

SECTION 20

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

OVERVIEW

Doctrine and Covenants Section 20, originally known as the 'Articles and Covenants of the Church of Christ,' was recorded in April 1830, coinciding with the formal organization of the Church. It stands as the first revelation to be presented to the church body for a sustaining vote, functioning as a constitution for the new movement. The text begins by establishing the divine authority of Joseph Smith and the Book of Mormon, asserting that God has called men in this 'age and generation' just as in ancient times. It then provides a summary of basic doctrines—including the nature of God, the Fall, and the Atonement—phrased in language similar to Protestant creeds of the era. However, it pivots sharply into ecclesiastical polity, defining specific priesthood offices (Elder, Priest, Teacher, Deacon) and their duties. It prescribes the exact wording for baptismal and sacramental prayers and establishes the requirements for membership. Theologically, it bridges the gap between a 'restoration' of ancient authority and the practical administration of a modern institution, placing heavy emphasis on the necessity of authorized ordinances for salvation.

KEY FIGURES

Jesus Christ, Joseph Smith, Jun., Oliver Cowdery, God the Father

DOCTRINES ANALYZED

1. CONTINUOUS REVELATION

Assertion: God inspires men and calls them to holy work in this age just as in generations of old, proving He is unchangeable.

"Proving to the world that the holy scriptures are true, and that God does inspire men and call them to his holy work in this age and generation, as well as in generations of old (D&C 20:11)."

Evangelical Comparison: Evangelical Christianity holds to 'Sola Scriptura,' believing the canon is closed and sufficient (Jude 1:3). D&C 20 asserts that God's unchangeable nature requires Him to continue giving new revelation and scripture (the Book of Mormon) today. While Evangelicals believe God is immutable in His character, D&C 20 interprets immutability as a requirement for God to continue the *method* of prophetic revelation found in the Old Testament, effectively reopening the canon.

2. CONDITIONAL SANCTIFICATION

Assertion: Sanctification is true for those who love and serve God with all their might, mind, and strength, but it is possible to fall from grace.

"And we know also, that sanctification through the grace of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ is just and true, to all those who love and serve God with all their mights, minds, and strength. But there is a possibility that man may fall from grace (D&C 20:31-32)."

Evangelical Comparison: Evangelical theology views sanctification as a progressive work of the Holy Spirit following justification, not a prerequisite for retaining salvation based on 'all might, mind, and strength.' Furthermore, D&C 20:32 explicitly warns of falling from grace, contradicting the Reformed evangelical doctrine of the Perseverance of the Saints (John 10:28-29) and placing the burden of retention on the believer's performance.

3. HIERARCHICAL PRIESTHOOD AUTHORITY

Assertion: Specific offices (Elder, Priest, Teacher, Deacon) hold specific authority to administer ordinances, which are required for the church.

"An apostle is an elder, and it is his calling to baptize... And to administer bread and wine... (D&C 20:38-40)."

Evangelical Comparison: In Evangelicalism, all believers are priests (1 Peter 2:9) and have direct access to God through Christ. D&C 20 establishes a Levitical-style hierarchy where access to valid ordinances (and thus full salvation) is mediated through ordained men holding specific offices. The validity of the sacrament and baptism is tied to the authority of the administrator, not just the faith of the recipient.

COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

Divergence Status: Yes

Theological Gap: While D&C 20 contains creedal-sounding language about God and Christ (v17-28), it embeds these truths in a framework that denies their sufficiency without the new 'restoration.' The fundamental gap is ecclesiological and soteriological: In Evangelicalism, the Church is the body of all believers united to Christ by faith. In D&C 20, the Church is a specific legal and spiritual organization established on April 6, 1830, outside of which valid ordinances do not exist. Salvation is thus tethered to the institution and its priesthood rather than solely to the person of Christ.

Shared Values:

Belief in the Trinity (Father, Son, Holy Ghost as one God - v28); Necessity of Repentance; Reality of the Fall of Man; Jesus Christ's death and resurrection; Baptism by immersion

Friction Points:

1. [Critical] Sola Scriptura – Asserts the Book of Mormon is scripture and that God gives new commandments to the modern church.
2. [Major] Sola Fide – Requires works to 'manifest' the Spirit **before** baptism (v37) and endurance to the end for salvation (v25).
3. [Major] Assurance of Salvation – Explicitly states the possibility of falling from grace (v32) and mandates constant anxiety/heed (v33).
4. [Major] Universal Priesthood – Restricts administration of sacraments to ordained offices.

Semantic Warnings:

"Priesthood"

In Text: A hierarchical authority structure with specific offices (Elder, Priest, etc.) required to perform valid ordinances.

Evangelical: The status of all believers who have direct access to God through Christ (1 Peter 2:5, 9).

Example: In D&C 20:38, an 'apostle is an elder' with specific duties; in the NT, apostleship is a foundational gift, not a hierarchical office for local administration.

"Sanctification"

In Text: A state achieved through grace but contingent on loving/serving God with 'all might, mind, and strength' (v31).

Evangelical: The process of being made holy, guaranteed by the Spirit, flowing from justification (1 Thessalonians 5:23-24).

Example: D&C 20 implies sanctification is a status one can 'fall' from (v32) if effort ceases.

SOTERIOLOGY

Salvation Defined: Eternal life (v14) and sanctification (v31).

How Attained: Through faith, repentance, baptism, and 'enduring to the end' (v25, 29).

Basis of Assurance: Low assurance; based on current standing, church membership, and personal performance ('godly walk').

Comparison to Sola Fide: D&C 20:37 requires the candidate to 'truly manifest by their works' that they have received the Spirit **before** baptism. This reverses the evangelical order of Faith -> Justification -> Works. See Ephesians 2:8-9.

MANDATES & REQUIREMENTS

Explicit Commands:

1. Repent and humble oneself before God (D&C 20:37)
2. Partake of bread and wine in remembrance of Jesus (D&C 20:75)
3. Bring children to the elders to be blessed (D&C 20:70)
4. Meet in conference once in three months (D&C 20:61)
5. Keep a record of all members (D&C 20:82)

Implicit Obligations:

1. Accept Joseph Smith's authority as the 'first elder' and apostle
2. Submit to the hierarchical structure of the church
3. Sustain the Book of Mormon as evidence of the work

Ritual Requirements:

1. Baptism by immersion using specific wording (D&C 20:73-74)
2. Sacrament prayers read exactly as written (D&C 20:77, 79)
3. Ordination to priesthood offices by laying on of hands (D&C 20:60)
4. Confirmation by laying on of hands (D&C 20:41)

EVANGELISM TOOLKIT

Discovery Questions:

1. In verse 37, it says a person must 'manifest by their works' that they have received the Spirit ***before*** they are baptized. How does that fit with the idea that the Spirit is a gift given ***after*** baptism?
2. Verse 30 says justification is 'just and true,' but verse 32 says we can fall from grace. How do you personally know if you are currently 'justified'?
3. The text emphasizes that God is 'unchangeable' (v17). If the requirements for salvation (priesthood, specific prayers) are unchangeable, why are they different here than in the New Testament epistles?

Redemptive Analogies:

1. The Broken Heart and Contrite Spirit – This is a direct quote from Psalm 51:17. It correctly identifies the posture of true repentance. [Psalm 51:17, Isaiah 57:15. This can be used to pivot to the ***sufficiency*** of God's grace for the brokenhearted, rather than the ***requirement*** of subsequent works.]
2. The Desire for Purity in the Church – The text shows a longing for a holy community, which Christ provides through His imputed righteousness. [Ephesians 5:25-27 (Christ cleansing the church).]

Spiritual Weight:

1. Uncertainty [Moderate] – The open canon creates a burden where truth is never final; new revelations can alter previous understandings, requiring constant realignment with current leadership.
2. Performance Anxiety [Severe] – The requirement to 'manifest by works' (v37) and the threat of 'falling from grace' (v32) creates a treadmill of performance where one's salvation is never settled.
3. Dependency [Severe] – The believer is made utterly dependent on the priesthood hierarchy for access to God's grace (sacrament/ordinances), creating a spiritual bottleneck controlled by men.

EPISTEMOLOGY

Knowledge Source: Revelation (vertical) confirmed by Testimony (internal/communal).

Verification Method: Adherents 'know' these things are true (D&C 20:17, 29) through the witness of the Spirit and the physical existence of the Book of Mormon as 'proof' (D&C 20:11).

Evangelical Contrast: Biblical epistemology relies on the objective, finished revelation of Scripture (2 Timothy 3:16) illuminated by the Spirit. D&C 20 relies on subjective, ongoing revelation channeled through a prophet, making the 'feeling' of truth and the authority of the leader the primary verification.

TEXTUAL CRITICISM

Dating: April 1830 (portions possibly Summer 1829).

Authorship: Joseph Smith (dictated).

Textual Issues: This section underwent significant revisions in early editions (1833 vs 1835) to reflect developing priesthood terminology (e.g., adding 'High Council' references in v67 which didn't exist in 1830).