

Section 134

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints has been dubbed “quintessentially American,” but in the beginning it struck many people as anything but that. Direct revelations to a prophet—in which Christ reserved to himself ultimate executive, legislative, and judicial power—seemed undemocratic to the Saints’ neighbors.¹ Moreover, controversial statements made in a Church newspaper by editor William Phelps demanded that the Church clarify its position relative to slavery.²

A general assembly of priesthood leaders convened in Kirtland, Ohio, on August 17, 1835, to listen to Oliver Cowdery and Sidney Rigdon present the Doctrine and Covenants for their approval. Oliver introduced the book and its contents to the assembled councils, after which the priesthood leaders unanimously testified of their satisfaction with the work. Then Oliver Cowdery read section 134, “Of Governments

¹ Steven C. Harper, “Dictated by Christ: Joseph Smith and the Politics of Revelation,” *Journal of the Early Republic* 26 (Summer 2006): 275–304.

² See “Free People of Color,” and his statement published later in the same issue, wherein he noted approvingly that much was being done “towards abolishing slavery,” *The Evening and the Morning Star* 2, no. 14 [July 1833]: 109, 111. The Church’s political *Northern Times* newspaper printed on October 9, 1835, that the Church was “opposed to abolition, and whatever is calculated to disturb the peace and harmony of our Constitution and Country” (see “Abolition,” *Northern Times* 1:28 [9 October 1835]). Joseph’s views on race and blacks changed during his lifetime. In 1836 Joseph Smith criticized the abolition movement and defended slavery as biblical (*Latter Day Saints Messenger and Advocate* 2:7 [April 1836]: 289–91. Also see Warren Parrish, “For the Messenger and Advocate,” *Latter Day Saints’ Messenger and Advocate* 2, no. 7 (April 1836): 295–96, and “The Abolitionists,” *Latter Day Saints’ Messenger and Advocate* 2, no. 7 (April 1836): 299–301.

and Laws in General,” which may have been primarily, if not exclusively, the product of his mind and pen. The assembly “accepted and adopted” it, too, for inclusion, and thus section 134, though not a revelation, became canonized as part of the Doctrine and Covenants.³

Section 134 mixes republican principles of constitutional government and individual liberties, emphatically including the right of religious conscience, with the Church’s concern for its ecclesiastical rights. Nothing in it was new or objectionable to Joseph. It informs a misled and sometimes hostile public that the Church is in harmony with mainstream American values at the time of its publication. It distances the Church from parties or causes other than sharing the gospel.

Joseph was in Michigan when the general assembly made these decisions. He did not author section 134, but he endorsed it in April 1836.⁴ The principles in section 134 continue to guide the Church’s actions regarding political questions and controversies. The principles in verses 4–6 are more tersely expressed in Articles of Faith 11 and 12. While the Church took a pragmatic position relative to slavery in section 134, the Lord declared the doctrine of individual agency as the reason for his repudiation of slavery in section 101:77–79.

³ Historical Introduction, “[Appendix 4: Declaration on Government and Law, circa August 1835 \[D&C 134\]](#),” 252, *The Joseph Smith Papers*, accessed December 8, 2020.

⁴ *Messenger and Advocate*, 2:239–41.