

SECTION 20 (MODERN SECTION 63)

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

OVERVIEW

This revelation, given in Kirtland, Ohio, in August 1831, addresses a critical transition period for the early Latter-day Saint movement. As the focus shifted toward establishing 'Zion' in Independence, Missouri, Joseph Smith issued this text to regulate the behavior and expectations of his followers. The text opens with a stern warning against 'sign-seeking,' equating the demand for miraculous proof with 'adultery'—a theological link suggesting that demanding signs is an act of spiritual unfaithfulness that often correlates with physical immorality. The revelation outlines the eschatological 'transfiguration' of the earth and promises an inheritance to those who endure in works and faith. Practically, it provides specific instructions regarding the purchase of land in Missouri, explicitly forbidding the violent seizure of property ('not... by blood') and mandating legal purchase to avoid inciting the 'anger' of the world. It establishes a hierarchy of authority where Joseph Smith is given the power to discern who is spiritually qualified to move to Zion and who must tarry. The text concludes with administrative directives for specific individuals (Titus Billings, Newel K. Whitney, Sidney Rigdon) and a warning against using the Lord's name without proper priesthood authority.

KEY FIGURES

Jesus Christ (The Speaker), Joseph Smith, Jr., Titus Billings, Newel K. Whitney, Oliver Cowdery, Sidney Rigdon

DOCTRINES ANALYZED

1. SIGN-SEEKING AS ADULTERY

Assertion: Those who seek signs are wicked and often guilty of adultery; signs are a reward for faith, not a cause of it.

"Verily I say unto you, there are those among you who seek signs... There were among you adulterers and adulteresses..."
(v3-4)

Evangelical Comparison: In Evangelical theology, skepticism or the desire for evidence is often treated as a lack of faith (Thomas), but not necessarily as an indicator of sexual immorality. This text creates a unique psycho-spiritual linkage where 'seeking signs' is diagnostic of 'adultery' (spiritual or physical). Furthermore, while Evangelicals believe miracles occur, they do not view them as a guaranteed 'right' or systematic 'reward' that follows faith in a predictable manner, but rather as acts of God's sovereign grace.

2. CONDITIONAL INHERITANCE OF ZION

Assertion: Inheritance in Zion and the transfigured earth is contingent upon enduring in faith, doing God's will, and purchasing land.

"he that endureth in faith and doeth my will, the same shall overcome, and shall receive an inheritance upon the earth (v6)"

Evangelical Comparison: The text posits a 'transfigured earth' as a reward for those who 'do my will' and 'endure.' In contrast, Evangelical eschatology views the New Earth as the destiny of all believers secured solely by the blood of Christ (Revelation 21). The specific requirement to 'purchase' land to secure a spiritual inheritance conflates temporal real estate acquisition with spiritual salvation, a concept foreign to the New Testament which emphasizes a kingdom 'not of this world.'

3. EXCLUSIVE PRIESTHOOD AUTHORITY

Assertion: Using the name of the Lord is only valid when done with specific authority; otherwise, it brings condemnation.

"who useth the name of the Lord, and useth it in vain, having not authority. (v15)"

Evangelical Comparison: The text redefines 'taking the Lord's name in vain' from a prohibition on irreverence/oaths (Exodus 20:7) to a prohibition on ministering without LDS priesthood authority. This directly opposes the Evangelical doctrine of the Priesthood of All Believers (1 Peter 2:9), where every Christian has access to the Father through the Son and authority to pray and minister in Jesus' name without human mediation.

COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

Divergence Status: Yes

Theological Gap: The fundamental gap lies in the nature of the Kingdom and the means of entry. In this text, the Kingdom is a physical location (Missouri) to be bought with money and inhabited by those who obey the prophet's specific logistical commands. Salvation (inheritance) is a future reward for those who 'endure' and 'do.' In Evangelicalism, the Kingdom is a spiritual reality entered immediately upon regeneration (John 3:3), and the inheritance is 'imperishable, undefiled, and unfading' (1 Peter 1:4), kept in heaven, not purchased in Missouri. The text's requirement of priesthood authority to 'use the name of the Lord' erects a barrier between the believer and God that Christ tore down at the veil.

Shared Values:

Condemnation of adultery and lust; Belief in the Second Coming of Christ; Resurrection of the dead; Warning against hypocrisy

Friction Points:

1. [Critical] Sola Fide – Inheritance is conditioned on works, endurance, and financial contribution (purchasing land).
2. [Critical] Sola Scriptura – Asserts new, binding revelation that modifies the requirements for salvation and church governance.
3. [Major] Christology (Sufficiency) – Implies Christ's work is insufficient to secure inheritance without the believer's 'doing' and 'purchasing.'
4. [Major] Universal Priesthood – Restricts the valid use of God's name to those with specific hierarchical authority.

Semantic Warnings:

"Zion"

In Text: A specific physical location in Jackson County, Missouri, to be purchased and built.

Evangelical: The dwelling place of God; often refers to Jerusalem, the church, or the heavenly city (Hebrews 12:22).

Example: *In this text: 'Assemble yourselves together unto the land of Zion... purchase the lands.' In Bible: 'You have come to Mount Zion... the heavenly Jerusalem' (Hebrews 12:22).*

"Mysteries"

In Text: Secret knowledge or deeper doctrines given as a reward for obedience (v7).

Evangelical: Truths once hidden but now fully revealed to all saints through Christ (Colossians 1:26).

Example: *In this text: 'I will give the mysteries... unto him that keepeth my commandments.' In Bible: 'To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom' (Matt 13:11 - given to disciples by grace).*

SOTERIOLOGY

Salvation Defined: Receiving an inheritance on the transfigured earth; overcoming the world.

How Attained: By faith, repentance, baptism, enduring to the end, keeping commandments, and gathering to Zion.

Basis of Assurance: Based on 'doing my will' and not being 'cut off' by the leadership.

Comparison to Sola Fide: Directly opposes Sola Fide. Verse 6 states 'he that endureth in faith and doeth my will... shall overcome.' Evangelicalism teaches we overcome because Christ has overcome (John 16:33) and our faith is the victory (1 John 5:4), not our doing.

MANDATES & REQUIREMENTS

Explicit Commands:

1. Repent of adultery and lust
2. Purchase lands in Zion (Missouri)
3. Send money to Zion
4. Titus Billings must sell his land

5. Newel K. Whitney must retain his store temporarily and send money
6. Sidney Rigdon must write a new description of the land

Implicit Obligations:

1. Submit to Joseph Smith's discernment regarding relocation
2. Accept the hierarchy's control over personal finances and property
3. Refrain from asking for miraculous proof (signs)

Ritual Requirements:

1. Ordination to power/agency (v12, v15)
2. Gathering to a specific geographic location

EVANGELISM TOOLKIT

Discovery Questions:

1. This passage says signs follow those who believe. How do you distinguish between a genuine sign from God and a 'confirmation bias' where we just see what we want to see?
2. Verse 6 promises inheritance to those who 'do my will.' How do you know when you have done enough of God's will to be secure?
3. The text warns against using the Lord's name without authority. In the Bible, Jesus says 'where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I.' How do you reconcile these two ideas?

Redemptive Analogies:

1. The Longing for Zion – This reflects the human heart's longing for a perfect society and dwelling place with God. The Gospel fulfills this not through building a city in Missouri, but through the New Jerusalem which God Himself brings down. [Hebrews 11:10, 16 (Abraham looked for a city whose builder is God).]

Spiritual Weight:

1. Performance Anxiety [Severe] – The believer must constantly 'endure' and 'do' to secure their inheritance. The fear of failure is heightened by the threat of being 'cut off' or denied the 'mysteries.'
2. Financial Pressure [Moderate] – The explicit command to send money and purchase land places a divine obligation on personal finances, linking monetary contribution to spiritual standing.
3. Ecclesiastical Dependence [Moderate] – The believer cannot even use the Lord's name or move locations without the validation of the hierarchy/prophet, creating a dependency that stunts personal spiritual maturity.

EPISTEMOLOGY

Knowledge Source: Prophetic Revelation (Joseph Smith) and Personal Experience (Signs following belief).

Verification Method: Obedience leads to mysteries; belief leads to signs. Skepticism is attributed to sin.

Evangelical Contrast: Biblical epistemology relies on the objective standard of Scripture (Acts 17:11) and the internal witness of the Holy Spirit regarding the truth of the Gospel (Romans 8:16), not on the production of signs or the directives of a modern prophet.

TEXTUAL CRITICISM

Dating: August 30, 1831

Authorship: Joseph Smith (dictated)

Textual Issues: This text was edited for the 1835 edition (Section 20) and later re-numbered to Section 63 in modern editions. Changes were made to clarify the 'property' and 'agent' roles.