

The United Order of Joseph Smith's Times

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SECTION 82 OF THE DOCTRINE AND COVENANTS, dated 26 April 1832, guided the formation of a united order in the Joseph Smith era. Until recently, code names were shown for the nine participants: Ahashdah (Newel K. Whitney), Pelagoram (Sidney Rigdon), Gazelam (Joseph Smith), Olihah (Oliver Cowdery), and Mahemson (Martin Harris). The remaining names, Alam, Mahalaleel, Horah, and Shalemanasseh, have recently been identified as Edward Partridge, Sidney Gilbert, John Whitmer, and W. W. Phelps (Whitaker 1983). The 1981 edition of the Doctrine and Covenants eliminated the secret names from Section 82, substituting the real names where known. Code names were similarly deleted from sections 78, 92, 96, and 104 dealing with the United Order. How did code names come into being in the first place? Why were they used?

The answers to these questions change dramatically some of the traditional meanings associated with such gospel terms as the United Order and the law of consecration. The United Order of Joseph Smith's time has been described by some as an intended church-wide experiment in Christian communal living which, because of various human shortcomings, was unsuccessful (JD 2:97, 298; 13:96; 17:59; Allen 1936, 17–19; McConkie 1966, 813; Arrington, May, and Fox 1976, 7). A cursory reading of parts of the Doctrine and Covenants might also support that view. However, a closer reading, supplemented by *The History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, indicates

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rather that these economic revelations were given to specific people for specific purposes and that generalizing may misinterpret them.

As the Saints began to gather and become organized, a small group of men were chosen for their business and spiritual qualifications and given specific assignments to begin the United Order. Contrary to the traditional idea of failure, the United Order of Joseph Smith's time performed its mission brilliantly. This group was chosen even before the Twelve Apostles were called on 14 February 1835 (HC 2:180–200), and long before the Twelve assumed any significant administrative functions. It combined the functions of today's Corporation of the President, the First Presidency, the Quorum of the Twelve, and the Presiding Bishopric in conducting the business affairs of the Church. As the Quorum of the Twelve became mature and stable, it assumed with the First Presidency all the duties of the United Order. The original ad hoc administrative body no longer existed separate from those two quorums. The creation of units in Utah from 1854 to 1877, which were also called united orders, has caused confusion (JD 2:97, 298 [1854]; 13:95 [1869]; 17:56, 59, 74, 154 [1874]). The united orders from different eras had different purposes, structures, and membership. They also had no historical continuity.

The United Order of Joseph Smith's day was organized essentially as a general partnership, with a branch in Kirtland and one in Missouri. By law all the partners of a business partnership are fully liable for the business agreements made by any one of the partners. In that sense, all the partners hold all business and personal assets in common and put all business gains into one account before each person's share of the total is calculated. The properties or monies that are held in common are available for the use of the individual partners (D&C 82:11–20; 104:67–77).

The original United Order was a combination of Church leaders in Kirtland (Joseph Smith, Sidney Rigdon, Oliver Cowdery, Newel K. Whitney, and Martin Harris), and those who had recently been sent to Missouri — W. W. Phelps, Bishop Edward Partridge, Algernon Sidney Gilbert, and John Whitmer (HC 2:434). Bishop Partridge's two counselors, John Corry and Isaac Morley, apparently acted as agents of the firm (HC 2:436). Two other men — Frederick G. Williams and John Johnson — were added later as full members by specific revelations (D&C 92, 96).

Certain assignments of Church leaders, including their calling to the United Order, were not made public. A letter dated 25 June 1833 from Joseph Smith and Sidney Rigdon in Kirtland to various brethren in Missouri illustrates a number of relationships:

Let Brother Edward Partridge choose as counselors . . . , Brother Parley P. Pratt and Brother Titus Billings Zombre [John Johnson] has been received as a member of the firm, by commandment, and has just come to Kirtland to live; as soon as we get a power of attorney signed agreeably to law, for Alam [Edward Partridge] we will forward it to him, and will immediately expect one from that part of the firm (HC 1:363).

Here Bishop Partridge is addressed in one paragraph by his name for public ecclesiastical topics and in another by his secret name for United Order busi-

ness. The passage concerning John Johnson equates the "order" mentioned in D&C 96:8 with the "firm" used to conduct various items of central Church business. The power of attorney mentioned is an instrument closely associated with the law of agency and partnership and implies a small and closely knit group, not a general or public institution.

From the original group of eleven partners, subgroups were formed as specific transactions or functions needed to be carried out (HC 2:433-34). These subgroups were kept insulated from each other (HC 2:287, 324, 335-6, 475). In today's world where liability-limiting corporations can be formed almost at will, the myriad of general partner/silent partner arrangements of Joseph Smith's Order would likely be recast into a system of subsidiary corporations under the control of a parent corporation. However, that was not practical in Joseph Smith's day, since a separate act of state legislature was needed for any new corporation and men in the legislature were often hostile to LDS interests. The United Order partnership system was a legal and creative solution to meet the needs of the time. If two or three men operated one store under a normal business name, and two or three other men operated another store under a different business name, and a third group operated a printing establishment under a third name, no one would suspect that all were really part of the same group (HC 1:270, 365; 2:273, 482-83).

This separation and secrecy had an important and legitimate business purpose. It allowed the United Order brethren to control their business credit, risks, and liabilities. If a creditor of one Mormon enterprise realized that he could claim payment from several other enterprises which were all parts of the same organization, that creditor could severely disrupt the gathering and settlement of the Saints. As it was, the creditors contracted with a limited set of men and looked only to them for repayment.

The brethren contracted some large debts in their business dealings with the trade and finance institutions of their time (D&C 82:22; 104:78-81; HC 1:365; 2:44-49, 492; Hill 1977, 26, 36). These large lines of credit were necessary to sustain extensive purchases of land in Kirtland and Missouri, and later, Far West and Nauvoo (HC 2:468, 496, 521; 3:63-64; 4:7-8). Church control of this land made the "gathering" a practical possibility since Saints could move to those areas with assurance that they could purchase land at a reasonable price and begin to improve it (HC 2:478-80). The same process worked with supplies. Church-controlled firms made wholesale purchases of goods and resold them to the Saints, providing a reliable source of supplies and precluding price-gouging by outside traders (HC 1:365; 2:288).

It was, of course, necessary for some early migration plans to be secret (D&C 28:9; 42:35). If anyone, Church member or not, knew where and when the Church was planning to move, they could purchase land at the destination from the government and then resell it at a large profit to the Saints. For example, Ezra Thayre probably had something like this in mind when he gave funds to the Church to purchase lands but wished to take title and control the disposition of the lands purchased with his money (D&C 56:8-10). Doctrine and Covenants 85 is also directed to those who wished to cir-

concurrent the Church land development plans with plans of their own (HC 1:298). The Church-controlled United Order entity instead made those first land purchases and prevented damaging price escalations.

Thus the existence and mission of the United Order was of necessity known to very few. The world only saw the United Order that the Church leaders (and the Lord) wished them to see. That may explain why the secret names have remained so long a mystery.

As conditions changed and the Church's migrating population moved further west, two separate general partnerships became appropriate (D&C 104). After the initial thrust into Missouri, communication between the east and west branches probably was too slow to allow most decisions to still be made in Kirtland. Men on the spot had to be given that authority. The single firm became two firms, and each probably added extra personnel as agents, such as Willard Richards in Kirtland (HC 2:492). They continued to deal with each other and lend money back and forth, but the eastern branch relinquished control of the western branch's operating decisions. Finally, some time after 1838, the functions of the United Order were absorbed by the First Presidency, the Quorum of the Twelve, and the Presiding Bishopric (D&C 119, 120).

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