

SECTION 77

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

OVERVIEW

This text, identified as Section 77 in the 1835 Doctrine and Covenants (Section 80 in modern editions), is a revelation dictated by Joseph Smith in March 1832. It is a direct administrative command addressed to Stephen Burnett, assigning him a missionary companion, Eden Smith. The text is notable for its missiological flexibility; the Lord declares that the specific direction they travel—north, south, east, or west—'mattereth not.' This suggests a theology where the act of preaching takes precedence over the specific field of labor. The missionaries are instructed to declare what they 'know to be true,' grounding their message in personal conviction and testimony. The revelation concludes with a claim of divine authority, asserting these words are the direct will of 'your Redeemer, even Jesus Christ.'

KEY FIGURES

Jesus Christ, Joseph Smith, Stephen Burnett, Eden Smith

DOCTRINES ANALYZED

1. CONTINUOUS REVELATION

Assertion: God provides specific, real-time administrative instructions to individuals through a living prophet.

"Verily, thus saith the Lord, unto you my servant Stephen Burnett..."

Evangelical Comparison: In Evangelical theology, the canon of Scripture is closed, and guidance is sought through the illumination of the Holy Spirit applied to the Bible (Sola Scriptura). This text asserts that God speaks new, canon-level words through a prophet to direct specific individuals. This creates a dependency on the prophetic figure (Joseph Smith) as a necessary mediator for God's specific will, whereas Evangelicals believe in the priesthood of all believers and direct access to God's will through Scripture and prayer.

2. EPISTEMOLOGY OF TESTIMONY

Assertion: Truth is proclaimed based on what the adherent has 'heard and verily believe, and know to be true.'

"declare the things which ye have heard and verily believe, and know to be true."

Evangelical Comparison: Evangelical evangelism focuses on 'expository' proclamation—declaring what the Bible says regardless of the speaker's feelings. This text emphasizes declaring what the missionary 'knows' to be true. This foreshadows the Mormon cultural emphasis on 'bearing testimony' (subjective internal witness) as the primary method of conversion, rather than the objective exegesis of the Word of God.

COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

Divergence Status: Yes

Theological Gap: While the command to 'preach the gospel' appears synonymous with the Evangelical mandate, the mechanism of authority creates a fundamental gap. In this text, the 'call' is mediated through Joseph Smith, establishing the LDS doctrine that missionary work is a priesthood duty regulated by ecclesiastical hierarchy. In contrast, the Evangelical view holds that the Great Commission is given directly to the Church by Scripture, and the Holy Spirit calls individuals (Acts 13:2) without the necessity of a prophetic intermediary. Furthermore, the 'gospel' being preached in 1832 Mormonism included belief in the Book of Mormon and the Restoration, which Evangelicals view as a different gospel (Galatians 1:6-9).

Shared Values:

The Great Commission (Evangelism); Divine Sovereignty/Providence ('it mattereth not'); Jesus as Redeemer

Friction Points:

1. [Critical] Sola Scriptura – The text presents itself as new, binding scripture, adding to the canon.
2. [Major] Universal Priesthood – Establishes a mediated relationship where Smith directs the service of others on God's behalf.

3. [Moderate] Objective Truth (Theology Proper) – Elevates subjective 'knowing' and 'believing' to the level of truth to be declared.

Semantic Warnings:

"Gospel"

In Text: The 'restored' gospel, including faith in the Book of Mormon, Joseph Smith's prophetic office, and repentance.

Evangelical: The finished work of Christ in his death, burial, and resurrection for the forgiveness of sins (1 Corinthians 15:1-4).

Example: *When this text says 'preach my gospel,' it implies preaching the Restoration. When a Christian says it, they mean preaching the Cross.*

"Call"

In Text: A specific assignment given by a priesthood leader (prophet).

Evangelical: The internal urging of the Holy Spirit or the general command of Scripture.

Example: *Stephen Burnett was 'called' by a letter/revelation from Smith; Paul was called by the Holy Spirit and the road to Damascus encounter.*

SOTERIOLOGY

Salvation Defined: Implicitly linked to accepting the 'gospel' preached by Burnett and Smith.

How Attained: Through belief in the message of the Restoration (and subsequent ordinances).

Basis of Assurance: Personal knowledge/testimony ('know to be true').

Comparison to Sola Fide: The text focuses on the ***activity*** of the missionary rather than the ***content*** of justification. However, Mormon soteriology generally requires acceptance of the Restoration (works/ordinances), contrasting with Sola Fide.

MANDATES & REQUIREMENTS

Explicit Commands:

1. Go into the world
2. Preach the gospel to every creature
3. Take Eden Smith as a companion (if desired)
4. Declare things heard, believed, and known to be true

Implicit Obligations:

1. Accept Joseph Smith's voice as the voice of Jesus Christ
2. Prioritize missionary work over location preferences

EVANGELISM TOOLKIT

Discovery Questions:

1. In this section, the Lord says 'it mattereth not' where they go. How does that balance with the idea of a specific 'call'? Does God care more about ***that*** we go or ***where*** we go?
2. The text tells Stephen Burnett to preach what he 'knows to be true.' How does a missionary distinguish between strong emotional conviction and objective truth?
3. If Stephen Burnett later left the church because he felt Joseph Smith wasn't honest, how do we process this revelation that claims to be the voice of Christ calling him?

Redemptive Analogies:

1. The Freedom of the Call ('It mattereth not') – This echoes the Christian understanding of freedom in Christ and Providence. We are not bound by legalistic micromanagement; we are commissioned to spread the Good News everywhere. [Acts 8:4 (Believers went everywhere preaching the word)]

Spiritual Weight:

1. Dependency [Moderate] – The believer is conditioned to wait for specific instructions from leadership rather than acting on Biblical wisdom and the Holy Spirit's prompting.
2. Epistemological Pressure [Severe] – The command to declare what you 'know' creates a pressure to manufacture certainty. If a member doubts, they feel they are failing the command to 'know'.

EPISTEMOLOGY

Knowledge Source: Revelation (via Prophet) and Internal Certainty (Testimony).

Verification Method: The text implies verification comes through the act of believing and 'knowing' (internal witness).

Evangelical Contrast: Biblical epistemology relies on the 'God-breathed' Scripture (2 Timothy 3:16) as the objective standard for truth, not the subjective 'knowing' of the messenger or the new revelations of a modern prophet.

TEXTUAL CRITICISM

Dating: March 1832

Authorship: Joseph Smith (Dictated)

Textual Issues: Originally published as Section 77 in the 1835 edition; renumbered to Section 80 in modern editions. The text is a specific occasional letter canonized as scripture.