

SECTION 40

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

OVERVIEW

Section 40 of the 1835 Doctrine and Covenants (canonized as Section 15 in modern editions) is a short but significant revelation dictated by Joseph Smith in June 1829. Addressed to John Whitmer, one of the Eight Witnesses to the Book of Mormon, the text is presented as the direct voice of Jesus Christ. The revelation serves two primary functions: first, to validate Joseph Smith's prophetic ability by revealing a private desire of John Whitmer's heart ('that which no man knoweth save me and thee alone')—specifically, his desire to know his highest duty. Second, it establishes a missiological hierarchy for the early Latter-day Saint movement, declaring that 'the thing which will be of the most worth' is not personal contemplation or study, but the active work of declaring repentance and bringing souls into the movement. This text establishes a precedent for the high value placed on proselytizing in Mormon culture, linking the believer's ultimate 'rest' in the Kingdom with the fruit of their missionary labors.

KEY FIGURES

Jesus Christ (The Speaker), John Whitmer (The Recipient), Joseph Smith (The Revelator/Mediator)

DOCTRINES ANALYZED

1. PROPHETIC OMNISCIENCE/DISCERNMENT

Assertion: The prophet (Joseph Smith) can reveal the private thoughts and secret desires of individuals as proof of his divine commission.

"I will tell you that which no man knoweth save me and thee alone: for many times you have desired of me to know that which would be of the most worth unto you."

Evangelical Comparison: In this text, the validation of the message relies on the revelator (Smith) telling the recipient (Whitmer) something private. In the Bible, prophets certainly exposed secrets (e.g., Nathan with David, Peter with Ananias), but the primary test of a prophet in Deuteronomy 13 and 18 is theological consistency with previous revelation and the fulfillment of prediction, not merely telepathic insight. Evangelicalism warns that supernatural knowledge can come from sources other than God (Acts 16:16), whereas this text uses the disclosure of private thoughts as the definitive proof of divine origin.

2. THE PRIMACY OF EVANGELISM

Assertion: The most valuable activity a believer can engage in is declaring repentance to bring souls to the church.

"the thing which will be of the most worth unto you, will be to declare repentance unto this people"

Evangelical Comparison: The text defines spiritual value functionally: doing missionary work. In contrast, the Westminster Shorter Catechism (representing historic Protestantism) states man's chief end is to 'glorify God and enjoy Him forever.' While evangelism is a command in Christianity, it is a fruit of salvation, not the definition of a believer's worth. This text shifts the focus from the believer's standing in Christ to the believer's utility for the movement.

COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

Divergence Status: Yes

Theological Gap: The fundamental gap lies in the source of authority and the nature of the Christian life. For the Evangelical, God speaks primarily through His Son as recorded in the closed canon of Scripture (Hebrews 1:1-2). In this text, God speaks new, binding instructions through Joseph Smith. Furthermore, the text introduces a 'merit-based' undertone to the Christian life, where the 'thing of most worth' is a work performed by the believer. This contrasts with the Evangelical view that the thing of most worth is the 'pearl of great price' (the Kingdom/Christ Himself) which has already been secured for the believer by grace.

Shared Values:

Desire to serve God; Importance of repentance; Zeal for evangelism; Belief in Jesus as Redeemer

Friction Points:

1. [Critical] Sola Scriptura – Claims to be the direct voice of Jesus Christ outside of the Bible.
2. [Major] Sola Fide – Elevates a specific work (missionary activity) as the highest value ('most worth') for the believer.
3. [Major] Universal Priesthood – Establishes a mediator (Joseph Smith) who holds the keys to knowing God's will for another individual.

Semantic Warnings:

"Repentance"

In Text: In early Mormonism, often associated with preparing oneself for covenants and aligning with the restoration movement.

Evangelical: A change of mind (metanoia) leading to a turning away from sin and toward God through faith in Christ.

Example: *In this text, 'declare repentance' implies bringing people into the specific authority structure of the restored church.*

"Rest"

In Text: Exaltation or the highest degree of glory in the afterlife, often contingent on works.

Evangelical: Ceasing from works-righteousness and trusting in Christ's finished work (Hebrews 4:9-10).

Example: *The text says 'that you may rest with them,' implying rest is a future reward for labor, rather than a present reality in Christ.*

SOTERIOLOGY

Salvation Defined: Resting in the kingdom of the Father with those one has converted.

How Attained: Implied to be contingent on obedience to the command to declare repentance.

Basis of Assurance: Assurance is derived from the successful performance of the assigned duty (bringing souls).

Comparison to Sola Fide: The text does not mention faith as the instrument of justification; it focuses entirely on the **activity** of the believer. Romans 4:5 states 'to him that worketh not, but believeth... his faith is counted for righteousness,' whereas this text emphasizes the work itself as the thing of 'most worth.'

MANDATES & REQUIREMENTS

Explicit Commands:

1. Hearken to the words of Jesus Christ
2. Declare repentance unto this people

Implicit Obligations:

1. Accept Joseph Smith as the mediator of Christ's voice
2. Prioritize missionary work above all other spiritual or temporal pursuits

EVANGELISM TOOLKIT

Discovery Questions:

1. In this passage, Jesus tells John Whitmer that missionary work is the thing of 'most worth' to him. How does that compare to Paul's statement in Philippians 3:8 about the surpassing worth of simply knowing Christ?
2. If the validity of this revelation rests on Joseph Smith knowing John's secret thoughts, how do we distinguish that from psychic phenomena, and how does it compare to the biblical test of a prophet?
3. This section is almost identical to the one given to Peter Whitmer Jr. Does it concern you that a 'personal' revelation might be a form letter?

Redemptive Analogies:

1. The Desire for Purpose – John Whitmer wanted to know what mattered most. This is a universal human longing. The Gospel answers this not with a 'to-do list' but with a relationship. [Micah 6:8, Matthew 22:37-40]
2. The Promise of Rest – The text promises rest as a future reward. Jesus offers rest as a present reality for the weary. [Matthew 11:28-30]

Spiritual Weight:

1. Performance Pressure [Moderate] – The believer is told that the most valuable thing they can do is convert others. This creates a burden where one's spiritual self-worth is tied to recruitment success.
2. Dependency on Leadership [Moderate] – By validating the prophet through secret knowledge, the text trains the adherent to rely on external authority for personal direction rather than developing their own walk with God.
3. Utilitarianism [Mild] – The individual is valued for their utility to the organization (bringing souls) rather than their intrinsic value as a child of God.

EPISTEMOLOGY

Knowledge Source: Subjective confirmation through a mediator revealing private information.

Verification Method: The recipient (John Whitmer) verifies the text's truthfulness because it accurately describes his private internal desire.

Evangelical Contrast: Biblical epistemology relies on the objective standard of Scripture (Acts 17:11) and the internal witness of the Holy Spirit regarding the Word, not on a prophet's ability to read minds or reveal secrets.

TEXTUAL CRITICISM

Dating: June 1829

Authorship: Joseph Smith (Dictated)

Textual Issues: This revelation is a near-duplicate of the revelation given to Peter Whitmer Jr. (D&C 16). In the 1833 Book of Commandments, these were chapters 14 and 15.