

SECTION 17

FAITH: Mormonism | TEXT: Doctrine and Covenants | VOLUME: 2013 | AUTHOR: Joseph Smith

OVERVIEW

Doctrine and Covenants Section 17 is a pivotal revelation given in June 1829 through Joseph Smith to Oliver Cowdery, David Whitmer, and Martin Harris. These men, known as the 'Three Witnesses,' sought a divine confirmation of the reality of the Golden Plates from which the Book of Mormon was translated. The text outlines a specific epistemological framework: they would not see the plates merely by physical inspection, but 'by faith' and with 'full purpose of heart.' The revelation promises that if they exercise this faith, they will view not only the plates but also ancient Nephite artifacts including the Sword of Laban, the Urim and Thummim, and the Liahona. The text places a heavy burden of responsibility on them, stating that their testimony is required so that Joseph Smith 'may not be destroyed.' Crucially, the text concludes with a conditional promise of salvation: 'if' they keep these commandments, 'grace is sufficient' for them. This section establishes the foundational Mormon concept that spiritual witness and physical evidence are intertwined through the mechanism of faith.

KEY FIGURES

Jesus Christ, Joseph Smith, Oliver Cowdery, David Whitmer, Martin Harris, Brother of Jared (Mahonri Moriancumer), Lehi

DOCTRINES ANALYZED

1. FAITH-MEDIATED EMPIRICISM

Assertion: Physical objects (plates, swords) are only visible to the witnesses through the exercise of spiritual faith, not neutral observation.

"And it is by your faith that you shall obtain a view of them... (D&C 17:2)"

Evangelical Comparison: In Evangelical apologetics, historical evidence for the resurrection or the biblical text is presented as objective data available to skeptic and believer alike (e.g., the empty tomb, manuscript transmission). D&C 17 presents a different epistemology where the physical evidence for the faith is only accessible **after** the observer exerts 'full purpose of heart' and faith. This suggests a visionary or 'spiritual sight' experience rather than a forensic examination, contrasting with the empirical claims usually associated with historical Christianity.

2. CONDITIONAL GRACE

Assertion: Divine grace is sufficient for salvation only upon the condition of obedience to specific commandments.

"And if you do these last commandments of mine... my grace is sufficient for you (D&C 17:8)"

Evangelical Comparison: D&C 17:8 employs a strict conditional structure: 'If you do... [then] my grace is sufficient.' In Evangelical theology, based on texts like Ephesians 2:8-9 and Romans 11:6, grace is by definition unmerited favor that cannot be contingent on works or obedience, otherwise 'work is no more work.' This text redefines grace as an enabling power accessed through obedience, rather than the unmerited favor that saves the disobedient.

COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

Divergence Status: Yes

Theological Gap: The primary theological gap lies in the definition of grace and the nature of revelation. D&C 17:8 articulates a 'covenant of works' model where grace is the reward for obedience ('If you do... grace is sufficient'), whereas Evangelicalism teaches a 'covenant of grace' where obedience is the fruit of salvation. Furthermore, the text elevates Joseph Smith's translation to the level of divine truth ('as your Lord and your God liveth it is true'), binding the believer's allegiance to Smith's prophetic office as a condition of their relationship with God.

Shared Values:

Belief in Jesus as Lord and God; The concept of witnessing/testimony; The necessity of faith

Friction Points:

1. [Critical] Sola Fide / Sola Gratia – Grace is made contingent on the performance of commandments (testifying).
2. [Major] Sola Scriptura – Asserts the Book of Mormon is true by divine oath and adds new binding revelation.

Semantic Warnings:

"Grace"

In Text: An enabling power or reward sufficient only after commandments are kept.

Evangelical: Unmerited favor given to the undeserving (Romans 11:6).

Example: *D&C 17:8 'If you do these last commandments... my grace is sufficient' vs 2 Corinthians 12:9 'My grace is sufficient for thee' (unconditional context).*

"Faith"

In Text: A psychic or spiritual exertion required to manifest a vision of physical objects.

Evangelical: Trust in God and His promises.

Example: *In D&C 17, faith is the tool to see the plates. In John 20:29, Jesus blesses those who have *not* seen and yet believed.*

SOTERIOLOGY

Salvation Defined: Being 'lifted up at the last day' (v8).

How Attained: Through faith, testifying of the work, and keeping the commandments given in the revelation.

Basis of Assurance: Conditional promise based on performance ('If you do...').

Comparison to Sola Fide: Explicitly rejects Sola Fide by adding the condition 'If you do these last commandments' before declaring grace sufficient.

MANDATES & REQUIREMENTS

Explicit Commands:

1. Rely upon the word with full purpose of heart (v1)
2. Testify of the artifacts after seeing them (v3)
3. Keep the commandments given in the revelation (v8)

Implicit Obligations:

1. Protect Joseph Smith's reputation and life by validating his claims (v4)
2. Exercise sufficient faith to trigger the visionary experience

EVANGELISM TOOLKIT

Discovery Questions:

1. In verse 8, it says 'if you do these last commandments... my grace is sufficient.' How do you interpret the relationship between grace and obedience here compared to Ephesians 2:8-9?
2. Why do you think faith was required to see physical objects like a sword or breastplate? Does this imply the viewing was a vision rather than a physical inspection?
3. Verse 4 mentions that the witnesses must testify so that Joseph Smith 'may not be destroyed.' What does this tell us about the pressure placed on these men to validate Joseph's claims?

Redemptive Analogies:

1. The Need for Witnesses – Just as God provided witnesses for the Book of Mormon, He provided eyewitnesses to the Resurrection of Christ, which is the true foundation of our faith. [1 Corinthians 15:3-6]

2. The Sword and the Director – The text mentions a sword (judgment/defense) and a director (guidance). The Gospel provides the Sword of the Spirit (Word of God) and the Holy Spirit as our true director. [Ephesians 6:17, John 16:13]

Spiritual Weight:

1. Performance Anxiety [Severe] – The believer is placed under the burden that God's grace is only sufficient *if* they successfully complete their assigned tasks and commandments.
2. Responsibility for Leadership [Moderate] – The text implies that the prophet's safety ('that my servant... may not be destroyed') depends on the followers' faithfulness, placing an undue burden of the leader's wellbeing on the laity.

EPISTEMOLOGY

Knowledge Source: Subjective spiritual experience (vision) triggered by faith, interpreted as objective reality.

Verification Method: The witnesses verify the truth of the artifacts by seeing them, but they can only see them if they first believe.

Evangelical Contrast: Biblical faith is trust in God's revealed character and finished work (Hebrews 11:1), often grounded in historical acts (1 Corinthians 15:3-8). D&C 17 requires faith as a mechanism to manifest the evidence itself.

TEXTUAL CRITICISM

Dating: June 1829

Authorship: Joseph Smith (dictated)

Textual Issues: The revelation was received through the 'Urim and Thummim.' Historical accounts suggest the 'vision' of the plates did not happen immediately or easily; Martin Harris had to withdraw initially because he lacked sufficient faith, suggesting the subjective nature of the experience.