

SECTION 4

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

OVERVIEW

This text, known in modern Latter-day Saint editions as Section 84, is a foundational document regarding priesthood authority and liturgy. Delivered in September 1832, it asserts that the 'greater priesthood' (Melchizedek) holds the key to the mysteries of godliness and that without its ordinances, no man can see the face of God and live. It traces a unique lineage of authority from Moses back to Adam, bypassing traditional biblical genealogies. The text issues a specific prophecy that a temple would be built in Independence, Missouri, before the passing of the current generation—a site dedicated by Joseph Smith. It establishes the 'Oath and Covenant of the Priesthood,' promising that those who receive the priesthood receive the Lord, while those who turn away commit an unpardonable sin. Finally, it serves as a missionary commission, instructing elders to travel without 'purse or scrip' (money or supplies), promising them miraculous protection and the power to seal up the wicked unto judgment.

KEY FIGURES

Jesus Christ, Joseph Smith, Moses, Aaron, Abraham, John the Baptist, Newel K. Whitney

DOCTRINES ANALYZED

1. NECESSITY OF PRIESTHOOD ORDINANCES

Assertion: Access to God and the 'power of godliness' is impossible without specific rituals administered by priesthood authority.

"in the ordinances thereof, the power of godliness is manifest; and without the ordinances thereof, and the authority of the priesthood, the power of godliness is not manifest unto men in the flesh; for without this no man can see the face of God, even the Father, and live. (Para 3)"

Evangelical Comparison: This doctrine establishes a sacramental sacerdotalism where grace is mediated through ritual rather than faith alone. Evangelical theology holds that the veil was torn at Christ's death (Matthew 27:51), allowing believers 'boldness to enter into the holiest by the blood of Jesus' (Hebrews 10:19). This text rebuilds the veil, asserting that without the specific priesthood ordinances, the 'power of godliness' is absent and God's face remains hidden. It effectively replaces the sole mediation of Christ (1 Timothy 2:5) with a system of human mediators.

2. THE OATH AND COVENANT OF THE PRIESTHOOD

Assertion: Men who receive the priesthood and magnify their calling become the 'elect of God,' but those who turn away cannot be forgiven in this world or the next.

"whoso breaketh this covenant, after he hath received it, and altogether turneth therefrom, shall not have forgiveness of sins in this world nor in the world to come. (Para 6)"

Evangelical Comparison: This doctrine ties eternal security directly to ecclesiastical faithfulness and office-holding. In Evangelicalism, the 'unpardonable sin' is generally interpreted as final resistance to the Holy Spirit, not the resignation of a priestly office. This text places a heavy burden of perfectionism on the adherent ('magnifying their calling') and creates a theological trap where leaving the priesthood structure equates to eternal damnation, contradicting the assurance of salvation found in Romans 8:38-39.

3. CONDEMNATION REGARDING THE BOOK OF MORMON

Assertion: The whole church is under condemnation for neglecting the Book of Mormon and former commandments.

"And this condemnation resteth upon the children of Zion, even all; and they shall remain under this condemnation until they repent and remember the new covenant, even the book of Mormon (Para 8)"

Evangelical Comparison: The text explicitly identifies the Book of Mormon as 'the new covenant,' a title biblically reserved for the blood of Christ (Luke 22:20). This displaces the centrality of the Cross. For the Evangelical, the canon is closed and sufficient (Sola Scriptura); here, the spiritual standing of the church is contingent upon their reception and obedience to a modern text, placing it functionally above the Bible.

COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

Divergence Status: Yes

Theological Gap: The fundamental gap lies in the sufficiency of Christ's high priestly work. Hebrews 7-10 argues that the Levitical priesthood was imperfect and temporary, replaced by Christ's unchangeable priesthood. This text resurrects the 'sons of Moses and Aaron' and makes their ordinances a prerequisite for seeing God. Furthermore, it introduces the 'Oath and Covenant,' which threatens unpardonable damnation for ecclesiastical failure, creating a system of high-stakes legalism that obscures the security of the believer found in the Gospel of Grace.

Shared Values:

Belief in Jesus Christ as Lord; Necessity of repentance; Concern for the poor (Para 19); Zeal for evangelism/missionary work

Friction Points:

1. [Critical] Sola Scriptura – Adds new revelation (D&C) and elevates the Book of Mormon to 'New Covenant' status.
2. [Critical] Sola Fide – Salvation/Exaltation is contingent on priesthood ordinances and magnifying callings.
3. [Major] Universal Priesthood – Restricts authority and access to God to a specific hierarchy of men.
4. [Critical] Soteriology (Eternal Security) – Introduces an unpardonable sin for those who leave the priesthood covenant.

Semantic Warnings:

"Priesthood"

In Text: A hierarchical authority structure (Aaronic/Melchizedek) necessary to administer saving ordinances.

Evangelical: The Priesthood of all Believers (1 Peter 2:9), with Christ as the sole High Priest.

Example: *In this text, 'priesthood' is a power holding the keys to God's presence; in the Bible, all believers have access to God through Christ.*

"Generation"

In Text: Used here to denote the lifetime of those living in 1832 ('shall not all pass away').

Evangelical: Can mean a specific time period or a quality of people, but here used as a specific time marker for prophecy fulfillment.

Example: *The prophecy claims the temple would be built before the 1832 generation died.*

"Salvation/Sanctification"

In Text: Linked to the 'renewing of their bodies' through priesthood ordinances (Para 6).

Evangelical: The process of being made holy by the Holy Spirit through faith in the Word.

Example: *Sanctification here is a result of 'magnifying a calling' in the priesthood.*

SOTERIOLOGY

Salvation Defined: Entering the presence of God (seeing His face) and receiving 'all that my Father hath' (exaltation).

How Attained: Through receiving the priesthood, ordinances, and magnifying one's calling.

Basis of Assurance: Faithfulness to the 'Oath and Covenant' of the priesthood.

Comparison to Sola Fide: Directly opposes Sola Fide by stating that without ordinances, the power of godliness is not manifest. Romans 3:28 states man is justified by faith apart from deeds of the law.

MANDATES & REQUIREMENTS

Explicit Commands:

1. Build a temple in Missouri in this generation (Para 2)
2. Repent and remember the Book of Mormon (Para 8)

3. Go into the world to preach without purse or scrip (Para 13, 15)
4. Cleanse feet as a testimony against those who reject the message (Para 16)
5. Send money to the Bishop in Zion or Ohio (Para 18)

Implicit Obligations:

1. Seek ordination to the priesthood (for men)
2. Submit to the hierarchical authority of the 'sons of Moses and Aaron'
3. Accept Joseph Smith's revelations as the voice of God

Ritual Requirements:

1. Priesthood ordination
2. Baptism by water
3. Washing of feet (as a judgment ritual)
4. Consecration of property/funds

EVANGELISM TOOLKIT

Discovery Questions:

1. The text says the temple in Missouri would be built before the generation of 1832 passed away. How do you reconcile this with the fact that the temple was never built?
2. Verse 21 says without priesthood ordinances, no man can see the face of God and live. How does this fit with Hebrews 10:19, which says we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus, not by human ordinances?
3. If the Book of Mormon is the 'new covenant' (Para 8), what is the role of the New Testament in your faith?

Redemptive Analogies:

1. The desire to see the face of God – The text correctly identifies the human longing to see God. The Gospel answers this not with more laws/priesthoods, but with Christ, who is the image of the invisible God. [John 14:9 ('He that has seen me has seen the Father')); 2 Corinthians 4:6]
2. The New Song – Revelation also speaks of a 'new song' sung by the redeemed, focusing on the Lamb's worthiness rather than our priesthood works. [Revelation 5:9]

Spiritual Weight:

1. Fear of Unpardonable Failure [Severe] – The 'Oath and Covenant' (Para 6) states that turning away from the priesthood results in no forgiveness in this world or the next. This creates immense psychological pressure to remain in the system regardless of doubts, driven by fear of eternal damnation.
2. Collective Condemnation [Moderate] – The text places the 'whole church' under condemnation (Para 8) for not treating the Book of Mormon seriously enough. This fosters a culture of perpetual guilt and the feeling that the community is never quite pleasing to God.
3. Performance Pressure [Severe] – Adherents must 'magnify their calling' to be sanctified. Salvation becomes a job performance review rather than a gift received.

EPISTEMOLOGY

Knowledge Source: Direct revelation through the prophet and the 'Spirit of Jesus Christ' which enlightens every man.

Verification Method: Personal spiritual experience ('Spirit enlightens every man') and obedience to the voice of the prophet.

Evangelical Contrast: Biblical epistemology tests all spirits against the objective standard of written Scripture (1 John 4:1, Acts 17:11). This text relies on subjective enlightenment and the authority of the revealer (Joseph Smith) rather than consistency with the biblical canon.

TEXTUAL CRITICISM

Dating: September 22-23, 1832.

Authorship: Joseph Smith (claimed dictation from Jesus Christ).

Textual Issues: The lineage of priesthood presented (Moses -> Jethro -> Caleb -> Elihu -> Jeremy -> Gad -> Esaias -> God) contains names and a sequence unknown to the Bible or Jewish tradition. 'Esaias' is likely a form of Isaiah, but placed chronologically in Abraham's time, creating an anachronism.