

SECTION 86

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

OVERVIEW

This revelation, originally given in April 1832 (now Doctrine and Covenants Section 82 in modern editions), addresses high-ranking church leaders regarding the management of the temporal affairs of the Church in Zion (Independence, Missouri) and Shinehah (Kirtland, Ohio). It establishes a 'bond and covenant' known historically as the United Firm or United Order, designed to manage the storehouse and care for the poor through a system of consecration and stewardship. The text employs 'code names' (e.g., Alam, Ahashdah) to protect the identity of the leaders from legal and financial persecution. Theologically, the text presents a rigorous view of divine justice, asserting that while God forgives current trespasses, a return to sin causes 'former sins' to return to the individual. It also introduces the distinct Mormon concept that God is legally 'bound' to bless the adherent when they obey specific commandments, framing the divine-human relationship as strictly transactional. The revelation concludes with a warning that violating this covenant results in being delivered to the 'buffetings of Satan' until the day of redemption.

KEY FIGURES

The Lord (Voice of the Revelation), Gazelam (Joseph Smith), Pelagoram (Sidney Rigdon), Alam (Edward Partridge), Ahashdah (Newel K. Whitney), Oliyah (Oliver Cowdery), Shalemanasseh (William W. Phelps), Mehemon (Martin Harris), Mahalaleel (Sidney Gilbert), Horah (John Whitmer)

DOCTRINES ANALYZED

1. REVOCABLE FORGIVENESS (THE BOOMERANG OF SIN)

Assertion: Forgiveness is conditional on future perfection; if one sins again, all previously forgiven sins are reinstated.

"unto that soul who sinneth shall the former sins return, saith the Lord your God. (Verse 2)"

Evangelical Comparison: In Evangelical theology, justification is a forensic declaration by God that the sinner is righteous based on the imputed righteousness of Christ (Romans 8:1, Hebrews 10:14). Once a person is justified, their sins are removed 'as far as the east is from the west' (Psalm 103:12) and God 'remembers them no more' (Hebrews 8:12). This text asserts the opposite: that forgiveness is provisional. The guilt of past sins remains latent and returns ('shall the former sins return') if the adherent stumbles again. This creates a system where a believer is never truly secure in their standing before God.

2. TRANSACTIONAL SOVEREIGNTY (THE BOUND GOD)

Assertion: God is obligated/bound to act when humans perform specific requirements.

"I the Lord am bound when ye do what I say, but when ye do not what I say, ye have no promise. (Verse 3)"

Evangelical Comparison: This doctrine shifts the power dynamic of the divine-human relationship. In Evangelicalism, God acts according to His good pleasure and grace (Ephesians 1:5), and while He is faithful to His promises, He is not 'bound' by human action in a mechanical sense. The text suggests a law of irrevocable cause-and-effect where human obedience forces God's hand ('I the Lord am bound'). This implies that the power to secure salvation or blessing originates in the human will and performance, violating Sola Gratia.

3. CONSECRATION AND STEWARDSHIP

Assertion: Believers must bind themselves legally to manage property for the church, with surplus given to the church storehouse.

"bound together by a bond and covenant... to manage the affairs of the poor... every man according to his wants and his needs (Verse 4)"

Evangelical Comparison: The text establishes the 'United Firm' (later interpreted as the United Order), a communal economic system. While the New Testament church shared things in common (Acts 2:44), it was voluntary and not a prerequisite for salvation or a 'bond and covenant that cannot be broken' under threat of judgment. This text elevates economic structure to the level of sacred covenant.

COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

Divergence Status: Yes

Theological Gap: The fundamental gap lies in the mechanism of forgiveness. In this text, forgiveness is a temporary suspension of penalty that is revoked upon recurrence of sin ('former sins return'). This creates a 'probationary' state of salvation rather than a 'possessed' state of eternal life (John 5:24). Furthermore, the doctrine that God is 'bound' by human action reverses the biblical order of grace, where God initiates and sustains salvation independent of human merit (Titus 3:5). The text creates a works-righteousness paradigm where the believer controls God's hand through obedience.

Shared Values:

Care for the poor; Stewardship of resources; Warning against sin; God's anger against wickedness

Friction Points:

1. [Critical] Justification (Sola Fide) – Re-imputation of forgiven sins upon new transgression denies the efficacy of the 'Once for All' sacrifice.
2. [Critical] Assurance of Salvation – Assurance is impossible if past sins can return at any moment.
3. [Major] Sovereignty of God (Sola Gratia) – Claims God is 'bound' by human action, making grace a debt God owes to the obedient.
4. [Major] Sola Scriptura – Adds new economic commandments required for salvation/Zion not found in the Bible.

Semantic Warnings:

"Salvation"

In Text: A state achieved by following specific directions and covenants ('turn to you for your salvation', Verse 3).

Evangelical: Deliverance from sin and death through faith in Jesus Christ alone (Ephesians 2:8).

Example: In Verse 3, following the 'directions' regarding the United Firm turns to the believer for their 'salvation,' implying administrative obedience aids in saving the soul.

"Forgiveness"

In Text: Conditional release from guilt that is revoked if the individual sins again.

Evangelical: Complete, permanent removal of sin based on Christ's sacrifice (Colossians 2:13-14).

Example: Verse 2 states 'unto that soul who sinneth shall the former sins return,' redefining forgiveness as provisional.

SOTERIOLOGY

Salvation Defined: A process involving obedience to new commandments, stewardship, and maintaining a sinless state to prevent the return of former sins.

How Attained: Through obedience which 'binds' God, and entering into the 'bond and covenant' of the United Order.

Basis of Assurance: Based on current performance ('if you fall not from your steadfastness').

Comparison to Sola Fide: Directly opposes Sola Fide by making the retention of forgiveness dependent on the believer's future conduct rather than Christ's finished work (Romans 8:33-34).

MANDATES & REQUIREMENTS

Explicit Commands:

1. Refrain from sin lest sore judgments fall
2. Bind yourselves by this covenant (United Firm)
3. Manage the affairs of the poor
4. Be equal in claims on properties
5. Make friends with the mammon of unrighteousness

Implicit Obligations:

1. Maintain absolute sinlessness to prevent past sins from returning

2. Submit financial surplus to the church storehouse
3. Accept the hierarchy of the bishopric and stewardship assignments

Ritual Requirements:

1. Entering into a 'bond and covenant' (United Firm/Order)

EVANGELISM TOOLKIT

Discovery Questions:

1. In verse 2, it says if a soul sins, their 'former sins return.' How do you handle the weight of knowing your past forgiven sins could come back if you slip up today?
2. Verse 3 says God is 'bound' when you do what He says. Do you feel like your relationship with God is a contract where He owes you blessings, or a relationship based on grace?
3. If forgiveness can be revoked, how can anyone ever have peace or assurance of salvation as described in Romans 5:1?

Redemptive Analogies:

1. The desire for a just community (Zion) – The text highlights a longing for a world without poverty or greed. The Gospel fulfills this not through a forced economic covenant, but through the Kingdom of God where the Spirit transforms hearts to give generously (2 Corinthians 9:7). [Acts 2:44-45]
2. The need for a 'bond and covenant' – Humans instinctively know they need a covenant to be secure. The New Covenant in Christ's blood is the only bond that cannot be broken, secured by His faithfulness, not ours. [Hebrews 9:15]

Spiritual Weight:

1. The Boomerang of Guilt [Severe] – The believer lives under the constant threat that one new sin will resurrect the guilt of every sin they have ever committed. This creates a crushing accumulation of potential judgment.
2. Uncertainty/Anxiety [Severe] – Since no one lives without sin (1 John 1:8), the adherent can never be truly assured of their standing, leading to chronic spiritual anxiety.
3. Performance Pressure [Moderate] – The idea that God is 'bound' only when 'ye do what I say' places the entire burden of receiving divine help on the perfection of the believer's performance.

EPISTEMOLOGY

Knowledge Source: Prophetic Revelation (Joseph Smith speaking as the Lord)

Verification Method: Obedience to the commands yields the 'bound' blessing of God; failure yields judgment.

Evangelical Contrast: Biblical epistemology relies on the illuminated Word of God (Psalm 119:105) and the witness of the Spirit consistent with Scripture (1 John 4:1). This text relies on the immediate voice of a modern prophet establishing new covenants.

TEXTUAL CRITICISM

Dating: April 26, 1832

Authorship: Joseph Smith (dictated)

Textual Issues: This section (86 in 1835 edition) is Section 82 in modern editions. The 1835 edition substituted code names (Alam, Ahashdah, etc.) for the real names of the individuals to protect them from enemies in Missouri and Ohio. Modern editions have restored the real names.