...a self-sufficient monad.” See “On the Jewish Question,” in *Selected Writings*, Lawrence H. Simon, ed. (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1994), 17.

<sup>20</sup> This is another reference to Karl Marx, this time to the Communist Manifesto: “Capital is, therefore, not a personal, it is a social power.” *Selected Writings*, 170.

<sup>21</sup> Alma Don Sorenson, “Being Equal in Earthly and Heavenly Power: The Idea of Stewardship in the United Order,” *BYU Studies* 18, no. 1 (1977), 111.

<sup>22</sup> Young, *Journal of Discourses*, 18:353-354.

*the glory of God. This is the economy of God's system by which men and women can be exalted spiritually. The same with regard to temporal affairs.*<sup>23</sup>

Snow's combination of the temporal and the spiritual, the economic and the heavenly, was typical of the rhetoric of consecration and stewardship throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century; in social justice terms, it is the belief that earthly solidarity and equality make possible the greater extension of charity and Christian love—both of which, as we shall see, are necessary to respond to the final, unavoidable mandate of social and economic justice, namely that of caring for the poor. But there is another principle to consider first.

### **Personalism and Distributism**

The traditions of the Catholic and Reformed churches by and large dissent from both classical liberalism and orthodox Marxism in their account of the individual. In contrast, these mostly continental European Christian traditions developed, in response to the extensive and frequently violent cultural transformations and conflicts during the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, a conception of the person that posited the individual as both a bearer of rights but also as essentially connected to an organic community. The human personality, an endlessly varying expression of God's diverse gifts to His creation, is inseparable from the historical, natural, and economic development of the social world wherein that personality may articulate itself. Owing some debt to both phenomenology and existentialism, personalism is one way of expressing the Hegelian insight into *sittlichkeit*, the “ethical life” of organic associations which makes possible the structures of human consciousness. The Christian authors most responsible for developing the idea range from Max Scheler and Martin Buber to Jacques Maritain and Karol Wojtyła (better known as Pope John Paul II).<sup>24</sup> Probably the most influential personalist text, however, made no direct reference to the doctrine; rather, it was a paper encyclical which spelled out what a just personalist response to economic life ought to be: Pope Leo XIII's *Rerum Novarum*.

Often considered alongside Pius XI's *Quadragesimo Anno*, John XXIII's *Mater et Magistra* and Paul VI's *Populorum Progressio* as one of the essential documents of Catholic social justice teaching, *Rerum Novarum*—“Of New Things”—contemplated the accelerated specialization of labor and concentration of capital which had attended the Industrial Revolution, with the consequent emergence of a largely propertyless, often exploited, wage-earning class. Such an economic existence, Leo believed, would almost certainly make impossible the full and Christian development of the human personality, due to the fact that it carried with it a separation from the kind of dependable foundation which an organic connection to one's work and one's place enables. Consequently, *ownership* of one's own means of economic livelihood, if at possible, becomes essential. As Allan C. Carlson writes:

*[T]he pope declares the first duty of the state to be the safeguarding of justly held private property. The “great labor question” facing the modern era could not be solved except by*

---

<sup>23</sup> Snow, *Journal of Discourses*, 19: 349.

<sup>24</sup> A good summary of this body of thought can be found in John F. Crosby, *The Selfhood of the Human Person* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1996).

*acknowledging “that private ownership must be held sacred and inviolable.” Most observers see this statement as a rejection of socialism. It is surely that, but it is also much more. For Rerum Novarum urges that the law “should favor ownership, and its policy should be to induce as many as possible of the people to become owners... If working people can be encouraged to look forward to obtaining a share in the land, the consequence will be that the gulf between vast wealth and sheer poverty will be bridged over, and the respective classes will be brought nearer to one another.” In short, the crafting of a society based on small property, particularly in land, becomes the Catholic solution to the modern industrial crisis.<sup>25</sup>*

To follow this recommendation through completely, however, would require a reversal of the enormous gains in overall wealth which capitalist development—and the attendant concentrations of property and resources—had generated over the previous two centuries. Leo did not imagine such a reversal, and recognized that, where property-based solutions of deprivation and alienation were not viable, at the very least a reconsideration of the organic connection with one’s community that a decent wage makes possible was in order: “Arguing that ‘the present age handed over the workers, each along and defenseless, to the inhumanity of employers and the unbridled greed of competitors,’ Leo rejected the wage theory of liberalism that considered wage just which resulted from a free contract between employer and worker.”<sup>26</sup> The answer had to involve union action, pressures upon corporations and government to insure the provision of a “family wage,” the demand for the collective providing of public goods (such as public education and universal health care) that otherwise would be priced outside the reach of many family bread-winners. All these can be included under the general title “distributism.”

Distributist thought has had relatively few defenders in the century and a half since *Rerum Novarum*; instead, it has been mostly marginalized as a sometimes radical, sometimes reactionary, and wholly implausible protectionist, pseudo-agrarian, or even outright Luddite response to the wealth-creating logic of industrial and finance capitalism. The creative destruction of the material constituents of one form of life so as to make room for the next, better one; the mobility of the labor force; the profit motive; the constant reliance upon debt and credit; the omnipresent commercialization of ordinary needs; the two-income family; the economic pressures and rewards attending to the ideal of constant meritocratic advancement—all of it has been essentially embraced in the contemporary world. The dominant alternatives to it has been some form of liberal egalitarianism—which takes to be settled the nature of human market transactions, and seeks to mollify their consequences through individual payments of one sort of another—or some variety of state socialism, wherein the market is controlled and directed towards pre-determined ends. The notion of a decentralized system of property and income redistribution, one which nonetheless takes with great seriousness the individual inputs into that which had been distributed—which is essentially what a personalist economics calls for—has few advocates. Fortunately for us, many of the most outspoken of them are Mormon.

The idea of distributing the opportunity for individual ownership far and wide was central to the

---

<sup>25</sup> Carlson, *Third Ways: How Bulgarian Greens, Swedish Housewives, and Bee-Swilling Englishmen Created Family-Centered Economies—and Why They Disappeared* (Wilmington: ISI Books, 2007), 7-8.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid*, 158.

laws of consecration and stewardship. Joseph Smith, after some discussion with John Finch, a disciple of Robert Owen who visited Nauvoo in September 1843, reiterated that the key difference between the plan outlined in the Laws of the Church of Christ and other communalistic experiments common in America at the time is that, under the United Order, “every one is a steward over his own.”<sup>27</sup> Was this an accurate response? Perhaps it was not under the first attempts to live out the laws of consecration and stewardship in 1831 and 1832, during which time property was expected to be formally deeded to the bishop, who would then work out a “stewardship agreement” with the consecrating member; this did, in fact, “limit tenure on property.”<sup>28</sup> By 1833—likely at least partly as a result of a lawsuit brought by a member named Bates who sought to recover his consecrated properties, but perhaps also as a result of Smith’s own further reflection upon the issue—the matter was clarified: Smith wrote to Edward Partridge, the man called to be bishop and thus responsible for developing stewardships, in a letter dated May 2, 1833, that:

*...concerning inheritances, you are bound by the law of the Lord, to give a deed, securing to him who receives inheritances, his inheritance, for an everlasting inheritance, or in other words, to be his individual property, his private stewardship, and if he is found a transgressor & should be cut off, out of the church, his inheritance is his still and he is delivered over to the buffetings of satan, till the day of redemption, But the property which he consecrated to the poor, for their benefit, & inheritance, & stewardship, he cannot obtain again by the law of the Lord.*<sup>29</sup>

Much can be made, perhaps, of the insertion of specific language about consecrated properties being defined as for the benefit of the poor, as a means employed by Smith and perhaps other church leaders to avoid lawsuits: as Underwood wrote, “because charitable donations were legally safeguarded in a way that communal resource sharing was not...wording was added to similarly clarify that the poor were the specific beneficiaries of consecrations.”<sup>30</sup> But too much can be made of it as well. The real heart of this change was emphasizing that stewardships which church members had responsibility for really *were* their own property. This made the work of determining such stewardships, and the amount of “surplus” or “residue” to be consecrated to the bishop, more complicated, that is certain. A letter from Joseph Smith dated June 25, 1833, reflected on this: “Every man must be his own judge how much he should receive and how much he should suffer to remain in the hands of the Bishop” (speaking here to “those who consecrate more than they need for the support of themselves and their families”). At the same time, though, for the individual member to “say how much he needs and the Bishop obliged to comply with his judgment is to throw Zion into confusion and make a slave of the Bishop.” Thus was a “balance or equilibrium of power” needed—and if one could not be developed, then a higher committee of

---

<sup>27</sup> Smith, *An American Prophet's Record: The Diaries and Journals of Joseph Smith*, Scott H. Faulring, ed. (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1989), 415.

<sup>28</sup> Dean L. May, “The Economics of Zion,” *Sunstone*, August 1990, 19.

<sup>29</sup> *The Joseph Smith Revelations*, 113; see also Lyndon W. Cook, *Joseph Smith and the Law of Consecration* (Provo: Grandin Book Company, 1985), 20-21, 29-30.

<sup>30</sup> Underwood, “A Textual and Historical Analysis,” 120.

church leaders would have to get involved, and so forth.<sup>31</sup> Sorenson observes that this additional level of interaction, imposed upon the original, much more simple, direct, and absolute vision of consecration expressed in the 1831 text, need not be understood as the further bureaucratization of the program; rather, in bringing additional players and responsibilities to bear on any act involving the consecration and distribution of property, it may be understood as the sort of preparatory interactions—guided by “harmony and good will”—that make us capable of being “equal in the bonds of heavenly things...our schooling in equality here is preparatory for a place of equality hereafter.”<sup>32</sup>

One point remains: even if it is accepted that the laws of consecration and stewardship, by providing for a system of economic stewardships that aim to give every working member a dependable economic base to contribute to the community and enjoy full personal dignity, replicate the social justice principle of distributism, what is the case when there is no land to distribute? Leo’s original distributist vision clearly presumed some sort of minimal agrarian foundation upon which the faithful could build, and in fact this was the case for early members of the church. Could the Mormon articulation of this principle operate in non-agrarian, more specialized contexts? John A. Widtsoe, for one, thought so. Picking up on the conflation, from 1833 and onward, of the terms stewardship and “inheritance,” he wrote:

*Each member would receive a sufficient portion, called an “inheritance,” from the common treasury, to enable him to continue his trade, business or profession as he may desire. The farmer would receive land and implements; the tradesman, tools and materials; the merchant, the necessary capital; the professional man, instruments, books, etc. Members who work for others would receive proportionate interests in the enterprises they serve. No one would be without property—all would have an inheritance.*<sup>33</sup>

This idea of stewardships incorporating a distribution of “inheritances,” which could include capital investment, educational supports, vocational apprenticeships, is suggestive of a host of contemporary egalitarian or social democratic policies and proposals, ranging from the Perpetual Education Fund in the church today to various plans to establish a common “stakeholder” fund which provides members of the community with an original purchase upon the organic life of the society in which they live.<sup>34</sup> However one chooses to pursue the idea, however, it points towards one in the direction of the social justice tradition: a response to economic alienation and deprivation which is premised upon neither liberal rights nor Marxist categories, but rather the development of the person through collective action taken to preserve the moral and education

---

<sup>31</sup> Letter cited in Underwood, “A Textual and Historical Analysis,” 124-125; compare with *History of the Church*, 1:364-365.

<sup>32</sup> Sorenson, “Being Equal in Earthly and Heavenly Power,” 109-110.

<sup>33</sup> Widtsoe, *Joseph Smith: Seeker After Truth, Prophet of God* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1957), 193.

<sup>34</sup> There are a great many forms that any such “stakeholder” proposal may take, depending first of all on if one is speaking of a large, national community or a smaller, intentional one. In either case though, Bruce Ackerman and Anne Alstott, *The Stakeholder Society* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), is the place to begin exploring the idea.

worth of laboring, within consensual, on property or in a field of one's own.

### **The Preferential Option for the Poor**

As was mentioned above, events from 1831 through 1833, in both Kirtland and in Missouri, led to some rethinking of how best to express and act upon the principles which Smith originally presented as the Laws of the Church of Christ. This rethinking and revising, which had apparently begun as early as late 1831, was mostly completed from September 1834 through September 1835, which was when the first version of the complete *Doctrine and Covenants* was published.<sup>35</sup> In that published version, the relevant portions of the revelation read as follows:

*If thou lovest me thou shalt serve me and keep all my commandments. And behold, though wilt remember the poor, and consecrate of thy properties for their support, that which thou has to impart unto them, with a covenant and a deed which cannot be broken—and inasmuch as ye impart of your substance unto the poor, ye will do it unto me—and they shall be laid before the bishop of my church and his counselors, two of the elders, or high priests, such as he shall or has appointed and set apart for that purpose.*

*And it shall come to pass, that after they are laid before the bishop of my church, and after that he has received these testimonies concerning the consecration of the properties of my church, that they cannot be taken from the church, agreeable to my commandments, every man shall be made accountable unto me, a steward over his own property, or that which he has received by consecration, inasmuch as is sufficient for himself and family.*

*And again, if there shall be properties in the hands of the church, or any individuals of it, more than is necessary for their support, after this first consecration, which is a residue, to be consecrated unto the bishop, it shall be kept to administer to those who have not, from time to time, that every man who has need may be amply supplied, and receive according to his wants.*

*Therefore, the residue shall be kept in my store house, to administer to the poor and the needy, as shall be appointed by the high council of the church, and the bishop and his council, and for the public benefit of the church, and building houses of worship, and building up of the New Jerusalem, which is hereafter to be revealed, that my covenant people may be gathered in one in that day when I shall come to my temple. And I do this for the salvation of my people.<sup>36</sup>*

What is different here? First and foremost, the line “remember the poor.” Then following it, the purpose of consecration is changed somewhat; now the faithful are now being commanded to impart some portion of their property explicitly to the support of the poor. Of course, this is enfolded into the general Christian understanding that acts of charity towards the poor and the needy is comparable to serving the Lord directly (“inasmuch as ye impart of your substance unto the poor, ye will do it unto me”). This enfolding continues later in the revelation, with the idea of

---

<sup>35</sup> Underwood, “A Textual and Historical Analysis,” 113.

<sup>36</sup> *The Joseph Smith Revelations*, 111.

using the residue of consecrated properties (after stewardships had been assigned to the faithful) to not simply “administer to the poor and the needy,” but also “for the public benefit of the church,” a possibly innocuous addition, but which nonetheless appears to express considerably more expansive language than the more enclosed, borderline apocalyptic tone which Smith adopted originally. It may also be worth noting that the earliest version speaks of members of the community only receiving that which is necessary to their full participation in the work to be done (“every man may receive according as he stands in need”), while the subsequent version seems more aware of the pluralism inherent in the collective desires of the faithful, stating that every man will be “amply supplied” and will “receive according to his wants.” (The language of “just wants,” as contained in the 1832 revelation of D&C 82, is not present in this formulation.)

There are, of course, a multitude of ways to read these changes, some of which have already been alluded to (legal challenges to the church, etc.), others of which I have avoided discussing because of my desire to focus on the ideas expressed by the Laws of the Church of Christ, and not accounts of their historical implementation (which by and large went very poorly). But I would like to concentrate on that first, central change: remembering the poor.

Probably no other task occupied more of Smith’s time during the years 1831-1833 than his New Translation of the Bible. The bulk of the work on that project was essentially finished by July of 1833, by which time Smith had read back through, and had frequently elaborated at great length upon, numerous scriptural stories and passages. But what I wonder might not be most relevant here was not the changes he made to the Biblical text, but what he got out of that re-reading. As is well known, one of the most common themes found in the Bible, both the Old and New Testament, is the care of the poor. “Remember the poor” is a direct quotation of Galatians 2:10, and the call to remember the poor, to rescue them from oppression, to provide relief for their suffering, is echoed in literally hundreds of verses through the Bible.<sup>37</sup> To think about the needs of those who go without is an arguably related, but still significantly different task than thinking about the needs of the faithful who have accepted baptism and are committed (at least ideally) to the principle of consecration within a closely defined, mutually supportive community; to think about “the poor” as a category of persons obliges the boundaries of the relevant “community” to be reconsidered, and broadened.

Which is, perhaps not coincidentally, something else that had changed in Smith’s thinking; by 1833, he was speaking not just of a New Jerusalem but of “stakes” of Zion, Zion being no longer simply a promised location in Missouri but an elastic concept that would, while still centered in a specific locale, extend and include a far greater range of particular congregations than the original 1831 revelation could reasonably be read to accommodate. I would suggest that Smith’s expanding vision of Zion prompted him, along with the aforementioned intense engagement with the repetitive calls to serve the poor contained throughout the Bible, to re-orient the abiding goal of what became D&C 42 of the D&C: to make it an outline of an economic order that would conscript all the faithful into a joint, charitable project, aimed at providing succor to the poor in

---

<sup>37</sup> See Ron Sider, *Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger: Moving From Affluence to Generosity* (New York: Thomas Nelson, 2005) and S. Michael Wilcox, *What the Scriptures Teach Us About Prosperity* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2010), for just a beginning to the many expressions of this central theme throughout the scriptures.

general as well as building up the church's infrastructure. The expanded—perhaps slightly less intensely communal, perhaps slightly more open to individual activity and variation—presumptions behind the kind of community which these verses came to be understood to refer to hints at larger aims for consecration than purely devotional purposes.

This strikes me as a promising way to appropriate the message of “the laws of the Church of Christ” for our present moment. As a far-flung “community” of believers, living in the midst of diverse yet (thanks to globalization) mostly market-related economic structures, and surrounded in most countries by huge divides between the rich and the poor, members of the Mormon church today have no truly likely, practical options available to them in terms of socio-economic consecration, enclosure, and community-building. The era of the United Order as it came to be experimented with during the Utah period is clearly past, to say nothing of what the Saints attempted in 1831-1833. However, if we think about becoming a covenant people in terms forming, through our stakes (including primarily our fellow members, but also reaching out to all those who live within stake jurisdictions) local associations and cooperatives that aim to build up public resources and serve the poor, we would be following the path which, upon my reading, captures the heart of what Smith came to insist, through the finalized version of these verses, the Lord wanted his people to do. Of course, further revelations may, in time, change or re-orient our thinking about community and the power of the church to become fully unified despite the immense growth and change that has been experience sense Smith's day; and moreover, such thinking obviously doesn't address how we ought to act as citizens in our respective polities to achieve similar ends, or at least make the achievement of said ends more likely. But I am doubtful that section 42—which even as it has come down to us through revisions is I think overwhelmingly shaped by political-theological position which rejects existing authority and anticipates the construction of something new to receive the coming of the Lord—can be taken to provide such specific socio-economic guidance anyway. The point of investigating the history and language of the revelation closely is, rather, to bring us around to a general perspective (one that, I would argue at least, tends towards the local, the communal, the humble, and the egalitarian). What we do with that perspective is a different question entirely from the one which the revelation was originally presented as answering.