

SECTION 96

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

OVERVIEW

Given on June 4, 1833, in Kirtland, Ohio, this revelation (now Doctrine and Covenants Section 96) addresses the practical and spiritual management of church resources. Using code names common in early editions to protect church leaders from legal and creditor scrutiny (e.g., 'Enoch' for Joseph Smith, 'Shinehah' for Kirtland), the text directs Newel K. Whitney ('Ahashdah') to manage the land designated for the 'holy house' (the Kirtland Temple). It establishes a system of land inheritance for the Saints and formally inducts John Johnson ('Zombre') into the 'United Firm' or 'Order,' a mercantile and stewardship consecration organization. Theologically, the text is significant for linking financial contribution and debt relief directly to spiritual standing and offering a conditional promise of eternal life based on future obedience.

KEY FIGURES

God (The Speaker), Joseph Smith (referred to as Enoch), Newel K. Whitney (referred to as Ahashdah), John Johnson (referred to as Zombre)

DOCTRINES ANALYZED

1. CONDITIONAL ASSURANCE OF ETERNAL LIFE

Assertion: Eternal life is promised to an individual only on the strict condition of continuous future obedience.

"unto whom I give a promise of eternal life inasmuch as he keepeth my commandments from henceforth"

Evangelical Comparison: In Evangelical theology, assurance of salvation is rooted in the sufficiency of Jesus's sacrifice and the sealing of the Holy Spirit (Ephesians 1:13-14), not in the believer's ability to maintain perfect obedience. This text introduces a 'probationary' assurance where the promise is valid only 'inasmuch' as the believer keeps commandments 'from henceforth.' This shifts the locus of security from the Savior's merit to the sinner's performance, effectively nullifying the concept of 'Sola Fide' (Faith Alone) by reintroducing a works-maintenance system for final salvation.

2. THE UNITED FIRM (THE ORDER)

Assertion: Financial assets and land management are directed by divine revelation as a holy order for the 'subduing' of hearts.

"let it be divided into lots according to wisdom... for the benefit of mine order... for the purpose of subduing the hearts of the children of men"

Evangelical Comparison: While Evangelicals practice stewardship, they generally distinguish between the spiritual organism of the Church and business holding companies. This text elevates a specific economic arrangement (the United Firm) to a divine 'order' necessary for the propagation of the word. It implies that the spiritual success of the Gospel ('subduing hearts') is contingent upon the material organization of this specific group, blurring the lines between corporate management and the Great Commission.

3. SACRED SPACE (THE HOLY HOUSE)

Assertion: God designates specific geographic locations for a 'holy house' (Temple) essential to His work.

"the place which is named among you, upon which I design to build mine holy house"

Evangelical Comparison: Evangelical Christianity holds that the physical temple system was fulfilled in Christ (John 2:19-21) and that the Church—the people—is now the temple of the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 6:19). This text reverts to a pre-Christian or Old Testament model where God requires a specific physical structure ('holy house') in a specific location ('Shinehah'/Kirtland) to manifest His power and order, denying the universal priesthood of believers where worship is 'in spirit and in truth' (John 4:21-24) regardless of location.

COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

Divergence Status: Yes

Theological Gap: The fundamental gap lies in the mechanism of salvation and the nature of the church. Evangelicalism posits a Church built on the confession of Christ, with salvation as a finished work received by faith (Romans 3:28). This text presents a 'Stake of Zion' built on real estate and a 'United Order,' with salvation ('eternal life') presented as a conditional future possibility dependent on the adherent's ability to 'keep commandments from henceforth.' This creates a 'Works-Righteousness' paradigm where the believer's standing before God is never settled but is always contingent on their latest performance.

Shared Values:

Desire to spread the word to 'subdue hearts'.; Stewardship of resources.; Importance of prayer.

Friction Points:

1. [Critical] Sola Fide (Faith Alone) – Salvation is contingent on future obedience ('inasmuch as he keepeth my commandments').
2. [Critical] Christology (Sufficiency of Christ) – Implies Christ's work is insufficient to guarantee eternal life without the believer's added works.
3. [Major] Sola Scriptura – Adds new, binding revelation regarding business and land administration.
4. [Major] Universal Priesthood – Establishes a hierarchical 'Order' and a physical 'Holy House' necessary for God's work.

Semantic Warnings:

"Eternal Life"

In Text: A conditional reward (often equated with Exaltation/Godhood in later LDS theology) granted only after proving oneself through obedience.

Evangelical: The present possession of the believer upon faith in Christ (John 5:24), equating to knowing the only true God (John 17:3).

Example: *In this text: 'promise of eternal life inasmuch as he keepeth my commandments.' In Bible: 'He that believeth on the Son hath everlasting life' (John 3:36).*

"Zion"

In Text: A specific geographic location (Kirtland, and later Missouri/Utah) to be built up physically.

Evangelical: The heavenly city or the spiritual body of believers (Hebrews 12:22).

Example: *The text focuses on the 'stake' and 'lots' of Zion; the New Testament focuses on the 'New Jerusalem' coming down from heaven.*

SOTERIOLOGY

Salvation Defined: Eternal life is a future state to be earned through endurance and obedience.

How Attained: By joining the Order, contributing financially ('taking away incumbrances'), and keeping commandments 'henceforth'.

Basis of Assurance: Personal performance and obedience.

Comparison to Sola Fide: Directly opposes Sola Fide. The text uses 'inasmuch' (to the extent that) as the qualifier for eternal life, whereas Romans 8:1 declares 'There is therefore now no condemnation to them which are in Christ Jesus.'

MANDATES & REQUIREMENTS

Explicit Commands:

1. Newel K. Whitney must take charge of the specific plot of land.
2. The land must be divided into lots for inheritances.
3. John Johnson must be ordained into the United Order.
4. John Johnson must pay off the debts ('incumbrances') on the property.

Implicit Obligations:

1. Believers must submit their property rights to the council's determination.
2. Financial solvency is a spiritual prerequisite for dwelling in the 'order'.

Ritual Requirements:

1. Ordination of John Johnson to the blessing of the order.

EVANGELISM TOOLKIT

Discovery Questions:

1. In verse 2, the promise of eternal life is given 'inasmuch as he keepeth my commandments from henceforth.' How does that phrase make you feel about your own security with God?
2. If your eternal life depends on keeping commandments 'from henceforth,' what happens if you have a bad day or a moment of weakness tomorrow?
3. How do you interpret the connection between John Johnson paying off the debt on the house and his spiritual standing in the Order?

Redemptive Analogies:

1. The desire for a 'Holy House' – The text reflects a human longing to dwell with God. The Gospel answers this not with a building, but with the indwelling Holy Spirit. [1 Corinthians 3:16 - 'Know ye not that ye are the temple of God, and that the Spirit of God dwelleth in you?']
2. Taking away incumbrances (Debt) – Just as Johnson was asked to pay the debt for the house, Christ paid the debt of sin that was upon us, which we could never pay. [Colossians 2:14 - 'Blotting out the handwriting of ordinances that was against us... nailing it to his cross.]

Spiritual Weight:

1. Performance Anxiety / Fear of Failure [Severe] – The phrase 'inasmuch as he keepeth my commandments from henceforth' places an unbearable burden of perfectionism on the believer. It implies that past forgiveness is insufficient if future performance falters.
2. Financial/Institutional Pressure [Moderate] – Linking spiritual acceptance ('member of the order') to financial output ('take away incumbrances') creates a dynamic where spiritual worth is tied to economic utility.

EPISTEMOLOGY

Knowledge Source: Prophetic Revelation (The voice of the Lord through Joseph Smith).

Verification Method: Obedience to the instruction and observation of the resulting 'strength' of Zion.

Evangelical Contrast: Evangelical epistemology relies on the illuminated interpretation of the closed biblical canon (2 Timothy 3:16). This text relies on ongoing, extra-biblical revelation that dictates specific real estate and financial transactions as divine law.

TEXTUAL CRITICISM

Dating: June 4, 1833

Authorship: Joseph Smith (Voice of God via Smith)

Textual Issues: The 1835 edition used code names (Enoch, Shinehah, etc.) to mask the identities of the individuals and the location (Kirtland) to protect the church's assets from creditors. These were replaced with real names in later editions (1981).