"Thou Wilt Remember the Poor": Social Justice and a Radical Reading of ‘The Law of the Church of Christ’ (D&C 42)

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The structure of my basic argument hinges upon explicating several principles that are important to the social justice teachings of the Catholic and Reformed Christian traditions. These principles include 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 rearranged text “The Laws of the Church of Christ,” may be understood as providing normative support for all of these principles. In short, I believe Doctrine and Covenants 42 should be read as a social justice document, one supportive of economic approaches conducive to these aims.

It is of course rather radical, not to mention audacious, to take a text composed nearly 170 years ago by Joseph Smith (and possibly some others), produced through a process that those disposed to take the Doctrines and Covenants seriously would assume to have involved some sort of revealed language or guidance from God, and subject it to a reading that wrests support from a political, economic, and religious platform about which Smith himself almost certainly knew nothing 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 to live the laws of consecration and stewardship is vital to understanding it. This means looking closely at the practices and explanations that arose in response to both the Laws of the Church of Christ (in both its 1831 original and its 1835 revised versions) in Ohio and Missouri, as well as at the sermons preached and the policies implemented by church leaders regarding the establishment of a “United Order of Enoch” in Utah during the 1870s. But this vital historical record is not, I think, the sole or deciding contribution to readers’ understanding of the revelation. Some acts of hermeneutical interpretation aim to recover an objective meaning of the text; my interpretation aims to examine the language of the text under consideration so as to express and speculate about its possible applications. That those possibilities are ones that I am, personally and politically, sympathetic to does not undermine the validity of my suggestions. The readers’ own prejudices are inseparably a part of what they bring to any reading, and sometimes it is those prejudices that make possible some speculative approach that might otherwise never have been attempted.

To be fair, some have argued that, as the fundamental message of any text that has been collectively accepted as “scripture” by the membership of the church is dependent upon the guidance of “the living oracles” of the church, the only form of interpretation with any kind of legitimacy would be one that turns to the writings of the presently sustained prophets and apostles and that attempts to identify “the inchoate normative logic” of the “practices and institutions” they currently direct. Doing so in connection with the laws of stewardship and consecration arguably suggests a strong denial of the appropriateness of approaching section 42 by way of a social justice reading. For example, church leaders of both the present and the recent (as opposed to nineteenth-century) past have given numerous and often vehement defenses of free market economics and condemnations of organized labor and welfare policies. Moreover, some of those closer to the original reception of the Laws of the Church of Christ have emphatically denied the notion that the communitarianism suggested by the revelation was a form of “Socialism” or “French Communism.” It is worth noting, however, that when these early church leaders disavowed any connection between such systems and the laws in question, they were mostly referring to the 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 worth noting is that the interpretation of the early church’s experiments with communitarian economics that focused fiercely upon distinguishing such practices from twentieth-century state socialism and communism was likely driven far more by the ideologically shaping global political realities that confronted leaders like J. Reuben Clark and Ezra Taft Benson than by a thorough knowledge of the actual history of those experiments. 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.

But even given all these caveats, 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, but I am not even seeking to develop a reading of the text that 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. I would argue that such open-ended speculation, when confronted with as influential and as ambiguous a text as the Laws of the Church of Christ, particularly the principles of consecration and stewardship first articulated therein, is the only reasonable response. Two Latter-day Saint 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 that, among other things, “condemn the ostentatious consumption of the rich and encourage Saints to care for the poor”—make it incumbent upon members “to struggle with the dilemma of economic justice.” These scholars were following the argument made by church leaders 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.” Writing this essay is an act of adding my voice in support of one additional, frequently beleaguered possible route toward the achievement of that goal.

Principles of social justice
While the teachings on social and economic justice within the Catholic and Reformed Christian traditions are enormously broad and multifaceted, such teachings can be fairly accurately summarized through the following three interlocking moral demands.

1. **Solidarity and equality.** Within social justice thought, the equal dignity and respect of persons are seen as dependent upon, and a function of, tightly bound and mutually supporting communities who share two overarching aims. The first is 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 the second is maintaining the integrity and balance of the community that its members identify with, thereby enabling the degree of trust and solidarity that supporting and sacrificing on behalf of one another require.

2. **Personalism and distributism.** Any true esteem of one’s fellow person is inseparable from a prior granting to him or her the ability to freely labor and develop in a mutually beneficial and personally satisfying vocation. Consequently, as important as guaranteed rights to individual persons are, an economic system that (to a degree) levels and distributes property and work opportunities through stewardships, apprenticeships, and the like is also essential to the maintenance of the common good.

3. **Option (or “preference”) for the poor.** This final moral demand, unlike the prior ones, does not partake of an argument about forms of social organization; hence, the demand is not as directly relevant to what may be
drawn from Smith’s writings and the tradition of consecration and stewardship. But that does not minimize its enormous moral importance as 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 must be constant. The poor, weak, disadvantaged, and suffering will always have a prior moral claim on the conscience of financially stable members of the church, and all decisions should be made with the standpoint of keeping in mind the needs of the powerless and weak.

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 least suggestive of, these basic principles.

Solidarity and equality

The textual linking of solidarity and equality in the revelations composed by Joseph Smith begins 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 of Peter Whitmer Sr. in Fayette, New York. That revelation, which eventually became Doctrine and Covenants 38, set the stage for subsequent egalitarian thinking among early members by issuing at least two crucial edicts. First, the whole body of the church was to relocate to Ohio—a prospect that prompted “divisions among the congregation” and required “great sacrifices of property”—where, the Lord declared, “I will give unto you my law” (D&C 38:32). Second, 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 among members of the church: “Let every man esteem his brother as himself. . . . If ye are not one ye are not mine” (vv. 25, 27). The poor members of the congregation were to be assisted in making this journey, and all members, regardless of their calling in the church, 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” (vv. 38–42).

A month later, Smith and others had made the move to Ohio. To whatever degree the state of a prophet’s mind is important to understanding the inspired texts that such individuals create, Smith was likely influenced at this time by other events. He had 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). He was also aware of the “Family,” a communalistic order of Christians attempting to live according to the precepts of Acts 2:44–45 (a passage that describes early Christians living in close proximity to each other and having “all things common”), centered around the farm of Isaac Morley outside Kirtland. They practiced a rough communism of all possessions, and the experiment exercised significant influence over both the members of and those sympathetic to the young LDS Church in that part of Ohio. These and other matters are likely to have complemented Smith’s thinking as he petitioned the Lord on February 9, 1831, for direction in how to organize the faithful Latter day Saints. 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. He 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.

In this early version of the revelation, there is an awareness of the poor—“him that hath not,” “the poor and needy,” and so forth—that is very much in line with the statements composed by Smith earlier in New York (in what is now section 38). However, the primary focus of this passage is clearly the building up of a self-sufficient, separate, and simple devotional—or what has come to be called an "intentional"—community. The goal is to create a covenant people that will be gathered to the Lord’s temple and receive salvation, a people that will give all that they have to the achievement of this end and consider this giving an all or nothing proposition, one that is suggestive of the parable of the ten virgins. If a member disobeys the commandments or otherwise is cast out for unrighteousness, all that has been devoted to the community stays with the community, and any opportunity for the individual 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.” In other words, a degree of sacrifice, consecration, and redistribution was commanded of the Saints, not to achieve a perfect economic equality among 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 members of the church community would consecrate their property to the whole church, accept the rule of recognizing the proper limits of their own and their family’s needs and concerns, content themselves with life within those circumscribed limits defined by the stewardship they were assigned, and donate whatever surplus came from their individual labors and genius to the whole once again. The particular focus on dignity, respect, mutual support, and coexistence is made even clearer in the specific phrasing of a call for equality among the Saints in a revelation that Smith dictated a month later. In a wideranging 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, wherefore 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 it may entail, is one that turns on the impossible quest to achieve perfect equality among all members of a society. That this flawed understanding has taken root so broadly is perhaps understandable since the legacy of totalitarian governments and fanatical cults using equality as a club to oppress and destroy individual differences is so widespread. 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, as well as—perhaps surprisingly—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 alienation—a feeling of separateness
from one's own work and one's own fellow man. Although capitalism in its fullest modern sense was only still emerging on the American frontier in the early 1830s, I would argue that it was, in essence, this problem of alienation that Smith aimed to resolve. The community of Saints would support one another, "live together in love" (D&C 42:45), and treat others as equals and with respect (which included paying for whatever one received from another as a service or an exchange, v. 54). Thus none would have the kind of social power over another that uncurcumscribed economic expansion and consumption unfortunately makes possible. Instead, social power would be shared, allowing individual members of the Latter day Saint community with their mutually determined stewardships (the bishop to whom members' properties would be consecrated, as well as the whole body of the church) to be sources of mutual counsel and consent. The end result would be a system that granted both personal dignity and an equality in "social status . . . , the esteem, deference or prestige connected with one's position in the social order."

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 among the Saints. 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 Latterday 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." You 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 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.

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 nineteenth century. In social justice terms, this rhetorical approach demonstrates the belief that earthly solidarity and equality make possible the greater extension of charity and Christian love. George Q. Cannon expressed it thus, reflecting in 1882 on the church's history of experiments with the principles of stewardship and consecration:

Watch the effect of wealth . . . Communities get wealthy and they begin to think about their wealth. Where their treasure is there is their heart also. Especially is this the case if they are divided into classes . . . If we are nearly alike temporally we feel alike. In this has consisted much of our strength in the past. We were not divided into classes, with interests diverse one from another . . . The increase of wealth, therefore, and the consequent increase of fashions are more to be dreaded than hostile legislation.

The emergence of classes—of the different interests that characterize those who are greatly diverse in relative amounts of personal wealth—is something the principles of stewardship and consecration were designed to
Personalism and distributism
The traditions of the Catholic and Reformed churches by and large dissent from both classical liberalism and orthodox Marxism in their accounts 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 nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, a conception of the person that posited the individual as a bearer of rights as well as being 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 that 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 Wojtyla (better known as Pope John Paul II). Probably the most influential personalist text, however, made no direct reference to the doctrine; rather, it was a paper encyclical that 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 that 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, since it carried with it a separation from the kind of dependable foundation that an organic connection to one’s work and one’s place enables. Consequently, ownership of one’s own means of economic livelihood, if possible, becomes essential. As Allan Carlson writes:

The 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 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.

To follow this recommendation through completely, however, would require a reversal of the enormous gains in overall wealth that capitalist development—and the attendant concentrations of property and resources—had generated over the previous two centuries. Leo did not imagine such a reversal (unlike more agrarianminded reactionaries) 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. Carlson explains, “Arguing that ‘the present age handed over the workers, each alone 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.” The answer had to involve union action, pressures upon corporations and government to ensure the
provision of a "family wage," and 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 breadwinners. 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 presumably implausible protectionist, pseudoagrarian, or Luddite response to the wealthcreating logic of industrial and finance capitalism. The creative destruction of the material constituents of one form of life so as to make room for a 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 these have been essentially embraced in the contemporary world. The dominant alternatives to this kind of "mere capitalism" have been some form of liberal egalitarianism (which takes as settled the nature of human market transactions and seeks to mollify their consequences through individual payments and transfers of one sort or another) or some variety of state socialism (wherein the market is controlled and directed toward predetermined ends). The notion of a decentralized system of property and income redistribution, one that nonetheless takes with great seriousness the individual inputs into that which has been distributed—which is essentially what a personalist economics calls for—has few advocates. Fortunately for the purpose of this paper, many of the most outspoken are Latterday Saints, though they did not recognize their arguments as such.

The idea of distributing the opportunity for individual ownership far and wide was central to the laws of consecration and stewardship. After some discussion with John Finch, a disciple of Robert Owen who visited Nauvoo in September 1843, Joseph Smith 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 was that, under the United Order, "every one is a steward over his own."\(^{31}\) Was this an accurate response? Perhaps it was not under the first attempts to live 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."\(^{32}\) By 1833—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:

> 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 benet, & inheritance, & stewardship, he cannot obtain again by the law of the Lord.\(^{33}\)

The insertion of specific language about consecrated properties being defined as for the benefit of the poor may be interpreted as a means employed by Smith and perhaps other church leaders to avoid lawsuits. As Underwood writes, "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."\(^{34}\) But perhaps too much can be made of this change in wording. The real heart of the change was in emphasizing that stewardships for which church members had responsibility 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 much 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 church leaders would have to get involved, and so forth. Don 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 members capable of being “equal in the bonds of heavenly things. . . . Our schooling in equality here is preparatory for a place of equality hereafter.”

One point remains. Even if it is accepted that the laws of consecration and stewardship replicate the social justice principle of distributism (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), 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 of Jesus Christ of Latter day Saints. Could the LDS articulation of this principle operate in nonagrarian, 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.

This idea of stewardships incorporating a distribution of inheritances—which could include capital investment, educational supports, or 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 that provides members of the community with an original purchase upon the organic life of the society in which they live. However one chooses to pursue the idea, it points in the direction of the social justice tradition: a response to economic alienation and deprivation that is premised on neither liberal rights nor Marxist categories, but rather on the development of the person through collective action taken to preserve the moral and educational worth of laboring on property or in a field of one’s own.

The preferential option for the poor

As mentioned above, events from 1831 through 1833, in both Kirtland and Missouri, led to some rethinking of how best to express and act upon the principles that 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. 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, thou 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.  

First and foremost, the line “remember the poor” is different in this version of the revelation. Then, following it, the purpose of consecration is changed somewhat. Now the faithful are commanded to impart some portion of their property explicitly to the support of the poor. Of course, this is folded into the general Christian understanding that acts of charity toward the poor and the needy are comparable to serving the Lord directly (“inasmuch as ye impart of your substance unto the poor, ye will do it unto me”). This folding into continues later in the revelation, with the idea of using the residue of consecrated properties (after stewardships had been assigned to the faithful) not simply to “administer to the poor and the needy” but also “for the public benefit of the church”—a possibly innocuous addition, but one that nonetheless appears to express considerably more expansive language than the more enclosed, borderline apocalyptic tone that the revelation adopted originally. It may also be worth noting that the earliest version speaks of members of the community receiving only 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 Doctrine and Covenants 82, is not present in this formulation.)

There are, of course, many ways to read these changes, some of which have already been alluded to (legal challenges to the church, etc.) and others that I have avoided discussing because of my desire to focus on the ideas expressed by the Laws of the Church of Christ rather than on accounts of their historical implementation. But I would like to concentrate, as a conclusion to this paper, on that first central change—remembering the poor—and what it has to say about the relationship between the principles of stewardship and consecration, and social justice principles generally.

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. However, what might be most relevant here was not the changes he made to the biblical text but what he got out
of that rereading. As is well known, one of the most common themes found in the Bible, both the Old and New Testaments, 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, and to provide relief for their suffering is echoed in literally hundreds of verses throughout the Bible. 41 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.

There was an another change to Smith’s thinking as well. 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 reorient the abiding goal of what became Doctrine and Covenants 42: 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 general as well as building up the church’s infrastructure. The expanded presumptions—perhaps slightly less intensely communal yet slightly more open to individual activity and variation—behind the kind of community these verses refer to hint 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, wherein such tremendous wealth has been generated through globalized markets that average levels of income and living are raising around the globe, though that average hides an increasingly steep gap separating the wealthy and the powerful from the marginalized and suffering. 42 As a farflung 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 LDS Church today have no truly likely practical options available to them in terms of socioeconomic consecration, enclosure, and community building. The era of the United Order as experimented with during the Utah period is clearly past, to say nothing of what the Saints attempted in 1831–1833. However, if members think about becoming a covenant people in terms of forming, through the stakes (including primarily fellow members, but also reaching out to all those who live within stake jurisdictions) and local associations and cooperatives that aim to build up public resources and serve the poor, they would be following the path that, upon my reading, captures the heart of what the finalized version of these verses claim the Lord wanted his people to do. This is the church as (what Erik Olin Wright would call) an “interstitial institution,” a nonstate agent that does not claim to act with the authority of a state nor denies the relevance of such to achieving social justice ends, but acts instead as a contributor to the state by presenting a “consciously constructed form of social organization that differs from the dominant structures of power and inequality [in capitalist society].” 43

Of course, further revelations may, in time, change or reorient this way of thinking about community and the power of the church to become fully unified despite the immense growth and change that has been experienced since Smith’s day. And moreover, such thinking obviously does not address how members ought to act as citizens in their respective polities to achieve similar ends or at least make the achievement of said ends more likely. But I am doubtful that section 42 can be taken to provide such specific socioeconomic guidance anyway. It is, after all, a document that, even as it has gone through revisions, seems overwhelmingly shaped by a politicaltheological
position that rejects existing authority and anticipates the construction of something new in order to receive the coming of the Lord. The point of closely investigating the history and language of the revelation is, rather, to gain an anticipatory perspective on that newness—a new set of arrangements that, I would argue at least, tends toward an emphasis upon social justice. What readers do with that perspective is an entirely different question from the one that the revelation was originally presented as answering (though a worthy question all the same).

NOTES

1. As Grant Underwood observes, 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.’ Grant Underwood, “The Laws of the Church of Christ” (D&C 42): A Textual and Historical Analysis,” in The Doctrine and Covenants: Revelations in Context, ed. Andrew H. Hedges, J. Spencer Fluhman, and Alonzo L. Gaskill (Provo, UT: BYU Religious Studies Center and Deseret Book, 2008), 112.


11. These points are adapted from documents that may be accessed from the website for the Center for Public Justice (http://www.cpjustice.org/) and the Office for Social Justice (http://www.osjspm.org/default.aspx).


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

19. “The equality of men rests essentially on their dignity. . . . ‘Talents’ 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).

20. 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 obsession 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 Karl Marx, Selected Writings, ed. Lawrence H. Simon (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1994), 17.

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


27. A good summary of this body of thought can be found in John F. Crosby, The Selfhood of the Human Person (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1996).


30. Carlson, Third Ways, 158.


34. Underwood, “Textual and Historical Analysis,” 120.


38. 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, Th Stakeholder Society (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), is the place to begin exploring the idea.


40. Marquardt, Joseph Smith Revelations, 111.

41. 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.