Section 51

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, New York, Saints settle on some of his 759 acres in Thompson. 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 Copley returned to his former faith, however, and rescinded his offer for the gathering Saints to settle on his land.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

---


3 Newel and Joseph Knight sources.
about Bishop Partridge obtaining a deed to Copley’s land were long since irrelevant and were omitted from the published version.⁴

The Saints who had gathered on Copley’s property were told by the Lord to gather to Missouri instead (section 54). Bishop Partridge implemented 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 and 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.⁶ 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 the Titus Billings example below.) 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

---


⁶ Painesville, Ohio Telegraph April 26, 1833, printed in Cook, 135.
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.”


Titus Billings consecration deed.
Edward Partridge consecration deed.