A Bishop unto the Church
D&C 41, 51, 54, 57
by Sherilyn Farnes

In the fall of 1830, four young men in their late teens or early twenties appeared at the door of Edward Partridge’s hat shop in Painesville, Ohio. As Partridge listened to the men’s extraordinary tale of a restoration of authority and a revelation of new scripture, he called them imposters and sent them away. Yet after they left, Partridge sent one of his employees after the men in order to purchase a copy of the book they carried, the Book of Mormon.1

Partridge and his wife, Lydia, were searching for a church that taught the New Testament gospel in its plainness and provided proof of divine authority to lead the church. Upon learning of the missionaries’ message, Lydia recognized the truth she knew from the Bible in their teachings and was baptized.2 Edward Partridge remained unconvinced, but after traveling to New York to meet the Prophet Joseph, he, too, was baptized.

About this same time, Joseph Smith received a revelation in which the Lord promised Edward Partridge, “thou shalt Receive my spirit, the Holy Ghost, even the comforter, which shall teach you the peacible things of the Kingdom.” With this reassurance, the Lord called Partridge “to preach my Gospel as with the voice of a Trump.”3 Partridge left to share his newfound faith with his parents and siblings in Massachusetts. Although his family members were for the most part unreceptive to his message, Partridge fulfilled his commission to preach the gospel to them.4

On February 4, 1831, upon Partridge’s return to Ohio, Joseph Smith received a revelation (now Doctrine and Covenants 41) calling Edward Partridge as the first bishop in the 10-month-old Church. The office of bishop was one of the first priesthood offices restored in this dispensation, and, like other offices, an understanding of the duties of a bishop came line upon line. Unlike bishops today, Partridge was instructed to not only be “ordained a bishop unto the Church” but also to “leave his merchandise & spend all his time in the labours of the Church.”5

With no handbook and no living precedents, Partridge may have wondered what exactly were the “labours of the Church” he was to perform. Fortunately, a few days later, Joseph received a revelation (called “the Law” by early Church members) that contained further information about Partridge’s duties as bishop.

In this revelation (now found in Doctrine and Covenants 42), the Lord commanded the Saints to consecrate all their properties to Him through the bishop and his counselors “with a covenanut and Deed which cannot be broken.” Then, the one consecrating would receive a stewardship from the bishop “sufficient for himself and family.” The bishop was charged to maintain any remaining property in a storehouse to “administer to the poor and needy,” to purchase lands, and to build Zion.6
Bishop Edward Partridge

Partridge faced one of his first major tasks as bishop with the arrival in Ohio of the Saints who had been commanded to flee New York. Partridge was charged with settling them upon lands for their inheritances. Early Church member Leman Copley offered to let the Saints from Colesville, New York, settle on his 759-acre property in Thompson, Ohio, about 20 miles from Kirtland, and Partridge needed more specific revelation about how to organize the Colesville Saints on Copley’s property. In response, the Lord gave instructions to Partridge through Joseph Smith. These instructions are now found in Doctrine and Covenants 51. The Lord taught Partridge that as he divided the land for the Colesville Saints, he was to “appoint unto this People their portion every man alike according to their families according to their wants & their needs.” Although Partridge still owned property in Painesville and did not need land, he was told in the revelation that in return for sacrificing his full-time job as a hatter to serve as bishop, he was to draw upon the supplies in the storehouse to support his family.

Living the law of consecration was to be considered a privilege. Yet not everyone viewed it that way. Copley soon rescinded his offer and evicted the Colesville Saints from his land, leaving them wondering where to turn. On June 10, a revelation (now Doctrine and Covenants 54) addressed their concern in a surprising way: it called them to move permanently to Missouri, more than 800 miles away.

At about the same time, Joseph Smith, Edward Partridge, and others were also preparing to depart on a trip to Missouri, the anticipated location of the future city of Zion. Partridge left, assuming he would return in a few months. But upon the elders’ arrival in Independence, Missouri, a frontier town in the far western part of the state, Joseph Smith received a revelation (now found in Doctrine and Covenants 57) declaring that Independence was to be the center of latter-day Zion. The revelation also contained a daunting imperative: “It is wisdom that the land should be purchased by the saints & also every tract lying westward even unto the [western border of Missouri.] And also every tract bordering by the Prairies.” The Lord further instructed, “Let my servant Edward [Partridge] stand in the office which I have appointed him to [divide] unto the saints their inheritance even as I have commanded.” The Lord then called several individuals to remain in Missouri and build up Zion. Contrary to his plans, Partridge was among those who were to “be planted in the Land of Zion as speedily as can be with their families to do these things even as I have spoken.”

In a letter to Lydia written a few days later, Partridge broke the news that he wouldn’t be returning to Ohio that summer and instead asked that she and their five daughters join him on the Missouri frontier. Additionally, instead of being able to return to Ohio to help them move that fall, he wrote, “Brother Gilbert or I must be here to attend the sales in Dec. & not knowing that he can get back by that time I have thought it advisable to stay here for the present contrary to [my] expectations.”
He also warned that once she joined him in Missouri, “We have to suffer & shall for some time many privations here which you & I have not been much used to for year[s].” Following the direction given to counsel between themselves and the Lord, he made suggestions about how she and the girls could make the journey, then suggested that she proceed as she thought best.13 Lydia willingly obeyed the revelation to move, packing her home and gathering her five daughters to travel west to a place she had never seen before.

In Missouri, anticipating the imminent arrival of the Colesville Saints and many others to follow, Partridge followed the Lord’s direction to prepare “to [divide] unto the saints their inheritance,” beginning to purchase land within two weeks of his arrival in Missouri. As Partridge settled the Saints on their land there, he followed the instructions given to him in May that “when he shall appoint a man his portion give unto him a writing that shall secure unto him his portion.”14

In response to this revelation, Partridge printed consecration deeds that had two parts. In the first part, he carefully recorded the property and goods that an individual Saint or family “laid before the Bishop.” In return, Partridge carefully recorded on the second part of the deed the property or goods that each member had stewardship over—usually the same as what they had consecrated. Each member was then appointed “a Steward over his own property, or that which he hath received [by consecration].”15

Partridge served as the Lord’s representative for many Saints who chose to live the law of consecration and accept the Lord’s invitation to act upon principles of stewardship, agency, and accountability. Yet once again, not everyone wished to live the law. Some purchased land on their own. Some, as had Copley and another man named Bates, donated property or money then changed their minds and demanded it back. Partridge was called upon to help lift and encourage the recalcitrant as well as the receptive Saint. After the law of consecration was received, John Whitmer wrote: “The Bishop Edward Partridge visited the church in its several branches, there were some that would not receive the Law.”16

Of the difficulties of dealing with imperfect Saints, Partridge’s daughter Emily Dow Partridge later remem-

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bered, “When I look back and remember the great responsibility that rested upon my father as first Bishop—his poverty and privations, and the hardships that he had to endure, the accusations of false brethren, the fault-finding of the poor, and the persecutions of our enemies—I do not wonder at his early death.”17 Partridge’s own patriarchal blessing warned him, “Thou shalt stand in thy office until thou art weary of it and shall desire to resign it that thou mayest rest for a little season.”18

In addition to dealing with the human weaknesses of others, Partridge faced the reality of his own fall-
en nature. When faced with the challenge of building Zion with few visible resources, Partridge apparently doubted the possibility of success. In response, the Lord warned him, “But if he repent not of his sins which is unbelief & blindness of heart let him take heed lest he fall.” Partridge’s August 1831 letter to Lydia revealed his own insecurities in his position. “You know I stand in an important station,” he wrote, “& as I am occasionally chastened I sometimes feel as though I must fall, not to give up the cause, but I fear my station is above what I can perform to the acceptance of my heavenly father.” He then pled with his wife, “Pray for me that I may not fall.”

Two years later, in July 1833, a mob of angry men entered Partridge’s home, where he was sitting with his wife and three-week-old son and namesake, Edward Partridge Jr. They dragged him to the center square of Independence, where they beat and tarred and feathered him. Unafraid, three days later Partridge, along with five other men, offered their lives as a ransom for the rest of the Saints in an attempt to prevent further violence towards the Saints. Their offer was refused, and the men instead were forced to agree to leave Jackson County. A few weeks later, Partridge wrote to his friends in Ohio, “I feel willing to spend and be spent, in the cause of my blessed Master.”

The revelations calling Partridge as bishop and outlining his duties in that office shaped the remainder of his life. He continued to serve as bishop throughout the Saints’ time in Missouri and into the Illinois period. In the spring of 1840, while building a home for his family in Nauvoo, Partridge fell sick. He died on May 27, 1840, leaving a wife and five children ages 6 to 20.

When Partridge was called as bishop, the Lord described him as one whose “heart is pure before me for he is like unto Nathaniel of old in whom there is no guile.” Early Church member David Pettigrew described Partridge as “a Gentleman, filling that high Office which he Occupied, with great dignity, Such as the New Testament States, that a man filling the Office of a Bishop Should be His appearance was grave, and thoughtful, yet pleasant and agreeable, his family like himself verry agreeable.” W. W. Phelps wrote of Partridge that “few will be able to wear his mantle with such simple dignity. He was an honest man, and I loved him.” Eight months after Partridge’s death, the Lord revealed that the faithful first bishop of the restored Church was with Him.

Footnotes
1. Edward Partridge Jr., “Genealogical Record,” 5, Church History Library, Salt Lake City.
3. “Revelation, 9 December 1830 [D&C 36],” in Revelation Book 1, 48, josephsmithpapers.org; punctuation standardized; see also Doctrine and Covenants 36:1.
4. Edward Partridge, Misc. Papers, Church History Library, Salt Lake City. Partridge noted a few years later that his brother James Harvey had joined the Church.
5. “Revelation, 4 February 1831 [D&C 41],” in Revelation Book 1, 62, josephsmithpapers.org; see also Doctrine and Covenants 41:9.
7. “Revelation, 20 May 1831 [D&C 51],” in Revelation Book 1, 86–87, josephsmithpapers.org; see also Doctrine and Covenants 51:2.
8. “Revelation, 20 May 1831 [D&C 51],” in Revelation Book 1, 87; see also Doctrine and Covenants 51:15.
9. Joseph Knight autobiographical sketch, 1832, 1862, Church History Library, Salt Lake City.
10. See “Revelation, 10 June 1831 [D&C 54],” in Revelation Book 1, 90, josephsmithpapers.org; see also Doctrine and Covenants 54:8.
11. See “Revelation, 6 June 1831 [D&C 52],” in Revelation Book 1, 87, josephsmithpapers.org; see also Doctrine and Covenants 52:3, 24.
12. “Revelation, 20 July 1831 [D&C 57],” in Revelation Book 1, 93–94, josephsmithpapers.org; see also Doctrine and Covenants 57:4–5, 7, 14; “Revelation, 1 August 1831 [D&C 58],” in Revelation Book 1, 96, josephsmithpapers.org; Doctrine and Covenants 58:24.
19. “Revelation, 1 August 1831 [D&C 58],” in Revelation Book 1, 95, josephsmithpapers.org; see also Doctrine and Covenants 58:15.
22. “Revelation, 4 February 1831 [D&C 41],” in Revelation Book 1, 62; see also Doctrine and Covenants 41:11.