

# Hard Questions in Church History

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## Law of Consecration—Misunderstood

### Timeline of the Law of Consecration

The Lord’s timing is once again miraculous. The Lord reveals the principles of the Law of Consecration line upon line to prepare the Saints to receive this law. It is given—to build Zion—as the law of the celestial kingdom. The details of our history show God’s omnipotent wisdom and care in the details of the restoration.

October 1830	Four Missionaries, sent to “the borders of the Lamanites” (Missouri), stop to preach in Kirtland, Ohio; baptize 127 people, many of whom had belonged to a group of Reformers (also known as Campbellites).
December 1830	The Lord reveals 46 times more information on Enoch and Zion in the JST than in Genesis 5. Zion is “of one heart and one mind,” dwelling “in righteousness” and having “no poor among them” (Moses 7:18). Upon completing Moses 8, God temporarily halted the translation of Genesis: “It is not expedient in me that ye should translate any more until ye shall go to the Ohio” (D&C 37:1). Emma is sick and for much of the month.
January 2, 1831	The Lord told Joseph, “I gave unto you the commandment that ye should go to the Ohio; and there I will give unto you my law” (D&C 38:32). Emma—still weakened from the December illness and five to six months pregnant with twins—travels in a sleigh with Joseph, Sidney Rigdon, and Edward Partridge (and their belongings) for a month-long journey to Ohio.
February 1, 1831	Joseph Smith’s group arrive in Kirtland and stop the sleigh at the Gilbert Whitney Store. Joseph recognizes Newel K. Whitney from a vision and introduces himself: “You have prayed me here, now what do you want of me?” While transferring their belongings from sleigh to wagon to a home, the wagon overturns and Emma falls.
February 4, 1831	Joseph receives revelation known as D&C 41. Edward Partridge called to be a “bishop unto the church” (D&C 41:9). Bishops will have a large role directing the Law of Consecration.
February 9, 1831	Twelve elders present when Joseph Smith receives “The Laws of the Church of Christ” (now known as D&C 42). The “Law” (or Law of Consecration) is explained: “Thou wilt remember the poor, and consecrate of their properties for their support that which thou hast to impart unto them” (D&C 42:30). It is the law of the celestial kingdom (D&C 105:5); D&C 78:7 explains that no one will receive an inheritance in Zion unless they live this Law ( <a href="http://www.josephsmithpapers.org">www.josephsmithpapers.org</a> , "Revelation, 9 February 1831 [D&C 42:1–72]," p. [1]).
1831-1838	Saints in Missouri and Ohio live the Law of Consecration in various forms—some more, some less.
1832-1834	The United Firm (Joseph Smith Jr., Sidney Rigdon, Newel K. Whitney) went to Missouri to organize “the Church’s mercantile and publishing endeavors,” D&C 78 heading). D&C 82:11 adds Bishop Edward Partridge, Sidney Gilbert, John Whitmer, Oliver Cowdery, W.W. Phelps, and Martin Harris with stewardships to assist the funding members’ needs.
Apr 10-23, 1834	Thirteen days after the United Firm is “dissolved,” the United Order is reorganized (D&C 104, heading).
March 1836	Through consecrated efforts, the Kirtland Temple is built, dedicated, and used as a sacred meetinghouse (initiatory of washings and anointings performed starting in January).

July 8, 1838	Tithing means all free-will offerings or contributions to the Church. Joseph Smith is told in a revelation, “I require all their surplus property . . . this shall be the beginning of the tithing of my people. And after that, those who have thus been tithed shall pay one-tenth of all their interest annually; and this shall be a standing law unto them forever” (D&C 119:1, 3-4). “Surplus property” includes especially property needed to be left behind in Kirtland when the main body of the Saints moved to western Missouri.
1841-1845	Through consecrated efforts, the Nauvoo Temple is built. The law of consecration is a culminating part of the Endowment given in the Temple (see “Consecration,” Encyclopedia of Mormonism 1:312-15).
1844	Joseph records: “I preached on the stand about one hour on the 2nd chapter of Acts, designing to show the folly of common stock [holding property in common]. In Nauvoo everyone is steward over his own” (Smith, History of the Church, 6:37-38).
1860s	Church cooperatives are established in Latter-day Saint settlements in Utah.
1874-1883	United Order is established in Orderville and Brigham City, Utah; remnants of the order still evident in 1904.
1917	Counterfeits of the Law of Consecration arise without agency.
April 1974	President Spencer W. Kimball says, “[Give] much more—ten times more where we are in a position to do it” (General Conference, April 1974).
1975, 77, 79	President Marion G. Romney speaks on the Law of Consecration in General Conference.
April 10, 1996	President Gordon B. Hinckley says, “The law of sacrifice and the law of consecration have not been done away with and are still in effect” (Teachings of Gordon B. Hinckley, 639).
April 2002	Elder Neal A. Maxwell taught, “Many ignore consecration because it seems too abstract or too daunting. The conscientious among us, however, experience divine discontent” (General Conference, April 2002).

### Scriptural Explanation for the Law of Consecration

In December 1830, while translating the Book of Genesis for the New Translation (JST), Joseph Smith receives over four-and-a-half-thousand words (4,656) across three chapters of new scripture that elaborate on the fewer than one-hundred words about Enoch in KJV Genesis. God restores to Joseph three chapters of revelation on how to build a Zion society. In these chapters, the Prophet Joseph learns for the first time of Enoch’s city of holiness and the Lord’s definition of Zion—“The Lord called his people ZION, because they were of one heart and one mind, and dwelt in righteousness; and there was no poor among them” (Moses 7:18). Then, as soon as that part of the Bible is translated, the Lord stops the translation for a few weeks until Joseph and Emma move to Ohio.

Within nine days of Joseph’s arrival in Ohio, God reveals the Law of Consecration. Many of the new converts are prepared to receive it through the preparatory work of Sidney Rigdon and “The Family.”

### Opposition to American History

The Law of Consecration is counter-cultural in Jacksonian America. It is anti-private ownership. Its purpose is to cooperate, not to compete, and to look to the poor, relieve suffering, and be one. It requires a belief that God is the creator of the earth and that we are His stewards to take care of it. We are agents in that stewardship and are accountable to Him. To implement the Law of Consecration, the Lord asks us to leave

behind the covetous, individualistic world. Our worldly currency often gets in the way of spiritual treasures. Gain as an end in itself is wrong. The Law of Consecration is founded on loving God and loving our neighbors.

### God's Preparation

On January 2, 1831, when God sends the Prophet Joseph and Emma to Ohio, the converts have grown to over 200. Three months before, when the Lord had called Oliver Cowdery to serve a mission, the same revelation mentioned a future location of Zion, “you shall go unto the Lamanites and preach my gospel unto them . . . behold, I say unto you that it is not revealed, and no man knoweth where the city Zion shall be built, but it shall be given hereafter. Behold, I say unto you that it shall be among the Lamanites” (D&C 28:8-9).

As part of the Lord's preparation for the restoration of Zion, those same missionaries were inspired to stop and preach the restoration of the gospel of Jesus Christ in Kirtland, Ohio. As part of the required preparations for the Lord's Second Coming, His people must live the Law of Consecration. God had prepared hundreds of sincere seekers near Kirtland, Ohio to receive His higher law—the Law of Consecration. Sidney Rigdon had played an important part in that preparation. As discussed earlier, Sidney led his congregation into a communal experiment, known as “the Family.” He tried to establish it after the New Testament church practice described in Acts 2:44. Yet, many of the members soon distinguish the difference between their efforts and the Lord's Law of Consecration (D&C 42). The Lord's plan had no “common stock” as practiced by “the family” on the Morleys' Farm.

By February 1, 1831 when Joseph Smith arrives in Kirtland, he does not realize what lay in store. The prophet had already learned to trust the Lord and His timing. The Lord had prepared the prophet and a people to receive the Law of Consecration in the following ways:

- While working on the Bible translation in December of 1830, Joseph receives revelations about the Zion society established by the people of Enoch (Moses 6-7).
- From 1830-1831, many of the newly converted Ohio Saints are open to a communitarian lifestyle.
- On February 4, 1831, just five days before receiving “The Law,” the Lord calls the first Bishop, Edward Partridge (D&C 41:9).
- On February 9, Joseph receives a revelation that reveals “The Law” or the law of Consecration (D&C 42).

The Lord's miraculous timing is right—for “a religion that does not require the sacrifice of all things never has power sufficient to produce the faith necessary [to lead] unto life and salvation” (Lectures on Faith, 1834).

### “The Law” (D&C 42, February 9, 1831)

Before the Law of Consecration could be revealed, God had to organize the leadership to carry it out. Bishop Edward Partridge's “heart was pure . . . like unto Nathanael of old, in whom there is no guile” (D&C 41:11). The Lord had forewarned Joseph, “I gave unto you the commandment that ye should go to the Ohio; and there I will give unto you my law; and there you shall be endowed with power from on high” (D&C 38:32). The Lord reveals several other scriptures to prepare and explain “the Law” (D&C 29:34; 41:3-5, 10; 42:2, 28, 52; 43:2-5, 8-9; etc.). Initially, the Saints live the Law by following D&C 42:55: “If thou

obtainest more than that which would be for thy support, thou shalt give it into my storehouse, that all things may be done according to that which I have said.”

From 1831 until his death in 1840, Edward Partridge serves as a Bishop and, to different degrees, implements the Law of Consecration. From 1831 to 1833, he oversees the Law in Jackson County, Missouri. He and his wife Lydia Partridge are the first Latter-day Saints to consecrate their all to the Lord. As other Saints follow suit, Bishop Partridge does not press them to give a certain amount of goods or funds. The definition of “all” is between the Lord and individual members. The Prophet Joseph wrote:

A man is bound by the law of the Church, to consecrate to the Bishop before he can be considered a legal heir to the kingdom of Zion, and this, too, without constraint, and unless he does this, he cannot be acknowledged before the Lord on the Church Book [see D&C 85]. . . . 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 (JosephSmithPapers.org, Letter to Church Leaders in Jackson County, Missouri, 25 June 1833, p.2).

In July 1838, Joseph asks:

O Lord! Show unto thy servants how much thou requirest of the properties of thy people for a tithing.

Answer. Verily thus saith the Lord, I require all their surplus property (D&C 119 heading and verse 1.)

Joseph and you and I will all be held accountable in heaven. God knows who are covenant-breakers. Everyone who has been endowed has made the covenant to live the Law of Consecration.

### Missouri 1831-1838

The Saints who gather in Jackson County, Missouri seek to establish a Zion society. They are asked to consecrate their goods to the Lord. Titus Billings writes a list of the items he is willing to consecrate, which includes bedding, extra clothing, farming utensils, cow, calf, and furniture as well as funds for the purpose of purchasing land. Bishop Edward Partridge gives Titus Billings a stewardship over each of the consecrated items (see Geddes, *The United Order Among the Mormons* [NYC: Columbia Univ, 1924], 50).

When W.W. Phelps is given a stewardship over the Church’s printing establishment, he develops a possessive sense of personal ownership that the Prophet discourages. Joseph writes to W.W. Phelps,

You say “my press, my types &c.” W[h]ere our brethren ask, did you get them & how came they to be “yours”? No hardness, but a caution, for you know that it is We, not I, and all things are the Lord’s, and he opened the hearts of his Church to furnish these things, or we should not have been privileged with using them (Dean C. Jessee, ed., *The Personal Writings of Joseph Smith* [Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1984], 338-339).

The incident with W.W. Phelps reminds me of a day in 2017 when two apostles from The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints visited the headquarters of Google, where my son worked. In a private meeting for employees who were members of our faith, Elder Bednar clarified: “You may receive your pay check from Google, but never forget that you work for the Lord.”

### Consecration

The word “consecration” means “to make sacred.” It has nothing to do with quantity. Consecration has everything to do with giving a sacred purpose—our time, talents, work, and money. Consecration is about our attitude to sacrifice what God asks. Consecration is not self-serving materialism, philanthropy, socialism, or communism. Instead, as mortals, we are stewards of God’s riches that we are to develop and share. Elder Neal A. Maxwell taught, “Consecration is giving all we have for all the Father has. What an exchange rate!” (Elder Neal A. Maxwell, Conference Report, April 2002). What are the riches of eternity compared to a bike, car, or three-bedroom duplex?

Consecration will change work into holiness. In his description of the Law of Consecration, Steven Harper synthesizes:

The law of consecration found in the Doctrine and Covenants can be envisioned as a three-legged stool, where the legs are agency, stewardship, and accountability. Agency is the power we have to act independently on the law, regardless of what anyone else thinks, says, or does. Once we know the law, we can keep or reject it, procrastinate or obey, ignore or observe, offer all or keep back part. No one will ever be forced to comply with the law of consecration.

I have expanded on Harper’s ideas to include the following:

1. Agency. Power to act in obedience or disobedience to the law. We have power to act independently of God’s will whether it be for good or evil (D&C 104:17).
2. Stewardship. Everything on earth and in the heavens belongs to our Creator Lord and God. What he has given to us is what we have to develop and act upon (D&C 38:17; 42:53; 104:11-14).
3. Esteem All Equally. “Appoint unto this people their portions, every man equal according to his family, according to his circumstances and his wants and needs” (D&C 51:3, 9; 38:24-27; 70:14; 78:6; 82:17).
4. Accountability to God. In the future, we will report our stewardship to God (D&C 70:4; 72:3; 78:22; 101:78; 104:13-18). Our bodies, minds, and spirits are also keeping track and of our responsibility and accountability.

### Table 1: Revelations about the Law of Consecration / United Order / Zion

The Law of Consecration is one of the most important principles to have been restored. It is mentioned in at least seventeen canonized revelations. Additionally, in 1842, Joseph incorporated it into the temple endowment. The following chart, adapted from Church History in the Fulness of Times, lists the sections that include details about the Law of Consecration (Church Educational System [Salt Lake City: The Church, 1989], 98).

Date	Where Received	Where Recorded	Content
Feb 4, 1831	Kirtland, OH	D&C 41:9	Edwards Partridge appointed Bishop
Feb 9, 1831	Kirtland, OH	D&C 42:29-34	Law of Consecration explained
Feb 1831	Kirtland, OH	D&C 44:6	Saints to administer to the poor
Mar 7, 1831	Kirtland, OH	D&C 45:64-75	Call to gather to Zion—New Jerusalem
Mar 1831	Kirtland, OH	D&C 48	Ohio Saints save money for inheritance in Zion

May 1831	Thompson, OH	D&C 51:3	Bishop to appoint stewardships according to family size and needs; Storehouse established
Jun 1831	Kirtland, OH	D&C 56:16-20	Rich and poor commanded to repent
Jul 20, 1831	Jackson Co, MO	D&C 57	Missouri appointed and consecrated as Zion
Aug 1, 1831	Jackson Co, MO	D&C 58:1-9, 50-57	Zion will be established after tribulation; lay foundation by purchasing lands
Dec 4, 1831	Kirtland, OH	D&C 70:1-8	Elders named stewards over printing revelations; surpluses consecrated to the Church
Mar 1832	Hiram, OH	D&C 78	Establish independent storehouses in Zion
Apr 26, 1832	Jackson Co, MO	D&C 82:11	United Order established in Zion and Kirtland
Apr 30, 1832	Jackson Co, MO	D&C 83	Widows and orphans provided for by consecration of storehouse
Nov 27, 1832	Kirtland, OH	D&C 85	To receive an inheritance in Zion, must be willing to live the Law of Consecration
Aug 2, 1833	Kirtland, OH	D&C 97:10-21	House in Jackson County commanded; Zion is pure in heart
Apr 23, 1834	Kirtland, OH	D&C 104:47-66	Literary Firm dissolved in Missouri
Jun 22, 1834	Kirtland, OH	D&C 105	Redemption of Zion postponed until saints prepared.

### Misunderstandings about the Law of Consecration

Some of the hard questions on the Law of Consecration may actually be misunderstandings. Saints who have been endowed in a temple have covenanted to live the Law of Consecration, yet it remains for us to understand the law. To ignore the Law of Consecration is to disobey it. We have been commanded repeatedly to be anxiously engaged in bringing to pass much righteousness. We decide how much love, money, and time to give to God. The method doesn't matter—the Lord guides all who inquire. He will enlighten you as to what more can be consecrated.

Here are a few common misunderstandings:

1. ***The Law of Consecration was rescinded or revoked.*** Some have interpreted certain verses, such as D&C 58:28-32 and D&C 119, to support their conclusion that the law has been rescinded. By taking a closer look at these sections though, the verses only tell of disbanding the Literary Firm, not stopping the Law of Consecration. The law has been implemented differently as circumstances and needs have changed since the 1830s but it is still the law God asks His people to live.
2. ***The Law of Consecration applies only to the land of Missouri.*** Some think the Law of Consecration will return when Latter-day Saints return to inhabit Zion in Missouri. The Lord taught in D&C 105:3, 5, 13, “They have not learned to be obedient to the things which I required at their hands, but are full of all manner of evil, and do not impart of their substance, as becometh saints, to the poor and afflicted among them . . . And Zion cannot be built up unless

it is by the principles of the law of the celestial kingdom . . . Therefore it is expedient in me that mine elders should wait for a little season, for the redemption of Zion.”

3. ***It is my stuff, I earned it.*** King Benjamin in the Book of Mormon reminds all humanity, “Are we not all beggars? . . . impart of your substance one to another” (Mosiah 4:19, 21). We all have been given much. We have truly “earned” little of it. Similarly, Jesus taught during his ministry, “Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also” (Matt 6:21; Luke 12:34; 3 Ne 13:21). The Law of Consecration is not about giving away all of our “stuff” but much more profoundly it embraces the consecration of our means, time, and talents to the Lord. It is as much principle about everyone working as it is about receiving (Deut 8:16-20; Ps 24; Luke 12:16-21).
4. ***We will live the Law of Consecration when we are asked.*** Endowed Latter-day Saints have not only been asked but have covenanted to live the Law of Consecration. It is no longer carried out as it was in the 1830s but the Saints have been asked to live God’s law since D&C 42 was revealed.
5. ***Why don’t Church leaders require members to live the Law of Consecration?*** Actually, the Law of Consecration has always been voluntary. Every person can treat their property, time, work, and callings as a stewardship and dedicated their efforts to God.
6. ***Tithing is a lower law.*** The Law of Consecration is the higher law. They are both laws from God that require the same submissive willingness to serve and worship God however He asks.
7. ***The Law of Consecration will only work in agricultural communities.*** Perhaps the pioneer settlements like Orderville, Utah were designed that way, but the law is not restricted to agricultural communities. All Saints can approach life as stewards of God’s blessing to share and bless the world.
8. ***The Law of Consecration is about giving to the poor.*** Actually, the Law of Consecration is more about working for and dedicating and giving all to the Lord than it is about just giving to the poor.

### Sources

JosephSmithPapers.org. Joseph Smith, History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 7 vols., 1844 (Reprint, Salt Lake City, UT: Deseret Book, 1980), ed. introduction and notes by B. H. Roberts). Andrew H. Hedges, The Doctrine and Covenants: Revelations in Context (Provo, UT: BYU RSC, 2008), Steven Harper, “All Things are the Lord’s”: The Law of Consecration in the Doctrine and Covenants. Hugh Nibley, Approaching Zion (Salt Lake City, UT: Deseret Book, 1989). Neal A. Maxwell, “Consecrate thy Performance,” Ensign, May 2002. D. Todd Christofferson, “Reflections on a Consecrated Life,” Ensign, November 2010. President Marion G. Romney, “Church Welfare—Some Fundamentals,” Ensign, November 1973. Gordon B. Hinckley, Teachings of Gordon B. Hinckley (Salt Lake City, UT: Deseret Book, 1997). Robert Richardson, Memoirs of Alexander Campbell (Philadelphia, PA: J. B. Lippincott, 1870). Karl Ricks Anderson, Joseph Smith’s Kirtland: Eyewitness Accounts (Salt Lake City, UT: Deseret Book, 1989). Dean C. Jessee, ed., The Personal Writings of Joseph Smith (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1984). James B. Allen and Glen M. Leonard, The Story of the Latter-day Saints, 2nd ed., rev. and enl. (Salt Lake City, UT: Deseret Book, 1976). Frank W. Hirschi and Karl Ricks Anderson, “Consecration,” in Daniel Ludlow, ed., Encyclopedia of Mormonism (New York: Macmillan, 1992), 1:312-15.