

SECTION 32

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

OVERVIEW

This revelation, given in March 1829 (canonized as Section 32 in the 1835 Doctrine and Covenants, now Section 5 in modern editions), addresses a critical moment of skepticism in early Mormon history. Martin Harris, Joseph Smith's scribe and financier, demanded a witness of the Golden Plates. The text, voiced as the Lord speaking to Joseph, denies Harris an immediate view, establishing a theological precedent that faith must precede physical evidence. It delineates Joseph Smith's role, commanding him to 'pretend to no other gift' but translation for the time being. The text promises that three witnesses will eventually be called to view the plates, but only if they rely on God's power. It contains severe warnings of a 'desolating scourge' upon the unbelieving generation and places heavy conditional burdens on both Smith and Harris. Smith is promised eternal life only 'if' he remains firm and walks uprightly, while Harris is threatened with condemnation if he fails to humble himself. The text serves to consolidate authority in Joseph Smith while managing the expectations of his followers regarding empirical verification of his claims.

KEY FIGURES

God (The Speaker), Joseph Smith, Martin Harris, The Three Witnesses (Prophesied)

DOCTRINES ANALYZED

1. CONDITIONAL JUSTIFICATION

Assertion: Eternal life is granted contingent upon the individual's performance, specifically walking uprightly and keeping commandments.

"if you do this, behold I grant unto you eternal life, even if you should be slain. (Verse 4)"

Evangelical Comparison: In Evangelical theology, justification is a forensic declaration by God based on the finished work of Christ, received by faith alone (Romans 3:28, Ephesians 2:8-9). This text presents a 'covenant of works' model where God says, 'if you do this... I grant unto you eternal life.' The granting of eternal life is explicitly tied to Joseph Smith's ability to 'walk more uprightly' and 'yield to the persuasions of men no more.' This introduces a probation-based soteriology where salvation is an uncertain future reward for successful endurance rather than a present possession secured by Christ.

2. EXCLUSIVE REVELATORY STEWARDSHIP

Assertion: God's word for this generation is exclusively channeled through Joseph Smith.

"this generation shall have my word through you (Verse 3)"

Evangelical Comparison: The text asserts that the current generation is dependent on Joseph Smith to receive God's word ('through you'). This centralizes spiritual authority in a single mediator other than Christ. Evangelicalism holds to Sola Scriptura, believing God has spoken fully and finally in His Son (Hebrews 1:1-2) and the closed canon of Scripture, rejecting the need for a new 'prophet' to mediate God's word to the age.

COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

Divergence Status: Yes

Theological Gap: The fundamental gap lies in the mechanism of salvation and authority. This text presents a God who negotiates salvation based on future performance ('if you do this... I grant eternal life'). This is a re-introduction of the Law, contrasting sharply with the Evangelical understanding of the Covenant of Grace where Christ fulfills the law on behalf of the believer. Furthermore, the text establishes Joseph Smith not merely as a preacher, but as a necessary revelatory gatekeeper for his generation, violating the doctrine of the sole mediatorship of Christ (1 Timothy 2:5).

Shared Values:

Necessity of repentance; God speaks to humanity; Reality of judgment ('desolating scourge')

Friction Points:

1. [Critical] Sola Fide (Faith Alone) – Salvation is conditional on 'walking uprightly' and keeping commandments.
2. [Critical] Sola Gratia (Grace Alone) – God's favor and the gift of eternal life are presented as a response to human effort ('if you do this').
3. [Critical] Sola Scriptura (Scripture Alone) – Asserts new, binding revelation through Joseph Smith as necessary for the generation.

Semantic Warnings:

"Witness"

In Text: A person permitted to see the plates through a spiritual manifestation contingent on faith.

Evangelical: Typically an observer of objective fact or historical event (Acts 1:22).

Example: *In Acts, the apostles witnessed the resurrected Christ physically. In D&C 32, Martin Harris must generate faith *before* he is allowed to be a witness.*

"Born of God"

In Text: Associated here with believing Joseph's words and water baptism (Verse 3).

Evangelical: Regeneration by the Holy Spirit through faith in Christ (John 1:12-13, 1 Peter 1:23).

Example: *The text links the new birth to accepting the new revelation ('whosoever believeth on my words... shall be born of me').*

SOTERIOLOGY

Salvation Defined: Eternal life (Verse 4) and being 'lifted up at the last day' (Verse 6).

How Attained: Through faithfulness, keeping commandments, and walking uprightly.

Basis of Assurance: Conditional promise based on future behavior.

Comparison to Sola Fide: Directly opposes Sola Fide. Romans 3:28 states a man is justified by faith apart from deeds of the law; D&C 32:4 states eternal life is granted 'if' the recipient walks uprightly and keeps commandments.

MANDATES & REQUIREMENTS

Explicit Commands:

1. Joseph must not show the plates to anyone except those commanded (Verse 1)
2. Joseph must 'pretend to no other gift' until the translation is finished (Verse 1)
3. Joseph must repent and walk more uprightly (Verse 4)
4. Martin Harris must humble himself and pray in faith to see the view (Verse 5)
5. Martin Harris must testify using specific prescribed wording (Verse 5)

Implicit Obligations:

1. Absolute loyalty to the new revelation over previous social or religious commitments
2. Acceptance of Joseph Smith as the sole conduit of divine will

Ritual Requirements:

1. Baptism ('born of me, even of water and of the Spirit') linked to believing the new words (Verse 3)

EVANGELISM TOOLKIT

Discovery Questions:

1. In verse 4, the Lord tells Joseph, 'if you do this... I grant unto you eternal life.' How do you interpret that 'if'? Does it worry you that eternal life is conditional on your performance?
2. The text says Martin Harris could only see the plates if he humbled himself and had faith first. Why do you think God required faith *before* providing the evidence, rather than using the evidence to create faith?

3. Verse 1 mentions Joseph should 'pretend to no other gift.' What other gifts might he have been tempted to use during this time?

Redemptive Analogies:

1. The Desire for a Witness – Humanity longs for assurance that God is real and has spoken. We all want a 'witness.' [God provided the ultimate witness not on gold plates, but in the person of Jesus Christ. Hebrews 1:1-3 tells us God has spoken to us by His Son, the exact imprint of His nature.]

Spiritual Weight:

1. Performance Anxiety / Uncertainty [Severe] – The believer is placed on a treadmill of 'if/then' salvation. Assurance is impossible because one can never be sure if they have 'walked uprightly' enough to satisfy the condition for eternal life.
2. Dependency on Human Mediation [Moderate] – The text binds the believer's access to God's word to Joseph Smith. If Joseph fails or is rejected, the connection to truth is severed (Verse 2: 'if they will not believe my words, they would not believe you').

EPISTEMOLOGY

Knowledge Source: Subjective Spiritual Confirmation preceding Empirical Evidence

Verification Method: Adherents must believe *before* seeing. Martin Harris is told he can only see the plates if he first humbles himself and exercises faith.

Evangelical Contrast: Biblical faith is often grounded in historical acts (1 Corinthians 15:3-8). While faith is the assurance of things not seen (Hebrews 11:1), this text weaponizes the unseen: one is denied evidence until they have already committed to the belief, creating a closed loop of confirmation bias.

TEXTUAL CRITICISM

Dating: March 1829

Authorship: Joseph Smith (dictated)

Textual Issues: Verse 1 in the 1835 edition reads: 'and I have commanded that you should pretend to no other gift'. In the 1833 Book of Commandments (4:2), it read 'and you have no other gift'. Modern editions (D&C 5:4) were changed to 'and you have a gift... and I have commanded that you should pretend to no other gift'. The word 'pretend' in 1829/1835 context could mean 'to claim' or 'attempt', but the evolution of the text suggests a shift from Joseph having *only* the gift of translation to Joseph eventually assuming a broader prophetic role.