

SECTION 17 (MODERN D&C 50)

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

OVERVIEW

Given in May 1831, this revelation (now D&C 50) addresses the 'enthusiasm' and ecstatic spiritual manifestations occurring among new converts in Kirtland, Ohio. The text functions as a corrective measure, establishing a hierarchy of spiritual authority where the 'Elders' are instructed to discern between spirits of God and false spirits. The central theological contribution is a subjective epistemological test: truth is defined by that which 'edifies' and is 'light,' while that which does not edify is darkness. It posits a theology of progressive sanctification where an adherent, if 'purified and cleansed from all sin,' becomes a 'possessor of all things,' gaining power to command spirits and eventually see the face of God. The text concludes with specific administrative assignments to early church leaders and a pronouncement of forgiveness of sins based on their reception of this specific revelation.

KEY FIGURES

Jesus Christ (The Speaker), Joseph Smith (The Revelator), Joseph Wakefield, Parley P. Pratt, John Corrill, Edward Partridge

DOCTRINES ANALYZED

1. DISCERNMENT VIA EDIFICATION

Assertion: Spiritual truth and the presence of God are identified by the feeling of edification and the reception of light.

"that which doth not edify, is not of God, and is darkness: that which is of God is light"

Evangelical Comparison: In Evangelical theology, the test of a spirit is doctrinal confession regarding the person and work of Christ (1 John 4:2) and alignment with the closed canon of Scripture (Acts 17:11). This text shifts the locus of verification from objective dogma to subjective experience. The criterion 'that which edifies' is potentially dangerous from an evangelical perspective, as falsehood can be emotionally uplifting or intellectually satisfying (2 Corinthians 11:14). This doctrine lays the foundation for the Mormon 'burning in the bosom' epistemology.

2. CONDITIONAL OMNIPOTENCE VIA PURIFICATION

Assertion: Adherents who are cleansed from 'all sin' become 'possessors of all things' and gain absolute power over spiritual entities.

"if ye are purified and cleansed from all sin, ye shall ask whatsoever you will in the name of Jesus, and it shall be done... the spirits shall be subject unto you"

Evangelical Comparison: The text suggests a causal link between a believer's personal purification from 'all sin' and the acquisition of divine power ('possessor of all things'). Evangelical theology maintains that believers are 'complete in Him' (Colossians 2:10) solely through imputed righteousness. The idea that a believer can be functionally sinless ('cleansed from all sin') in this life to unlock spiritual power leans toward Pelagianism or Wesleyan perfectionism, contradicting the Reformed view of ongoing sanctification and total dependence on grace.

COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

Divergence Status: Yes

Theological Gap: The fundamental gap lies in the source of authority and the means of sanctification. Evangelicalism posits the Bible as the sufficient judge of spiritual phenomena. This text posits the 'Spirit' (subjectively experienced as edification) as the judge. Furthermore, the text implies that spiritual authority over darkness is contingent upon the believer's level of personal purification ('cleansed from all sin'), whereas the Bible teaches that authority over darkness is based on the position of the believer 'in Christ' regardless of their level of personal perfection.

Shared Values:

Desire to avoid spiritual deception; Belief in the existence of demons/false spirits; Jesus as the Good Shepherd; Necessity of truth

Friction Points:

1. [Critical] Sola Scriptura – The text introduces new, binding revelation and subjective criteria (edification) that supersede biblical testing.
2. [Major] Sola Gratia – Spiritual power and answers to prayer are conditioned on the believer's ability to be 'cleansed from all sin.'
3. [Major] Christology (Sufficiency) – Forgiveness is pronounced based on hearing the servant's words, obscuring the exclusive role of Christ's cross.

Semantic Warnings:

"Edify"

In Text: A subjective feeling of spiritual enlightenment or positivity that validates a spirit's origin.

Evangelical: Building up the church in love and doctrinal truth (Ephesians 4:12-16), always anchored in the content of the Gospel.

Example: *A Mormon might feel 'edified' by a testimony of Joseph Smith, validating it as truth. An Evangelical would judge that testimony by whether it aligns with the biblical Gospel, regardless of the feeling.*

"Purified"

In Text: A state of sinlessness required to wield priesthood power and 'possess all things.'

Evangelical: The positional status of a believer justified by Christ (Hebrews 10:10), or the progressive work of the Spirit, but never a prerequisite for access to God's power in a transactional sense.

Example: *In this text, one must be purified to get answers ('ask whatsoever you will'). In the Bible, God hears us because of Jesus' righteousness, not our own purification.*

SOTERIOLOGY

Salvation Defined: Inheriting eternal life (v2), possessing all things (v6), and seeing God (v8).

How Attained: Through faithfulness, enduring, being purified from all sin, and heeding the ordained servants.

Basis of Assurance: Assurance is derived from the subjective experience of 'light' growing brighter and the pronouncement of the servant (Joseph Smith).

Comparison to Sola Fide: The text explicitly links blessing and power to 'enduring' and being 'faithful' (v2) and 'purified' (v6). This contrasts with Romans 4:5 ('to the one who does not work but trusts God who justifies the ungodly').

MANDATES & REQUIREMENTS

Explicit Commands:

1. Hearken to the voice of the living God
2. Preach the gospel by the Spirit
3. Ask the Father in the name of Jesus regarding strange spirits
4. Proclaim against false spirits with a loud voice
5. Do not use railing accusations or boasting
6. Watch and be ready for the Lord's appearance

Implicit Obligations:

1. Achieve a state of sinlessness ('purified from all sin') to be effective
2. Accept the 'words of the servant' (Joseph Smith) to receive forgiveness
3. Submit to the hierarchy of ordained elders

Ritual Requirements:

1. Ordination to preach

2. Pronouncement/Exorcism ('proclaim against that spirit')

EVANGELISM TOOLKIT

Discovery Questions:

1. In verse 6, it says 'that which doth not edify is not of God.' Have you ever felt good or edified by something that turned out to be untrue? How do you tell the difference?
2. Verse 6 also says you must be 'purified and cleansed from all sin' to ask whatsoever you will. How do you handle the pressure of needing to be sinless to have your prayers fully answered?
3. Verse 8 says your sins are forgiven because you heard the words of the servant. How does that relate to forgiveness coming through the blood of Christ?

Redemptive Analogies:

1. The desire for discernment – Just as the early Saints wanted to know what was true, we all long for certainty. Christ provides this not through a feeling, but through His objective Word. [John 17:17 ('Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth.')]
2. The longing to see God – The text taps into the beatific vision. The Gospel promises we will see Him because He has washed us, not because we purified ourselves. [1 John 3:2 ('We shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is.')]

Spiritual Weight:

1. Perfectionism/Performance [Severe] – The requirement to be 'purified and cleansed from all sin' to possess power creates an impossible standard, leading to hidden shame or despair when the adherent inevitably sins.
2. Epistemological Anxiety [Moderate] – Relying on 'edification' (feelings) to determine truth leaves the believer constantly analyzing their own emotions to validate their faith, rather than resting on objective promises.
3. Dependency on Hierarchy [Moderate] – Forgiveness and truth are mediated through the 'servant' and the 'elders,' creating a spiritual dependency on human leaders rather than a direct confidence in Christ.

EPISTEMOLOGY

Knowledge Source: Subjective Experience (Edification/Light) and Prophetic Dictation.

Verification Method: The adherent verifies truth by assessing if the message 'edifies' and causes 'light' to grow brighter.

Evangelical Contrast: Biblical epistemology relies on the objective standard of God's written Word (Psalm 119:105, 2 Timothy 3:16). Feelings of edification are secondary and unreliable indicators of truth compared to the 'more sure word of prophecy' (Scripture) mentioned in 2 Peter 1:19.

TEXTUAL CRITICISM

Dating: May 1831

Authorship: Joseph Smith (dictated)

Textual Issues: This text was edited for the 1835 edition to include more developed priesthood terminology (e.g., 'elders') compared to the original Book of Commandments version.