

SECTION 18

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

OVERVIEW

This revelation, delivered in August 1831 (now known as Section 58 in modern editions), marks a pivotal moment in early Mormon ecclesiology and eschatology. It identifies Independence, Missouri, as the central gathering place for the Saints, instructing them to purchase land and establish a literal city of Zion. The text redefines the office of the Bishop (specifically Edward Partridge) from a pastoral role to that of a 'judge in Israel' responsible for dividing inheritances and managing consecrated properties. Theologically, it introduces a rigorous concept of human agency and merit, asserting that believers have the power within themselves to 'bring to pass much righteousness' and that those who wait for divine command are 'slothful' and 'damned.' It further codifies a works-based view of repentance, declaring that forgiveness is contingent upon a believer successfully confessing and forsaking sin, rather than solely on the finished work of Christ.

KEY FIGURES

The Lord (speaking in first person), Edward Partridge (Bishop), Martin Harris, William W. Phelps, Sidney Rigdon, Joseph Smith, Jr., Oliver Cowdery, Ziba Peterson

DOCTRINES ANALYZED

1. INTRINSIC HUMAN AGENCY AND MERIT

Assertion: Humans possess inherent power to generate righteousness and are condemned if they do not proactively do good without command.

"Verily I say, men should be anxiously engaged in a good cause... for the power is in them, wherein they are agents unto themselves. (v6)"

Evangelical Comparison: Evangelical theology, grounded in Romans 3:10-12 and Ephesians 2:1-5, teaches that humanity is dead in trespasses and lacks the intrinsic power to generate spiritual righteousness apart from the regenerating work of the Holy Spirit. This text asserts 'the power is in them,' suggesting an inherent capacity for righteousness that exists independent of immediate divine enablement. Where the Bible teaches that 'it is God who works in you to will and to act' (Philippians 2:13), this text condemns those who wait for God's command as 'slothful,' placing the burden of initiating righteousness on the human agent.

2. CONDITIONAL FORGIVENESS (CONFESS AND FORSAKE)

Assertion: Forgiveness is contingent upon the successful completion of confessing and forsaking sin.

"By this ye may know if a man repenteth of his sins. Behold he will confess them and forsake them. (v9)"

Evangelical Comparison: In Evangelical soteriology, repentance is a change of mind (metanoia) that leads to behavioral change, but forgiveness is immediate upon confession and faith in Christ (1 John 1:9). This text redefines the evidence of repentance ('forsake them') as the condition for forgiveness ('he who has repented... is forgiven'). This creates a theological anxiety: one cannot know they are forgiven until they have successfully and permanently ceased the sin, making assurance of salvation impossible as long as the struggle with sin continues.

3. GEOGRAPHIC ZION

Assertion: Zion is a literal location in Independence, Missouri, to be purchased and built by the Saints.

"And it is wisdom also, that there should be lands purchased in Independence, for the place of the storehouse... (v7)"

Evangelical Comparison: The New Testament interprets Zion typologically as the heavenly Jerusalem or the assembly of the firstborn (Hebrews 12:22). This text reverts to a geo-political understanding of the Kingdom of God, requiring the physical purchase of land in Missouri to establish God's heritage. This conflates the Old Covenant territorial promises given to Israel with the New Covenant spiritual kingdom, which Jesus declared is 'not of this world' (John 18:36).

COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

Divergence Status: Yes

Theological Gap: While using Christian terminology (repentance, faith, gospel), the underlying structure is Pelagian or Semi-Pelagian. The text asserts that humans have the inherent power to do good and that God's blessings are strictly transactional ('I commanded and a man obeys not, I revoke and they receive not the blessing'). This denies the Evangelical doctrine of Sola Fide, where justification is a gift of grace received by faith alone, independent of the believer's moral performance or 'anxious engagement' in works.

Shared Values:

Importance of repentance; Care for the poor (Feast of fat things); Obedience to civil law (Romans 13); Expectation of the Second Coming

Friction Points:

1. [Critical] Sola Fide (Faith Alone) – Forgiveness is conditioned on the work of forsaking sin (v9) and keeping commandments (v1).
2. [Critical] Sola Gratia (Grace Alone) – Claims the 'power is in them' to bring to pass righteousness, denying total dependence on grace.
3. [Major] Sola Scriptura – Adds new binding laws, offices, and geographic mandates not found in the Bible.
4. [Major] Theology Proper (Kingdom of God) – Materializes the Kingdom into a real estate venture in Missouri rather than a spiritual reign.

Semantic Warnings:

"Zion"

In Text: A specific geographic location in Independence, Missouri.

Evangelical: The city of God, the church, or the heavenly Jerusalem (Hebrews 12:22).

Example: *In this text, you 'purchase' Zion with money. In the Bible, you are born into Zion through faith.*

"Bishop"

In Text: A judge in Israel who manages property, inheritance, and church law.

Evangelical: An overseer/elder charged with shepherding souls and teaching doctrine (1 Timothy 3, Titus 1).

Example: *Edward Partridge is told to 'divide the lands' (v4), a civil/legal function, whereas biblical bishops are shepherds.*

"Repentance"

In Text: The process of confessing and successfully forsaking sin to obtain forgiveness.

Evangelical: A change of mind (metanoia) regarding sin and Christ, resulting in immediate forgiveness.

Example: *The text says 'By this ye may know if a man repenteth... he will... forsake them,' implying forgiveness is suspended until the forsaking is verified.*

SOTERIOLOGY

Salvation Defined: Implicitly defined as entering the Kingdom of Heaven through obedience, tribulation, and gathering to Zion.

How Attained: Through keeping commandments, enduring tribulation, and exercising inherent agency to do good works.

Basis of Assurance: Based on the evidence of works ('anxiously engaged') and the successful forsaking of sin.

Comparison to Sola Fide: Directly opposes Sola Fide by stating 'he that doeth not anything until he is commanded... is damned' (v6), making salvation dependent on proactive works.

MANDATES & REQUIREMENTS

Explicit Commands:

1. Keep commandments to be blessed (v1)
2. Edward Partridge to judge the people and divide lands (v4)

3. Be subject to the powers that be (laws of the land) (v5)
4. Martin Harris to give his money to the bishop (v7)
5. Purchase lands in Independence, Missouri (v7, 11)
6. W.W. Phelps to repent of seeking to excel (v9)
7. Sidney Rigdon to write a description of the land and consecrate the temple spot (v11, 13)
8. Preach the gospel to every creature (v15)

Implicit Obligations:

1. Proactively find 'good causes' to engage in without waiting for specific revelation (v6)
2. Accept the Bishop's authority over personal property and inheritance (v4, 7)
3. Endure tribulation with the expectation of future glory (v2)

Ritual Requirements:

1. Consecration and dedication of the land and temple spot (v13)
2. Gathering to Zion (Missouri) (v12)

EVANGELISM TOOLKIT

Discovery Questions:

1. In verse 9, it says we know a man repents if he 'forsakes' his sin. If forgiveness depends on completely stopping a sin, how can you ever be sure you are forgiven if you might struggle with it again?
2. Verse 6 says the 'power is in' us to bring to pass righteousness. How does that fit with Paul's statement in Romans 7:18 that 'in my flesh dwelleth no good thing'?
3. If being 'anxiously engaged' is required to avoid being 'damned' (v6), do you ever feel like you can rest in Christ, or is there always pressure to do more?

Redemptive Analogies:

1. The Feast of Fat Things – This expresses a deep human longing for God's provision and celebration. In the Gospel, God provides the feast (the Wedding Supper of the Lamb) by His grace. [Isaiah 25:6, Revelation 19:9]
2. Desire for a Good Cause – We were created for good works (Ephesians 2:10), but these works are the *result* of salvation, not the cause of it. The Gospel frees us to do good out of love, not fear of damnation. [Ephesians 2:8-10]

Spiritual Weight:

1. Performance Anxiety / Perfectionism [Severe] – The command to be 'anxiously engaged' without waiting for direction creates a psychological state of constant vigilance and guilt. The believer feels they are never doing enough and that their salvation is always at risk due to 'slothfulness.'
2. Uncertainty of Forgiveness [Severe] – By defining repentance as 'forsaking,' the text removes the assurance of immediate forgiveness. A believer who struggles with a habitual sin is effectively told they have not repented and are not forgiven.
3. Financial/Material Pressure [Moderate] – The requirement to purchase lands and lay moneys before the bishop creates a financial burden on the adherent to fund the religious system to secure their 'inheritance.'
4. Fear of Revocation [Moderate] – The text explicitly states God may 'revoke' blessings if obedience is not perfect (v6), portraying God as unstable or reactionary based on human performance.

EPISTEMOLOGY

Knowledge Source: Prophetic Revelation (Joseph Smith) and Pragmatic Verification (Behavioral Observation).

Verification Method: Adherents know if a man repents by observing if he confesses and forsakes sin (v9). Adherents know the will of God through the written commandments of the prophet.

Evangelical Contrast: Biblical epistemology relies on the illuminated Word of God (Psalm 119:105) and the internal witness of the Spirit regarding the truth of Scripture (1 John 5:6-10). This text relies on external obedience and the dictates of a modern prophet.

TEXTUAL CRITICISM

Dating: August 1, 1831

Authorship: Joseph Smith (dictated)

Textual Issues: This text was edited for the 1835 edition. Comparison with the Book of Commandments (1833) often reveals significant theological evolution in early Mormon texts, though this specific section focuses heavily on administrative setup.