

SECTION 16

FAITH: Mormonism | TEXT: Doctrine and Covenants | VOLUME: 1835 Edition | AUTHOR: Joseph Smith

OVERVIEW

This revelation, originally received in March 1831 and cataloged as Section 16 in the 1835 Doctrine and Covenants (Section 46 in modern editions), addresses early institutional challenges regarding liturgy and charismatic expression. Joseph Smith dictates instructions regarding the 'conduct' of meetings, mandating that they be guided by the Holy Spirit but also strictly commanding that non-members and seekers not be 'cast out' of public or sacrament meetings. The text transitions into a pneumatological discourse, warning against 'doctrines of devils' and 'seducing spirits,' a reflection of the charismatic excesses occurring in the Kirtland period. To counter deception, the text lists valid spiritual gifts (paralleling 1 Corinthians 12) such as wisdom, healing, and tongues. Crucially, it establishes an ecclesiastical hierarchy over these pneumatic experiences: the Bishop and appointed elders are granted the specific gift to 'discern all those gifts,' thereby centralizing authority and placing spiritual manifestation under priesthood supervision. It concludes with a soteriological caveat that eternal life is contingent upon 'continuing faithful.'

KEY FIGURES

Jesus Christ, The Holy Spirit, The Bishop of the Church, Elders, Joseph Smith (implied voice)

DOCTRINES ANALYZED

1. ECCLESIASTICAL DISCERNMENT OF SPIRITS

Assertion: The Bishop and appointed elders possess a specific spiritual gift to judge the validity of other members' spiritual gifts.

"And unto the bishop of the church... are to have it given unto them to discern all those gifts, lest there shall be any among you professing and yet be not of God."

Evangelical Comparison: In Evangelical theology, the 'discerning of spirits' is a charisma given by the Spirit to members of the body for the protection of the church, and all believers are commanded to 'test the spirits' (1 John 4:1) using Scripture as the standard. This text, however, hierarchizes this function. It grants the 'Bishop' (a specific office) and appointed elders the authoritative right to determine the validity of spiritual manifestations. This shifts the locus of verification from the objective standard of Scripture to the subjective authority of a priesthood leader, creating a structure where the institution validates the Spirit, rather than the Spirit validating the church through the Word.

2. CONDITIONAL ETERNAL LIFE

Assertion: Belief in Christ leads to eternal life only if the believer continues faithful.

"to others it is given to believe on their words, that they also might have eternal life, if they continue faithful."

Evangelical Comparison: The text asserts that the gift of believing on the words of others leads to eternal life 'if they continue faithful.' While some Arminian Evangelicals hold to the possibility of apostasy, the Mormon context of 'faithfulness' generally implies adherence to laws, ordinances, and church mandates. This creates a 'probationary' view of salvation where final status is determined by the consistency of one's performance, contrasting with the Reformed Evangelical view of the perseverance of the saints, where preservation is a work of God (Philippians 1:6), or the general Evangelical assurance that salvation is a present possession (John 5:24) not merely a future reward for endurance.

3. MERIT-BASED ACCESS TO GIFTS

Assertion: Spiritual gifts are given for the benefit of those who love God and keep all His commandments.

"they are given for the benefit of those who love me and keep all my commandments, and him that seeketh so to do"

Evangelical Comparison: The text states that spiritual gifts are for those who 'keep all my commandments.' Theologically, this suggests that spiritual power is a result of moral performance. In contrast, the New Testament describes spiritual gifts (charismata) as manifestations of grace (charis) given to the church. The Corinthian church, for example, possessed all gifts (1 Cor 1:7) yet was carnal and immature (1 Cor 3:1-3). By

linking gifts to obedience, this text reinforces a works-righteousness paradigm where divine empowerment is earned rather than received by grace.

COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

Divergence Status: Yes

Theological Gap: While the list of gifts superficially resembles 1 Corinthians 12, the underlying theology diverges significantly from Evangelicalism. First, the text introduces a 'Head' (Verse 8) who may possess **all** gifts, establishing a charismatic autocracy centered on the Prophet/President, unlike the biblical model of the body where no one part has all functions (1 Cor 12:12-30). Second, the text conditions the receipt of gifts on 'keeping all my commandments,' turning grace-gifts into merit-badges. Third, the authority to discern these gifts is removed from the congregation and vested in the Bishop, creating a mediation structure that violates the Priesthood of All Believers.

Shared Values:

Belief in the Holy Spirit's guidance; Practice of spiritual gifts (healing, prophecy); Importance of prayer and thanksgiving; Rejection of sign-seeking for lustful purposes; Openness to seekers in worship

Friction Points:

- 1. [Critical] Sola Scriptura – The text claims to be a new, binding revelation from God, expanding the canon.
- 2. [Major] Sola Fide – Gifts and eternal life are linked to 'keeping all my commandments' and 'continuing faithful,' implying works-righteousness.
- 3. [Major] Universal Priesthood – Spiritual discernment is centralized in the Bishop and Elders rather than the body of believers.

Semantic Warnings:

"Bishop"

In Text: A specific priesthood office (Edward Partridge at this time) with authority to judge spiritual manifestations.

Evangelical: An overseer/elder (episkopos) responsible for shepherding, synonymous with presbyter, not a distinct hierarchical rank controlling pneumatic gifts.

Example: *In this text, the Bishop 'discerns' the gifts of others; in the Bible, the congregation is told to 'test everything' (1 Thess 5:21).*

"Faithful"

In Text: Obedient to the laws, ordinances, and commandments of the restored church.

Evangelical: Full of faith/trust in Christ; trustworthy.

Example: *The text says eternal life is for those who 'continue faithful' (performance), whereas the Bible speaks of those who are 'kept by the power of God through faith' (1 Peter 1:5).*

SOTERIOLOGY

Salvation Defined: Eternal life (Verse 5), framed as a future reward.

How Attained: Through believing (gift) AND continuing faithful (works/endurance).

Basis of Assurance: Conditional assurance based on current standing and obedience.

Comparison to Sola Fide: The text adds the qualifier 'if they continue faithful' to the promise of eternal life, contrasting with the Evangelical understanding of Justification as a completed forensic act (Romans 5:1).

MANDATES & REQUIREMENTS

Explicit Commands:

- 1. Conduct meetings as guided by the Holy Spirit
- 2. Do not cast anyone out of public meetings
- 3. Do not cast seekers out of sacrament or confirmation meetings
- 4. Seek earnestly the best gifts
- 5. Practice virtue and holiness continually

6. Give thanks unto God in the spirit

Implicit Obligations:

1. Submit spiritual experiences to the Bishop for discernment
2. Maintain constant faithfulness to ensure eternal life
3. Avoid asking for signs for selfish purposes

Ritual Requirements:

1. Sacrament meetings
2. Confirmation meetings
3. Public meetings

EVANGELISM TOOLKIT

Discovery Questions:

1. The text mentions that gifts are for those who 'keep all my commandments.' How do you handle the pressure of needing to keep *all* commandments to experience God's power?
2. Verse 5 mentions the gift of believing on the words of others. Do you feel you have a direct relationship with Christ, or do you rely on the testimony of leaders?
3. The text says the Bishop is given the gift to discern all other gifts. How does that impact your freedom to follow the Spirit if a leader disagrees with your experience?

Redemptive Analogies:

1. The command not to cast out seekers. – This reflects the heart of the Gospel where Jesus invites 'all who are weary' (Matt 11:28). It shows a desire for grace and inclusion. [John 6:37 - 'All that the Father giveth me shall come to me; and him that cometh to me I will in no wise cast out.']
2. The desire for spiritual gifts. – The text shows a hunger for God's active presence, which is fulfilled in the indwelling of the Holy Spirit for every believer. [Luke 11:13 - '...how much more shall your heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to them that ask him?']

Spiritual Weight:

1. Performance Anxiety [Severe] – The requirement to 'keep all my commandments' to access spiritual gifts creates a burden of perfectionism. The believer may feel that a lack of miracles or gifts is due to their own hidden sin or lack of obedience.
2. Uncertainty of Salvation [Moderate] – The phrase 'if they continue faithful' hangs over the promise of eternal life, making salvation a tentative possibility rather than a secure reality.
3. Dependency on Hierarchy [Moderate] – By placing discernment in the hands of the Bishop, the individual believer is disempowered to trust their own walk with God, creating a dependency on leaders to validate their spiritual reality.

EPISTEMOLOGY

Knowledge Source: Pneumatic revelation validated by Priesthood Authority.

Verification Method: The individual seeks gifts/testimony, but the Bishop verifies their divine origin.

Evangelical Contrast: Biblical epistemology relies on the objective standard of Scripture (Acts 17:11, 2 Timothy 3:16). This text relies on subjective spiritual experience regulated by a human hierarchy.

TEXTUAL CRITICISM

Dating: March 8, 1831

Authorship: Joseph Smith (Dictated)

Textual Issues: This text was edited for the 1835 edition. Earlier manuscript versions may show slight variations in wording regarding the 'head' or specific instructions to the Bishop.