

Leman Copley and the Shakers

D&C 49

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In the spring of 1831, a prosperous farmer named Leman Copley joined the fledgling Church of Christ (as the Church was then known). His farm in Thompson, Ohio, was only a few miles northeast of the village of Kirtland, which had recently been established as the Church's new headquarters.

Copley had been a member of the United Society of Believers in Christ's Second Appearance for many years before his conversion. Members of this sect were commonly known as Shakers because their worship included a form of ecstatic dancing. The many similarities between Shaker and Latter-day Saint doctrines no doubt appealed to Copley: The two faiths shared a belief in a general apostasy, modern prophecy, the agency of man, and the ideal of a communal life. They differed dramatically, however, on other important points.

Shakers did not consider baptism—or any other ordinance—essential for salvation. They believed Jesus Christ had already made His Second Coming in the form of Mother Ann Lee (1736–84), an early Shaker leader. Some practiced vegetarianism. Latter-day Saints and Shakers also diverged in their views of marriage and sexual relations; devout Believers (as Shakers called themselves) insisted upon absolute celibacy, which they referred to as “taking up the cross.”

These two religious groups had first crossed paths during the previous winter, when a group of Latter-day Saint missionaries, which included Oliver Cowdery and Parley P. Pratt, stopped briefly in the Shaker settlement of North Union, Ohio, en route to Missouri. The North Union community was situated a mere 15 miles southwest of Kirtland.

Cowdery introduced himself to the Shaker leader, Ashbel Kitchell, as “an assistant in the translation of the golden Bible” and as one of three who had witnessed an angel bear testimony of its truthfulness. Kitchell allowed Cowdery to share his message at one of the community's gatherings.¹

After two nights in North Union, Cowdery and his companions went on their way, but not before leaving seven copies of the Book of Mormon with Kitchell. The missionaries had complete confidence “in the virtue of their Books, that whoever would read them, would feel thoroughly convinced of the truth of what they contained.” Following this early encounter, the Shakers and Latter-day Saints in Ohio remained on good

terms, engaging in “trade and other acts of good neighborhood,” according to Kitchell. Their friendly interchange, however, was about to be put to the test.

A Revelation for the Shakers

Before joining the Church, Leman Copley associated with the North Union Shakers, perhaps attending their meetings, though he did not immerse himself fully in their austere communal life. The fact that he lived 35 miles from the community and remained married gives some indication of his level of commitment to Shaker principles. While clearly attracted to some of their teachings and perhaps their mode of worship, he was not a full participant. In fact, Kitchell chided Copley for rejecting a life of celibacy and for having “taken up with Mormonism as the easier plan.”

Like all early converts to the Church, Copley brought with him traditions and attitudes shaped by his previous religious experience. Joseph Smith spoke to Copley shortly after his conversion and noted that he was “apparently honest hearted, but still retaining ideas that the Shakers were right in some particulars of their faith.”² John Whitmer further noted that Copley “was anxious that some of the elders should go to his former brethren and preach the gospel.” He even “teased to be ordained to preach himself.”³

Copley decided to visit Joseph Smith—who was then living at the home of his friend Isaac Morley near Kirtland—on Saturday, May 7, 1831.⁴ Though we have no record of their conversation, Copley likely hoped for clarification about certain Shaker beliefs and perhaps suggested the idea of a mission to North Union. As a result of this meeting, Joseph received the revelation now canonized as Doctrine and Covenants 49. This revelation authoritatively addressed the doctrinal differences between the two faiths. It began by rebuking the Shakers: “They desire to know the truth in Part,” it read, “but not all for they are not right before me & must needs repent.”

Reaffirming that baptism is indispensable, the revelation proceeded to denounce several of the Shakers’ dearly held beliefs, declaring that marriage is ordained of God, that animals were given to man for food and clothing, and that “the son of man cometh not in the form of a woman neither of a man traveling on the earth.”⁵

In the revelation, the Lord called Copley—along with Sidney Rigdon and Parley P. Pratt—to preach the gospel to his brothers and sisters at North Union. While all three of them were acquainted with Shaker principles, Copley was much less seasoned as a preacher and missionary

than either of his companions. His apparent interest in preaching to his Shaker friends meant he would be calling to repentance the very people who scorned him for what they felt was his lack of religious commitment. Perhaps he hoped to demonstrate the true substance of his new faith. In any event, Copley agreed to comply faithfully with the revelation's commandment to "reason with" the Shakers.⁶

The Mission to North Union

So, with revelation in hand, Rigdon and Copley set out for North Union almost immediately. They arrived in North Union later that day and were received cordially by Kitchell and his associates. They spent the evening together, debating the relative merits of their religions, each likely feeling they had gotten the best of the debate.

The next morning, Kitchell proposed to Rigdon and Copley that neither side should "force their doctrine on the other at this time." Rigdon had planned to read the revelation to the Shakers at their Sabbath service that day but decided to keep his peace for the moment and "subject himself to the order of the place."

Just before the meeting began, Parley P. Pratt arrived at North Union on horseback. Upon hearing of Rigdon's submissive response to Kitchell's proposal, the fiery Pratt insisted they "pay no attention to [him], for they had come with the authority of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the people must hear it."

The missionaries sat in silence until the meeting was complete. As the people stood to leave, Rigdon "arose and stated that he had a message from the Lord Jesus Christ to this people; could he have the privilege of delivering it?" With Kitchell's permission, he read the revelation in its entirety and asked if they might be allowed to continue preaching as the revelation dictated.

Kitchell, keeping his indignation in check, responded that he did not accept the message and "would release them & their Christ from any further burden about us, and take all the responsibility on myself." Rigdon countered, "This you cannot do; I wish to hear the people speak." But when Kitchell allowed others present to speak their minds, they too affirmed "that they were fully satisfied with what they had."

Rigdon stoically set the revelation aside, resigned that their mission had been unfruitful. Pratt, on the other hand, was not finished so easily. He arose, Kitchell recounted, and shook the dust from his coattail "as a testimony against us, that we had rejected the word of the Lord Jesus." In so doing, Pratt was following Jesus's injunction to His disciples in the Gospels.

But Kitchell would not tolerate it. His forbearance at its limit, the Shaker leader denounced Pratt in full sight of his congregation: “You filthy Beast, dare you presume to come in here, and try to imitate a man of God by shaking your filthy tail; confess your sins and purge your soul from your lusts, and your other abominations before you ever presume to do the like again.”

Kitchell then turned his wrath to Copley, who had begun weeping, and gave this stinging rebuke: “You hypocrite, you knew better;—you knew where the living work of God was; but for the sake of indulgence, you could consent to deceive yourself.”

The Aftermath

Kitchell promptly dismissed the congregation. The frustrated Pratt mounted his horse and returned to Kirtland immediately. He later summed up their visit: “We fulfilled this mission, as we were commanded, in a settlement of this strange people, near Cleveland, Ohio; but they utterly refused to hear or obey the gospel.”⁷ Following this incident, contact between the Church and the Shakers was rare and usually tense.

Rigdon stayed for supper before returning to Kirtland that evening, leaving a copy of the revelation with Kitchell. Copley, meanwhile, remained at North Union that night and made for his farm the next day, his hopes of converting some of his former brethren sadly dashed. The encounter had shaken him such that upon his return to Thompson, he backed out of an agreement he had made to permit Church members from Colesville, New York, to live on his farm.

The vacillating Copley continued to teeter in his devotion to the restored Church for many years after his mission to the Shakers. He finally broke company with the Church permanently around 1838 and remained in Ohio the rest of his life.

1. Lawrence R. Flake, “A Shaker View of a Mormon Mission,” *BYU Studies*, vol. 20, no. 1 (Fall 1979), 95. Unless otherwise cited, the quotations in this narrative are found in an excerpt from Ashbel Kitchell’s diary, as transcribed in Lawrence R. Flake’s article.
2. Joseph Smith, “History, 1838–1856, volume A-1 [23 December 1805–30 August 1834],” 112, josephsmithpapers.org.
3. “John Whitmer, History, 1831–circa 1847,” 26, josephsmithpapers.org.
4. This date for the revelation is based on research by Gerrit Dirkmaat for the volume Michael Hubbard MacKay, Gerrit J. Dirkmaat, Grant Underwood, Robert J. Woodford, and William G. Hartley, eds., *Documents, Volume 1: July 1828–June 1831*, vol. 1 of the Documents series of *The Joseph Smith Papers*, ed. Dean C. Jessee, Ronald K. Esplin, Richard Lyman Bushman, and Matthew J. Grow (Salt Lake City: Church Historian’s Press, 2013).
5. “Revelation, 7 May 1831 [D&C 49],” in Revelation Book 1, 80–81, josephsmithpapers.org; see also Doctrine and Covenants 49:2, 15, 19, 22.
6. “Revelation, 7 May 1831 [D&C 49],” 80, josephsmithpapers.org; see also Doctrine and Covenants 49:4.
7. *The Autobiography of Parley Parker Pratt; One of the Twelve Apostles of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints*, ed. Parley P. Pratt Jr. (Chicago: Law, King, and Law, 1888), 65.

