

REVIEWS

Equality and Plain Living

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Building the City of God, Community and Cooperation Among the Mormons. By Leonard J. Arrington, Feramorz Y. Fox and Dean L. May. Salt Lake City, Utah: Deseret Book Company, 1976. 497 pp. including nine appendices, illustrations, maps, and footnotes. \$7.95.

In 1831 Joseph Smith announced the Law of Consecration and Stewardship. This law was revealed, according to the Prophet, to establish the social and economic basis of the Restoration on the same scriptural foundations as existed in Biblical and Book of Mormon times, to comply with the Lord's commandment that "it is not given that one man should possess that which is above another," and to lay the economic groundwork for the Second Coming.

The authors of *Building the City of God* suggest that there were also more practical reasons for this revelation. They argue that 1) the Prophet wanted to offer an alternative system of communal living which would appeal to Sidney Rigdon's recently converted and communitarian following in Kirtland, Ohio; 2) this new revelation—by dividing up the property on the basis of need—would provide the means of attracting poor members from New York to Ohio, the new center of the Church; 3) the revelation would also help provide for the temporal needs of Church leaders; and 4) provide an effective refuge from the socially disintegrating forces of Jacksonian America.

In theory, the Law of Consecration and Stewardship required faithful members of the Church to deed to the bishop *all* of their property, both personal and real. In return the member received an inalienable stewardship based on need determined jointly by the member and the bishop. At the end of each year all surplus was to be turned back to the bishop. This arrangement placed the use of virtually all investment capital in the hands of the Church, while still allowing the profit motive to function relative to the stewardship. By encouraging plain living and relative equality, and by dispensing with

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the ever pressing need for charity, the consecration principle also maintained maximum control of the membership by the leadership and, if practiced effectively, discouraged worldliness.

The Law of Consecration and Stewardship was never effectively and only briefly practiced. Persecution, frequent moves, too few good stewards and problems inherent in the doctrine itself, e.g., diminished incentives, insufficient doctrinal details, questionable legality, caused the practice to be abandoned in 1834. Thereafter a series of "inferior" formal and informal systems based on this ideal were introduced at Far West and still later by Brigham Young in a surprisingly large number of Great Basin communities. Even the current Welfare Plan and food storage program have some important roots in this initial revelation, according to these authors.

Perhaps the most successful of these later "experiments"—which came to be known as the United Order—was at Orderville in southcentral Utah. From 1874 to 1885 this small, poor, but marvelously unified village came as close as anyone ever did to the ideal pronounced in 1831. Their dedication was truly impressive. In part they succeeded because they had already failed together once before in Nevada, and because they had little more to lose. But in the end they, too, could not survive the polygamy raids of the mid-1880's or the desire for the greater affluence that surrounded and enticed the young of even that isolated settlement.

Most of the other successes were to be found in the widely dispersed southern settlements (with the notable exception of Kanab). The northern Utah communities were older, more established in their ways, and apparently less pious. Their general experimental contribution was the economic "cooperative," which supplemented but did not supplant the usual private economic activities of its members. The Brigham City cooperative represented the model and the acme of northern achievement, but even on this less intense foundation the coming of the railroad and the desire for "finer fabrics and footwear than could be produced at home" also caused Brigham City to go the way of Orderville. In the end the Church's attempt to preserve its unique but crumbling communitarian system against the onslaught of the spiritually disintegrating forces of 19th century capitalism fared no better than the Church's attempt to preserve polygamy.

If 19th century Mormon communitarianism was a failure, this book is not. Superbly researched and broadly conceived, *Building the City of God* is one of the best books within the genre of the New Mormon History. It will be a standard against which the multi-volume Mormon history series will be measured when these begin to appear. It is free from polemics, written with sympathetic detachment, and should interest everyone who wants to understand the Mormon past.

Those who try and fail are admired for their efforts while the reasons for failure are clearly and honestly faced. Unlike those who would manipulate our past so as to build faith in what is not true, the authors of *Building the City of God* are frank to show that Brigham Young was not always willing to practice what he preached, that Erastus Snow believed Brigham Young's United Order was more an experiment than a commandment and that John Taylor was glad to see the experiment die when Brigham Young died.