

SECTION 22

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

OVERVIEW

Section 22 (modern Section 68) is a seminal text in the development of Mormon ecclesiology and authority. Delivered in November 1831, it fundamentally alters the definition of 'scripture' from a fixed canon to a dynamic, continuous stream of revelation flowing through priesthood holders. It asserts that when elders speak by the power of the Holy Ghost, their words are the 'will,' 'mind,' and 'voice' of the Lord, equivalent to scripture. This establishes the foundation for the LDS concept of 'living prophets' taking precedence over ancient texts. The text also attempts to harmonize Old Testament Levitical requirements with the new church structure by claiming that 'literal descendants of Aaron' have a legal right to the office of Bishop, though Melchizedek High Priests may officiate if no literal descendant is found. Finally, it codifies the 'age of accountability,' commanding that children be baptized for the remission of sins at eight years old. It places a heavy spiritual burden on parents, declaring that if they fail to teach this doctrine and baptize their children, the sin falls upon the parents' heads.

KEY FIGURES

Orson Hyde, Luke Johnson, Lyman Johnson, William E. McLellin, Oliver Cowdery, Literal Descendants of Aaron

DOCTRINES ANALYZED

1. OPEN CANON / LIVING SCRIPTURE

Assertion: Any word spoken by an elder when moved by the Holy Ghost is technically scripture, the will of the Lord, and the power of God.

"whatsoever they shall speak when moved upon by the Holy Ghost, shall be scripture; shall be the will of the Lord... shall be the voice of the Lord"

Evangelical Comparison: Evangelical Christianity holds to Sola Scriptura, meaning the 66 books of the Bible are the sole infallible rule of faith (2 Timothy 3:16, Jude 3). This text radically expands the definition of scripture to include the extemporaneous speech of missionaries and leaders when 'moved upon by the Holy Ghost.' This creates a subjective standard for truth where current revelation can supersede the written Bible, effectively removing the objective standard by which truth is measured.

2. AARONIC LINEAGE RIGHTS

Assertion: Literal descendants of Aaron have a legal right to the office of Bishop without needing to be called as High Priests.

"if they be literal descendants of Aaron, they have a legal right to the bishopric... the first born holds the right of presidency over this priesthood"

Evangelical Comparison: The text asserts that biological lineage (descendants of Aaron) confers spiritual authority and office. In contrast, Evangelical theology, based on Hebrews 7, teaches that the Levitical/Aaronic priesthood was a shadow fulfilled by Christ, who is a priest forever in the order of Melchizedek. The New Testament office of overseer (bishop) is based on character and gifting (1 Timothy 3), not bloodline or Old Covenant tribal affiliation.

3. PARENTAL SIN TRANSFER

Assertion: If parents do not baptize their children at age eight, the sin is placed upon the parents.

"teach them not to understand the doctrine... of baptism... when eight years old, the sin be upon the head of the parents"

Evangelical Comparison: While Evangelicals emphasize the duty of parents to raise children in the Lord (Ephesians 6:4), they reject the idea that a child's lack of ritual observance transfers guilt to the parent. This doctrine creates a 'vicarious guilt' mechanism. Furthermore, it mandates baptism for the remission of sins at a specific age (8), whereas Evangelicals view baptism as an outward sign of inward faith, not a ritual that remits sin or is tied to a biological clock.

COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

Divergence Status: Yes

Theological Gap: The fundamental gap lies in the locus of authority and the nature of the priesthood. For Evangelicals, authority resides in the completed Word of God (Sola Scriptura) and the priesthood is universal to all believers through Christ (1 Peter 2:9). This text shifts authority to a living hierarchy whose words become 'scripture' and restricts priesthood authority to specific offices and even bloodlines (Aaronic). Additionally, the requirement of baptism for the remission of sins at eight years old introduces a works-based sacramentalism that conflicts with Sola Fide (Salvation by Faith Alone).

Shared Values:

Great Commission (Go ye out into all the world); Trinitarian formula in baptism (Father, Son, Holy Ghost); Importance of teaching children faith and repentance; Sabbath observance; Work ethic

Friction Points:

1. [Critical] Sola Scriptura – Declares oral words of modern elders to be 'scripture' and 'the voice of the Lord,' denying the uniqueness and closure of the Bible.
2. [Major] Sola Fide / Individual Responsibility – Conditions freedom from sin on the performance of a ritual (baptism) for one's children, implying salvation/standing is dependent on works and family performance.
3. [Major] Christology / Priesthood – Rebuilds the Aaronic priesthood wall that Christ tore down, claiming validity for Levitical bloodlines.

Semantic Warnings:

"Scripture"

In Text: Any word spoken by a priesthood holder when moved by the Holy Ghost.

Evangelical: The fixed canon of the Old and New Testaments (Theopneustos - God-breathed writings).

Example: *In this text, a missionary's sermon is 'scripture'; in Evangelicalism, only the Bible is Scripture.*

"Bishop"

In Text: An office in the Aaronic priesthood, ideally held by a literal descendant of Aaron, dealing with temporal things.

Evangelical: An overseer/elder (episkopos) responsible for shepherding the flock, unrelated to Aaronic lineage.

Example: *A 'Bishop' in this text has a 'legal right' via bloodline; a biblical Bishop is qualified by character (1 Tim 3).*

SOTERIOLOGY

Salvation Defined: Implied as 'eternal life' (v1) and remission of sins (v4).

How Attained: Through faith, baptism (specifically at age 8), receiving the Holy Ghost, and priesthood sealing power.

Basis of Assurance: Priesthood authority ('power to seal them up') and adherence to covenants.

Comparison to Sola Fide: The text adds ritual requirements (baptism, sealing) and lineage-based authority as necessary components for the administration of salvation, contradicting Romans 3:28.

MANDATES & REQUIREMENTS

Explicit Commands:

1. Go out into all the world and preach
2. Baptize in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost
3. Parents must teach children repentance, faith, and baptism
4. Baptize children specifically at eight years old
5. Observe the Sabbath day
6. Labor faithfully; do not be idle
7. Pray in the season thereof

Implicit Obligations:

1. Accept the words of elders as scripture
2. Submit to the First Presidency as the supreme court of the church
3. Seek out lineage to determine priesthood rights

Ritual Requirements:

1. Baptism by immersion (implied context) at age 8
2. Laying on of hands for the Holy Ghost
3. Ordination of Bishops (literal descendants or High Priests)

EVANGELISM TOOLKIT

Discovery Questions:

1. This section says that whatever an elder speaks when moved by the Holy Ghost is scripture. How do you personally test whether a leader is speaking by the Holy Ghost or just their own opinion?
2. Verse 25 says if parents don't baptize their children at eight, the sin is on the parents' heads. How does that make you feel as a parent, and how does that relate to Jesus taking all sin upon Himself?
3. Why would the Lord re-establish the 'literal descendants of Aaron' as Bishops when Hebrews 7 says the priesthood has changed from Aaron to Melchizedek because of Christ?

Redemptive Analogies:

1. The desire for a 'Sure Word' – People long to hear God speak clearly. This longing is truly satisfied not in fallible human leaders, but in the 'more sure word of prophecy'—the Bible. [2 Peter 1:19-21]
2. Parental Concern for Children – The text leverages the fear of parents for their children's souls. The Gospel offers peace, knowing that children are sanctified through believing parents and entrusted to a gracious God, not a legalistic timeline. [1 Corinthians 7:14, Mark 10:14]

Spiritual Weight:

1. Uncertainty / Epistemological Instability [Moderate] – Believers must constantly discern if a leader's current words are 'scripture' or opinion. If they are scripture, they must be obeyed even if they contradict previous scripture, creating anxiety and cognitive dissonance.
2. Parental Guilt / Fear [Severe] – Parents carry the crushing weight of believing that their children's eternal status—and their own freedom from sin—depends on their performance in teaching and enforcing rituals by age eight. Any rebellion by the child is interpreted as the parent's failure and sin.

EPISTEMOLOGY

Knowledge Source: Subjective spiritual impulse ('moved upon by the Holy Ghost') and authoritative decree from the First Presidency.

Verification Method: Adherents are expected to accept the 'voice of the Spirit' through leaders as the 'mind of the Lord.'

Evangelical Contrast: Biblical epistemology tests all spirits and prophecies against the fixed, written Word of God (Acts 17:11, 1 John 4:1). This text makes the subjective impulse of the speaker the standard of truth.

TEXTUAL CRITICISM

Dating: November 1831

Authorship: Joseph Smith (dictated)

Textual Issues: This section underwent significant revision between the 1833 Book of Commandments and the 1835 Doctrine and Covenants to reflect the developing priesthood hierarchy (adding references to First Presidency and High Priests which did not exist in the same form in 1831).