

SECTION 59 (MODERN SECTION 39)

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

OVERVIEW

This text, originally published as Section 59 in the 1835 Doctrine and Covenants (Section 39 in modern editions), presents a revelation dictated by Joseph Smith addressed to James Covill (historically Covel), a Methodist minister who briefly investigated Mormonism in January 1831. The text opens with a high Christology, identifying the speaker as the 'Great I AM.' It proceeds to redefine the Gospel not merely as faith in Christ, but specifically as a sequence of repentance, water baptism, and the reception of the Holy Ghost through the laying on of hands. Covill is told that despite his previous religious service, he must be baptized to 'wash away' his sins, implying the invalidity of his previous Christian experience. The revelation includes a specific missiological command to preach the 'fulness of my gospel' and a geopolitical command to gather to 'the Ohio' (Kirtland), promising a unique endowment of power there. It serves as a critical text for understanding early Mormonism's dismissal of other Christian denominations and its developing doctrine of 'gathering' to specific physical locations.

KEY FIGURES

Jesus Christ (The Speaker), James Covill (Recipient, Methodist Minister), Joseph Smith (The Revelator)

DOCTRINES ANALYZED

1. RITUAL DEFINITION OF THE GOSPEL

Assertion: The 'Gospel' is defined explicitly as repentance, baptism by water, and baptism of fire/Holy Ghost.

"And this is my gospel: repentance and baptism by water, and then cometh the baptism of fire and the Holy Ghost (v2)"

Evangelical Comparison: In this text, the 'Gospel' is operationalized as a covenantal process involving specific ordinances (baptism and laying on of hands). In contrast, the Evangelical understanding of the Gospel (Euangelion) is the 'Good News' of what God has already done in Christ—his death, burial, and resurrection (1 Corinthians 15:1-4). By including the believer's response (baptism) in the definition of the Gospel itself, the text shifts the focus from Christ's finished work to the believer's ritual obedience. This conflates justification with sanctification and ecclesiology.

2. BAPTISMAL REGENERATION

Assertion: Baptism is required to 'wash away sins,' implying previous sins remain despite faith if this specific ritual is not performed.

"Arise and be baptized, and wash away your sins... (v3)"

Evangelical Comparison: The text commands James Covill, a practicing minister, to be baptized to 'wash away' his sins. This indicates that in Mormon theology, the remission of sins is mechanically tied to the authority of the priesthood administering the ordinance. Evangelical theology holds that the blood of Jesus cleanses us from all sin upon the exercise of faith (1 John 1:7), prior to and distinct from water baptism. The thief on the cross (Luke 23:43) and Cornelius (Acts 10:44-48) demonstrate salvation and Spirit reception apart from/prior to water baptism.

3. GEOGRAPHIC GATHERING (ZION)

Assertion: Spiritual blessings and power are contingent upon physically moving to a specific location (Ohio).

"And inasmuch as my people shall assemble themselves to the Ohio, I have kept in store a blessing such as is not known among the children of men (v4)"

Evangelical Comparison: The text introduces the concept of 'The Gathering,' a central tenet of 19th-century Mormonism. Believers were commanded to physically relocate to 'the Ohio' to receive power. This contrasts with the Great Commission (Matthew 28:19-20) and Acts 1:8, where believers are sent *out* from Jerusalem to the ends of the earth. The New Covenant temple is the believer's body (1 Cor 6:19), rendering geographic pilgrimage for spiritual power obsolete (John 4:21-24).

COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

Divergence Status: Yes

Theological Gap: The fundamental gap lies in the sufficiency of Christ's work versus the necessity of restored priesthood ordinances. While the text uses orthodox language ('Great I AM', 'Spirit'), it redefines the mechanism of grace. In Evangelicalism, a believer is justified by faith alone (Romans 5:1). In this text, a veteran Christian minister is told his sins are not washed away until he submits to the specific ritual authority of Joseph Smith's movement. Furthermore, the text introduces a 'geographic soteriology' where special blessings are locked behind a physical move to Ohio, contradicting the universal access to God's throne established in Hebrews 4:16.

Shared Values:

Necessity of Repentance; Divinity of Jesus Christ; Reality of the Holy Spirit; Urgency of the Second Coming

Friction Points:

1. [Critical] Sola Fide – Salvation/Remission of sins is contingent upon water baptism and specific obedience to the restoration message.
2. [Critical] Sola Scriptura – Adds new revelation that modifies the requirements for salvation and church practice.
3. [Major] Universal Priesthood – Denies the validity of Covell's previous ministry, requiring him to submit to the new hierarchy.

Semantic Warnings:

"The Gospel"

In Text: A system of ordinances: Repentance + Baptism + Holy Ghost (v2).

Evangelical: The announcement of Christ's death and resurrection for sinners (1 Cor 15:1-4).

Example: When a Mormon says 'Live the Gospel,' they mean 'Obey the laws and ordinances.' When an Evangelical says 'Believe the Gospel,' they mean 'Trust in Christ's finished work.'

"Fulness of my gospel"

In Text: The restored doctrines and authority found only in the LDS church.

Evangelical: The complete revelation of God in Christ (Colossians 1:19, 2:9).

Example: The text claims to contain the 'fulness,' implying the Bible is partial or empty.

SOTERIOLOGY

Salvation Defined: Deliverance, receiving the Spirit, and gathering to Zion.

How Attained: Through repentance, baptism by water, and the reception of the Holy Ghost via laying on of hands.

Basis of Assurance: Contingent on obedience to the command to gather and be baptized.

Comparison to Sola Fide: Directly contradicts Sola Fide by stating 'wash away your sins' is a result of the act of baptism (v3), rather than the result of faith in Christ's blood (Romans 3:25).

MANDATES & REQUIREMENTS

Explicit Commands:

1. Arise and be baptized
2. Wash away your sins
3. Preach the fulness of the gospel
4. Go to the Ohio
5. Call faithful laborers into the vineyard
6. Lay hands on the baptized for the Holy Ghost

Implicit Obligations:

1. Abandon previous denominational affiliation (Methodism)

2. Accept Joseph Smith as the mouthpiece of Jesus Christ
3. Relocate physically to the gathering place

Ritual Requirements:

1. Baptism by immersion (implied by 'wash away')
2. Laying on of hands for the gift of the Holy Ghost

EVANGELISM TOOLKIT

Discovery Questions:

1. In verse 2, the text defines the gospel as repentance and baptism. How does this compare to how Paul defines the gospel in 1 Corinthians 15:1-4?
2. The text tells James Covill, a minister, to be baptized to 'wash away' his sins. Do you believe a person can have genuine faith in Jesus and be saved before they are baptized?
3. Verse 4 mentions a blessing 'not known among the children of men' reserved for those who go to Ohio. Do you believe spiritual blessings are tied to specific geographic locations today?

Redemptive Analogies:

1. The Peaceable Things of the Kingdom – This phrase resonates with the human longing for peace. The true Gospel brings 'peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ' (Romans 5:1) and the 'peace of God which surpasses all understanding' (Phil 4:7), not through rituals, but through reconciliation. [Romans 5:1, Philippians 4:7]
2. Deliverance – The text offers deliverance from sorrow and sin. Christ offers true deliverance from the domain of darkness into His kingdom (Col 1:13) instantly upon faith. [Colossians 1:13-14]

Spiritual Weight:

1. Works-Righteousness [Severe] – The believer must perform specific rituals (baptism, gathering) to have sins washed away and receive blessings. This creates anxiety about whether one has performed enough or correctly.
2. Exclusivity/Isolation [Moderate] – By invalidating Covell's previous ministry, the text isolates the believer from the broader Christian body, insisting that only this specific group has the 'fulness.'
3. Geographic/Financial Pressure [Severe] – The command to move to Ohio (v4) placed immense financial and social strain on early converts, equating relocation with faithfulness.

EPISTEMOLOGY

Knowledge Source: Prophetic Revelation. Truth is received through the authorized channel (Joseph Smith) rather than solely through biblical exegesis.

Verification Method: Subjective spiritual confirmation follows obedience ('If thou do this... you shall receive my Spirit').

Evangelical Contrast: Biblical epistemology tests all prophecy against the closed canon of Scripture (Acts 17:11, 1 John 4:1). This text demands obedience to the revelation to validate the revelation.

TEXTUAL CRITICISM

Dating: January 5, 1831

Authorship: Joseph Smith (dictated)

Textual Issues: The recipient's name is spelled 'Covill' in early prints but refers to Methodist minister James Covell. The text assumes a context where Covell had covenanted to obey before the revelation was given.