

GENERAL ASSEMBLY MINUTES, AUGUST 17, 1835

FAITH: Mormonism | TEXT: GeneralAssembly 1 | VOLUME: 1835 Doctrine and Covenants | AUTHOR: Oliver Cowdery and Orson Hyde (Clerks), Joseph Smith (Presiding)

OVERVIEW

This text records the official minutes of the General Assembly of the Church of the Latter Day Saints held in Kirtland, Ohio, on August 17, 1835. The primary purpose of this gathering was to formally accept the labors of a committee (comprising Joseph Smith, Oliver Cowdery, Sidney Rigdon, and Frederick G. Williams) that had arranged the 'items of doctrine' for the government of the church. The text documents a highly structured liturgical process where the 'Book of Doctrine and Covenants' was presented to the body. Through a mechanism known as 'Common Consent,' various quorums of the priesthood (High Council, Seventy, Elders, Priests, Teachers, Deacons) and the general membership voted sequentially to accept these writings as the 'doctrine and covenants of their faith.' The text emphasizes that these votes were unanimous. Additionally, it records the 'Testimony of the Twelve' apostles, who claimed the Holy Ghost bore record to their souls regarding the truth of these revelations. This event marks the formal addition of the Doctrine and Covenants to the Mormon canon, placing it alongside the Bible and the Book of Mormon.

KEY FIGURES

Joseph Smith, Oliver Cowdery, Sidney Rigdon, W.W. Phelps, John Whitmer, The Twelve Apostles

DOCTRINES ANALYZED

1. OPEN CANON

Assertion: The church has the authority to canonize new revelations (Doctrine and Covenants) alongside the Bible and Book of Mormon.

"These items are to be taken from the bible, book of Mormon, and the revelations which have been given to said church... accepted and acknowledged them as the doctrine and covenants of their faith"

Evangelical Comparison: Evangelical Christianity adheres to Sola Scriptura, holding that the 66 books of the Bible are the sufficient, closed canon of God's revelation (Revelation 22:18-19, Jude 1:3). This text explicitly demonstrates the Mormon doctrine of an open canon, where modern revelations given through Joseph Smith are elevated to scriptural status equal to the Bible. The assembly's vote to 'accept and acknowledge' these new writings as binding doctrine represents a fundamental departure from the sufficiency of Scripture.

2. COMMON CONSENT

Assertion: Doctrine and scripture must be accepted by the vote of the church membership and priesthood quorums to be binding.

"President Rigdon... explained the manner by which they intended to obtain the voice of the assembly for or against said book... accepted and acknowledged it... by a unanimous vote."

Evangelical Comparison: In this text, the authority of the scripture is partially ratified by the 'voice of the assembly.' In Evangelical theology, the Bible's authority is intrinsic and derived from God (Theopneustos, 2 Timothy 3:16), not contingent upon a democratic or hierarchical vote of the congregation. While the early church recognized the canon, they did not create it; Mormonism here depicts the church actively voting to establish the authority of new revelation.

COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

Divergence Status: Yes

Theological Gap: The fundamental theological gap is the rejection of the sufficiency of the Bible. By convening an assembly to vote on and canonize new 'items of doctrine' and 'revelations,' the text asserts that the Bible is insufficient for the government of the church. Furthermore, the reliance on a 'testimony' derived from feelings ('record to our souls') shifts the locus of authority from the objective Word of God to subjective human experience. This creates a system where 'truth' can be expanded or altered by the hierarchy and ratified by the membership, contrasting with the immutable nature of the Gospel in Evangelical thought (Galatians 1:8).

Shared Values:

Belief in the Bible (nominally); Desire for orderly church government; Recognition of Jesus Christ as the head of the church

Friction Points:

1. [Critical] Sola Scriptura – Explicit addition of the Doctrine and Covenants as binding scripture.
2. [Major] Universal Priesthood – Establishment of a rigid, multi-tiered priesthood hierarchy that mediates between God and the congregation.

Semantic Warnings:

"Testimony"

In Text: A subjective spiritual confirmation or feeling that validates a truth claim.

Evangelical: A witness to historical events or facts (e.g., the apostles witnessing the resurrection, 1 John 1:1-3).

Example: *The Twelve bear 'testimony' based on the Holy Ghost 'shed forth upon us' (feeling), whereas biblical apostles bore witness to what they had 'seen and heard' (historical fact).*

"Doctrine"

In Text: In this specific 1835 context, 'Doctrine' referred primarily to the 'Lectures on Faith' (later decanonized), while 'Covenants' referred to the revelations.

Evangelical: The eternal, unchanging truths of God revealed in Scripture.

Example: *The assembly voted to accept the 'Lectures on Faith' as doctrine, yet the LDS church later removed them from the canon, illustrating a fluid definition of doctrine.*

SOTERIOLOGY

Salvation Defined: Implied as adherence to the 'doctrine and covenants' of the faith.

How Attained: Through obedience to the revelations and the priesthood structure established in this text.

Basis of Assurance: The 'testimony' of the Holy Ghost and the collective assurance of the unanimous assembly.

Comparison to Sola Fide: The text focuses on 'government,' 'laws,' and 'commandments' rather than grace. It sets up a legal framework for the church, moving away from the simplicity of justification by faith alone (Romans 3:24-28).

MANDATES & REQUIREMENTS

Explicit Commands:

1. Vote to accept the labors of the committee
2. Vote to accept the Book of Doctrine and Covenants

Implicit Obligations:

1. Accept the D&C as binding faith and law
2. Conform to the unanimous decision of the body
3. Recognize the authority of the hierarchical priesthood quorums

Ritual Requirements:

1. Voting by uplifted hands (implied by 'unanimous vote' and closing blessing)
2. Singing of hymns
3. Solemn prayer

EVANGELISM TOOLKIT

Discovery Questions:

1. In this assembly, the church voted to accept new scripture. Do you believe truth is established by a vote, or is it established by God regardless of human opinion?

2. The assembly accepted an Article on Marriage that defined it as one man and one woman. Since Joseph Smith was already practicing polygamy, how do you view the integrity of this public vote?
3. If the Bible is 'profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction' (2 Tim 3:16), why was a committee needed to arrange new items of doctrine for the government of the church?

Redemptive Analogies:

1. Common Consent / The Voice of the Assembly – The desire to have a voice and be part of the body is fulfilled in the biblical doctrine of the Priesthood of All Believers. In Christ, every believer has direct access to God and a vital role in the body, not just a vote to ratify leaders' decisions. [1 Peter 2:9, 1 Corinthians 12:12-27]

Spiritual Weight:

1. Conformity/Groupthink [Moderate] – The emphasis on 'unanimous vote' creates a high-pressure environment where dissent is equated with unfaithfulness. The believer is burdened with the need to align their internal convictions with the group's decision to avoid spiritual isolation.
2. Legalism [Severe] – By canonizing a book of 'commandments' and 'laws,' the text places the believer under a new legal code, obscuring the freedom found in the Gospel of grace.

EPISTEMOLOGY

Knowledge Source: Subjective spiritual witness (Pneumatology) and Ecclesiastical Consensus.

Verification Method: The Holy Ghost shedding forth a witness to the soul; The unanimous voice of the assembly.

Evangelical Contrast: Evangelical epistemology relies on the objective truth of the written Word (Psalm 119:105, John 17:17). This text relies on an internal, subjective feeling ('record to our souls') to validate external propositions, a practice often called 'burning in the bosom' in Mormonism.

TEXTUAL CRITICISM

Dating: August 17, 1835

Authorship: Minutes recorded by Oliver Cowdery and Orson Hyde.

Textual Issues: The 'Article on Marriage' accepted here was later removed from the D&C in 1876 and replaced with D&C 132 (polygamy), effectively reversing the doctrine canonized in this text.