

SECTION 26

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

OVERVIEW

Doctrine and Covenants Section 26, received in July 1830, is a brief but foundational text in the developing ecclesiology of the early Latter-day Saint movement. Given at Harmony, Pennsylvania, it addresses the immediate logistical and spiritual needs of the newly formed church leadership—specifically Joseph Smith, Oliver Cowdery, and John Whitmer. The text bifurcates into two primary directives: personal stewardship and corporate governance. First, the leaders are commanded to balance spiritual duties (studying scriptures, preaching, confirming the church in Colesville) with temporal necessities ('labors on the land'). This reflects the early tension between the demands of a lay ministry and physical survival. Second, and most significantly for Mormon theology, verse 2 canonizes the 'law of common consent.' This principle dictates that church affairs must be executed through the mutual agreement of the body, ostensibly through prayer and faith. While this appears democratic, in the broader context of LDS theology, it functions as a ratification of prophetic authority rather than a parliamentary procedure. The revelation concludes with a promise of future guidance ('then it shall be made known'), reinforcing the movement's dependence on continuous, progressive revelation rather than a finished canon.

KEY FIGURES

Joseph Smith, Oliver Cowdery, John Whitmer, God (The Speaker)

DOCTRINES ANALYZED

1. COMMON CONSENT

Assertion: All affairs within the church must be conducted by the mutual consent of the membership, achieved through prayer and faith.

"And all things shall be done by common consent in the church, by much prayer and faith (D&C 26:2)"

Evangelical Comparison: In Evangelical Christianity, church governance is derived from biblical principles (e.g., Acts 6, 1 Timothy 3) but allows for diversity in application (congregationalism, elder-rule, etc.). The authority resides in Scripture, and the congregation submits to leaders insofar as they follow Scripture. In D&C 26, 'Common Consent' establishes a specific ritual of 'sustaining' leaders. In practice, this has evolved not into a democratic vote, but a covenantal act where members pledge support to the hierarchy. The Evangelical contrast lies in the source of authority: Evangelicals consent to the Word of God; the LDS doctrine of common consent often functions as a communal ratification of the Prophet's current revelation, creating a dynamic where dissent is equated with a lack of faith.

2. PROGRESSIVE/CONTINUING REVELATION

Assertion: God provides instructions incrementally; future duties are currently hidden and will be revealed later.

"until after you shall go to the west to hold the next conference; and then it shall be made known what you shall do. (D&C 26:1)"

Evangelical Comparison: The text explicitly states that the leaders' future actions are contingent upon future revelation ('then it shall be made known'). This establishes an epistemology of dependence on the Prophet's ongoing reception of divine voice. Evangelical theology holds to 'Sola Scriptura'—that the Bible contains all necessary knowledge for salvation and godly living. While Evangelicals believe in the Holy Spirit's guidance (illumination), they reject the need for new, binding canonical revelation to dictate church movements or doctrines, viewing the canon as closed (Jude 1:3).

COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

Divergence Status: Yes

Theological Gap: The fundamental gap lies in the source of authority and the nature of the church. D&C 26 assumes that the church requires constant, specific verbal dictation from God through a prophet to function

(e.g., 'then it shall be made known'). Evangelical ecclesiology relies on the sufficiency of the completed Scriptures to guide the church through wisdom and the Holy Spirit. Furthermore, 'Common Consent' in this text lays the groundwork for a hierarchical structure where the congregation's role is to ratify the prophet's decisions, creating a system where authority flows from the top down (Prophet -> People), whereas the Protestant 'Priesthood of All Believers' emphasizes the equality of all before God and the accountability of leaders to Scripture.

Shared Values:

Importance of studying Scripture; Necessity of prayer; Church order and governance; Preaching the gospel

Friction Points:

1. [Critical] Sola Scriptura – Asserts new, binding revelation is necessary for church governance, denying the sufficiency of the Bible.
2. [Major] Universal Priesthood – Establishes a hierarchy where the congregation's role is to consent to the decisions of the specific revelators (Smith, Cowdery, Whitmer).

Semantic Warnings:

"Scriptures"

In Text: In July 1830, this refers to the Bible AND the recently published Book of Mormon.

Evangelical: The 66 books of the Old and New Testaments (Sola Scriptura).

Example: *When D&C 26:1 says 'study the scriptures,' it is a command to study the Book of Mormon as equal authority to the Bible.*

"Common Consent"

In Text: The practice of sustaining church leaders and decisions, often functioning as a loyalty test or ratification.

Evangelical: N/A (Not a biblical term, though 'unity' and 'agreement' are biblical concepts).

Example: *In Mormonism, refusing 'common consent' (voting opposed) can lead to disciplinary councils; in a democracy, it is a right of dissent.*

SOTERIOLOGY

Salvation Defined: Not explicitly defined in this text, but implies being part of the 'church' and following its order.

How Attained: Implicitly through obedience to the commands (study, preach, labor) and alignment with the church body (consent).

Basis of Assurance: Assurance is tied to the 'confirming' of the church and the reception of future revelation.

Comparison to Sola Fide: The text focuses entirely on works (study, preach, labor) and church procedure. There is no mention of Christ's finished work or faith as the sole ground of justification. It promotes a 'faithfulness' (loyalty/activity) model rather than a 'faith' (trust in Christ) model.

MANDATES & REQUIREMENTS

Explicit Commands:

1. Devote time to studying the scriptures
2. Preach the gospel
3. Confirm the church at Colesville
4. Perform labors on the land (farming/manual work)
5. Go to the west for the next conference

Implicit Obligations:

1. Wait for further instructions regarding future actions
2. Participate in the sustaining/consent process of the church

Ritual Requirements:

1. Common Consent (voting/sustaining leaders and decisions)

EVANGELISM TOOLKIT

Discovery Questions:

1. When D&C 26 mentions 'common consent,' how does that work practically for you? Do you feel free to disagree with a leader's decision if you feel it contradicts Scripture?
2. Verse 1 commands the leaders to 'study the scriptures.' Since this was 1830, what scriptures were they studying, and how does that compare to what you study today?
3. The text says 'it shall be made known what you shall do.' How do you balance waiting for new instructions from leaders versus trusting the guidance God has already given in the Bible?

Redemptive Analogies:

1. Common Consent / Desire for Unity – The human desire for a unified community is fulfilled in the Body of Christ, not through administrative voting, but through the 'unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace' created by the Gospel. [Ephesians 4:3-6]
2. Confirming the Church – The desire to strengthen (confirm) believers is noble. In the Gospel, we are confirmed/established not by a ritual or a prophet's visit, but by the grace of God and the Gospel itself. [Romans 16:25]

Spiritual Weight:

1. Uncertainty/Dependency [Moderate] – The believer is placed in a state of dependency on the next revelation ('then it shall be made known'). This creates a spiritual instability where one cannot rest in the finished will of God revealed in Scripture but must anxiously await the next directive from the hierarchy.
2. Pressure to Conform [Severe] – The 'law of common consent' creates immense social and spiritual pressure to agree with the group and the leaders. Dissent is framed as a lack of 'prayer and faith,' leading to the suppression of conscience and valid questions.

EPISTEMOLOGY

Knowledge Source: Direct Revelation via the Prophet

Verification Method: Prayer and Faith (Verse 2)

Evangelical Contrast: Evangelicals verify truth by testing it against the closed canon of Scripture (Acts 17:11). This text suggests truth is verified by an internal spiritual process ('prayer and faith') in response to a new revelation.

TEXTUAL CRITICISM

Dating: July 1830

Authorship: Joseph Smith (dictated)

Textual Issues: Early manuscripts of the D&C were often edited before publication in the 1835 Doctrine and Covenants. This section was originally part of a larger context of instructions.