

SECTION 52

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

OVERVIEW

This text, designated as Section 52 in the 1835 Doctrine and Covenants (Section 30 in modern editions), contains three distinct revelations addressed to the Whitmer brothers: David, Peter Jr., and John. The text captures a critical moment of consolidation in the early Mormon movement (September 1830). David Whitmer is severely rebuked for fearing man more than God and for heeding unauthorized sources—historically understood as a reference to the Hiram Page seer stone incident—thereby establishing Joseph Smith's exclusive claim to receive binding revelation for the church. Peter Whitmer Jr. is commanded to accompany Oliver Cowdery on a mission to the 'Lamanites' (Native Americans), explicitly placing him under Cowdery's authority, who is in turn under Smith's. John Whitmer is called to preach locally. The text serves to centralize authority, enforce hierarchy, and mobilize the early leadership for evangelism, while explicitly conditioning 'eternal life' upon diligence in keeping these specific commandments.

KEY FIGURES

Jesus Christ (The Speaker), Joseph Smith (The Prophet/Mediator), David Whitmer (Rebuked Leader), Peter Whitmer Jr. (Missionary), Oliver Cowdery (Mission Leader), John Whitmer (Missionary), The Lamanites (Target Audience)

DOCTRINES ANALYZED

1. HIERARCHICAL MEDIATION

Assertion: Spiritual authority flows strictly through appointed leaders (Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery), and adherents must heed 'those who were set over you.'

"give heed... to those who were set over you... none have I appointed to be his [Oliver's] counsellor, over him, in the church... except it is his brother Joseph Smith, jr."

Evangelical Comparison: In Evangelical theology, the Priesthood of the Believer (1 Peter 2:5, 9) asserts that all Christians have direct access to God through Christ without the need for a human mediator or hierarchical magisterium to interpret God's will for their personal lives. This text, however, establishes a rigid chain of command: Peter must heed Oliver, and Oliver is accountable only to Joseph. This structure mirrors the Roman Catholic Magisterium more than Protestant ecclesiology, effectively denying the sufficiency of Scripture and the Holy Spirit's direct guidance if it contradicts the appointed leader.

2. CONDITIONAL ETERNAL LIFE

Assertion: Eternal life is the result of diligence in keeping commandments and fulfilling church callings.

"be diligent in keeping my commandments, and you shall be blessed unto eternal life."

Evangelical Comparison: The text explicitly links the attainment of 'eternal life' to the action of being 'diligent in keeping my commandments.' In the Evangelical baseline, eternal life is a present possession received by faith in Christ's finished work (John 5:24, Ephesians 2:8-9), not a future reward contingent on missionary service or obedience to church leaders. This doctrine shifts the basis of assurance from Christ's merit to the believer's performance.

3. LAMANITE IDENTITY

Assertion: Native Americans are 'Lamanites,' a remnant of the House of Israel to whom the gospel must be restored.

"I have given unto him power to build up my church among the Lamanites"

Evangelical Comparison: The text commands a mission to the 'Lamanites,' referring to Native Americans. This presupposes the historical truth of the Book of Mormon, which claims Native Americans are descendants of Israelites. Evangelical Christianity views Native Americans as created in God's image but does not assign them a specific lost Israelite identity, nor does it accept the Book of Mormon as a historical record. This claim creates a friction point with both biblical history and secular archaeology.

COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

Divergence Status: Yes

Theological Gap: While the text shares a zeal for ministry, the theological foundation is fundamentally different. The 'Gospel' being proclaimed here includes the Book of Mormon and the restoration of the church, not merely the death and resurrection of Jesus. Furthermore, the text establishes a mediatorial structure where access to God's will is gated by Joseph Smith and his appointees. The promise of eternal life is explicitly conditional on works ('be diligent... and you shall be blessed unto eternal life'), which is a rejection of the Pauline doctrine of Justification by Faith Alone (Romans 3:28).

Shared Values:

Importance of evangelism; Warning against the 'fear of man'; Prioritizing spiritual things over 'things of the earth'

Friction Points:

- 1. [Critical] Sola Scriptura – Adds new canonical revelation and asserts historical claims (Lamanites) foreign to the Bible.
- 2. [Critical] Sola Fide – Conditions eternal life on diligence in keeping commandments.
- 3. [Major] Universal Priesthood – Establishes a rigid hierarchy where members must heed leaders to be right with God.

Semantic Warnings:

"Gospel"

In Text: The message of the Restoration, including the Book of Mormon and authority of Joseph Smith.
Evangelical: The good news of Jesus Christ's death, burial, and resurrection for sin (1 Corinthians 15:1-4).
Example: *When the text says 'declare my gospel,' it means teaching the Book of Mormon, not just the biblical message of salvation.*

"Lamanites"

In Text: Native Americans, viewed as descendants of Israelites.
Evangelical: N/A (Term does not exist in the Bible).
Example: *The mission to the Lamanites is a mission to Native Americans based on a specific restorationist anthropology.*

"Eternal Life"

In Text: Exaltation/Godhood in the highest degree of glory, contingent on ordinances and obedience.
Evangelical: Life with God forever, given as a free gift to all believers (Romans 6:23).
Example: *The promise 'blessed unto eternal life' implies earning a specific tier of salvation through diligence.*

SOTERIOLOGY

Salvation Defined: Eternal life is the ultimate reward for faithfulness and obedience.
How Attained: Through diligence in keeping commandments and heeding the priesthood authority.
Basis of Assurance: Performance-based: 'Be diligent... and you shall be blessed.'
Comparison to Sola Fide: The text presents a 'If you do X, then you get Y' structure for eternal life. Evangelicalism presents a 'Because Christ did X, you get Y' structure (Titus 3:5).

MANDATES & REQUIREMENTS

Explicit Commands:

- 1. David: Return to father's house
- 2. David: Attend to ministry in the church and region
- 3. Peter: Journey with Oliver Cowdery to the Lamanites
- 4. Peter: Heed Oliver Cowdery's advice
- 5. John: Proclaim the gospel at Philip Burroughs' house and in Zion

Implicit Obligations:

1. Submit to the ecclesiastical hierarchy (Joseph Smith -> Oliver Cowdery -> Others)
2. Reject spiritual influences not authorized by the hierarchy
3. Accept the Book of Mormon narrative regarding Lamanites

Ritual Requirements:

1. Proclaim the gospel (Missionary work)

EVANGELISM TOOLKIT

Discovery Questions:

1. In verse 2, the text says 'be diligent in keeping my commandments, and you shall be blessed unto eternal life.' How do you reconcile that with Titus 3:5 which says 'not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to his mercy he saved us'?
2. The text rebukes David for fearing man. Do you ever feel pressure to conform to the expectations of the church community rather than just following Jesus simply?
3. Who are the 'Lamanites' mentioned in verse 2, and how does that relate to what we know about Native American history today?

Redemptive Analogies:

1. The Fear of Man – We all struggle with seeking approval from others rather than God. This is a universal human problem. [Proverbs 29:25 states 'The fear of man bringeth a snare: but whoso putteth his trust in the Lord shall be safe.' This points to our need for a security that only Christ provides, freeing us from performance anxiety.]

Spiritual Weight:

1. Performance Anxiety [Severe] – The believer is told that eternal life depends on their diligence. This creates a perpetual anxiety: 'Have I been diligent enough?'
2. Intellectual Dissonance [Moderate] – The believer must accept the 'Lamanite' identity of Native Americans despite overwhelming scientific evidence to the contrary, creating a split between faith and reason.
3. Submission to Hierarchy [Severe] – The believer is conditioned to distrust their own spiritual intuition or outside information ('persuaded by those whom I have not commanded') and rely solely on the chain of command.

EPISTEMOLOGY

Knowledge Source: Prophetic Revelation (mediated through Joseph Smith).

Verification Method: Obedience to the revelation and the appointed leaders.

Evangelical Contrast: Evangelical epistemology relies on the illumination of the Holy Spirit through the written Word of God (2 Timothy 3:16). This text demands reliance on a living prophet's voice, rebuking David Whitmer for 'inquiring for himself' outside the sanctioned channel.

TEXTUAL CRITICISM

Dating: September 1830

Authorship: Joseph Smith (dictated)

Textual Issues: This section combines three separate revelations into one section in the 1835 edition. In modern editions, it is Section 30.