

SECTION 31

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

OVERVIEW

Doctrine and Covenants Section 31, dated September 1830, is a revelation dictated by Joseph Smith addressed to Thomas B. Marsh, a recent convert and future President of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles. The text follows the standard structure of early Mormon revelations: a divine preamble, specific commendations, a call to action, and promises of reward. Theologically, it is significant for explicitly linking the forgiveness of sins to the performance of missionary labor ('thrust in your sickle... and your sins are forgiven you'). It commands Marsh to preach the specific revelations given to Joseph Smith, establishing Smith's output as the content of the new gospel message. The text also addresses Marsh's domestic concerns, promising that his family will eventually believe and be unified in the church—a prophecy that historically faced significant challenges given Marsh's later apostasy and family struggles. The revelation concludes with an eschatological warning to be faithful to the end to avoid losing the reward, reinforcing a conditional view of salvation.

KEY FIGURES

Jesus Christ (The Speaker), Thomas B. Marsh (Recipient), Joseph Smith, Jun. (The Revelator/Servant)

DOCTRINES ANALYZED

1. FORGIVENESS THROUGH LABOR

Assertion: The text asserts that the act of performing missionary service results in the forgiveness of the missionary's sins.

"Therefore, thrust in your sickle with all your soul, and your sins are forgiven you (D&C 31:5)"

Evangelical Comparison: In Evangelical theology, justification is a forensic act of God based solely on the imputed righteousness of Christ, received through faith (Romans 3:28, Ephesians 2:8-9). Service and good works are the ***fruit*** of salvation, not the ***cause*** of forgiveness. D&C 31:5 reverses this order, presenting forgiveness as a transactional benefit ('hire') for the 'laborer.' This suggests that remission of sins is an ongoing process contingent upon the believer's utility and exertion in the harvest field, rather than a settled status secured by the cross.

2. PROPHETIC AUTHORITY AS GOSPEL CONTENT

Assertion: The content of the gospel message is defined as the revelations given to Joseph Smith.

"You shall declare the things which have been revealed to my servant, Joseph Smith, Jun. (D&C 31:4)"

Evangelical Comparison: The 'Gospel' in the New Testament is the 'Good News' of Jesus Christ's substitutionary atonement. In D&C 31:4, the mandate is to declare the specific new tenets revealed through Joseph Smith. This shifts the focus of the message from the finished work of Christ to the unfolding restoration narrative and the authority of the modern prophet. It implies that the Bible alone is insufficient for the current generation's salvation or instruction, violating Sola Scriptura.

COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

Divergence Status: Yes

Theological Gap: While the ethical commands (patience, prayer) align with Christian living, the foundational theology of D&C 31 creates a significant gap. The primary divergence is Soteriological: Verse 5 explicitly ties the remission of sins to the work of the ministry, violating Sola Fide. The secondary divergence is Ecclesiological and Bibliological: The text centers the 'gospel' on the revelations of Joseph Smith (v4) and defines the church as a specific institution to be built up, rather than the universal body of believers. The assurance of salvation is conditional ('lest you... lose your reward'), creating a psychological burden unknown in the doctrine of Grace.

Shared Values:

Importance of prayer; Call to evangelism; Meekness in leadership; Patience in affliction; Family unity (as a goal)

Friction Points:

1. [Critical] Sola Fide (Faith Alone) – Forgiveness of sins is promised as a result of 'thrusting in the sickle' (missionary work).
2. [Major] Sola Gratia (Grace Alone) – The text frames spiritual standing as 'hire' for a 'laborer,' making blessings a debt God owes for service.
3. [Critical] Sola Scriptura – Commands the preaching of extra-biblical revelations given to Joseph Smith as binding truth.

Semantic Warnings:

"Gospel/Glad Tidings"

In Text: The specific revelations and restorationist doctrines revealed to Joseph Smith (v4).

Evangelical: The death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of sins (1 Cor 15:1-4).

Example: When D&C 31 commands Marsh to declare 'glad tidings,' it means the message of Mormonism's restoration, not solely the biblical message of the Cross.

"Physician"

In Text: A role of spiritual healing and leadership within the LDS church structure (v10).

Evangelical: Often a metaphor for Christ (Mark 2:17), or a literal profession (Luke).

Example: Marsh is called a physician 'unto the church,' implying a hierarchy where leaders dispense spiritual healing, contrasting with the priesthood of all believers.

SOTERIOLOGY

Salvation Defined: Implicitly defined as being 'one' in the church, having sins forgiven through service, and receiving a reward.

How Attained: Through faith in 'the work' (v1), missionary labor (v5), and enduring to the end (v13).

Basis of Assurance: Conditional upon continued obedience and prayer; assurance is fragile ('lest you... lose your reward').

Comparison to Sola Fide: D&C 31:5 offers a 'works-righteousness' exchange (labor for forgiveness), which is the antithesis of Romans 4:4-5 ('Now to the one who works, his wages are not counted as a gift but as his due. And to the one who does not work but believes... his faith is counted as righteousness').

MANDATES & REQUIREMENTS

Explicit Commands:

1. Lift up your heart and rejoice (v3)
2. Declare the things revealed to Joseph Smith (v4)
3. Thrust in your sickle with all your soul (v5)
4. Go from your family for a little time (v6)
5. Revile not against those that revile (v9)
6. Govern your house in meekness (v9)
7. Pray always (v12)

Implicit Obligations:

1. Accept Joseph Smith as the authoritative channel of truth
2. Prioritize church service over immediate family presence
3. Maintain specific internal emotional states (patience, meekness)

Ritual Requirements:

1. Missionary service (viewed here as a priesthood duty/ritual act of gathering)

EVANGELISM TOOLKIT

Discovery Questions:

1. In verse 5, it says 'thrust in your sickle... and your sins are forgiven you.' How do you understand the relationship between your missionary work and God's forgiveness?
2. If forgiveness is earned by laboring in the field, how does that relate to Jesus paying it all on the cross?
3. Verse 2 promises Marsh's family would believe and be one with him. Historically, Marsh left the church and his family didn't return with him. How do you interpret prophecies that don't seem to come to pass?
4. The text calls Marsh a 'physician unto the church.' Do you feel you need a human mediator to heal you, or do you go directly to Christ?

Redemptive Analogies:

1. The Physician – Marsh was called to be a physician, but he himself was spiritually sick and eventually fell away. This points to our need for the true Great Physician, Jesus, who heals us not because of our skills but because of His mercy. [Mark 2:17 'Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. I came not to call the righteous, but sinners.']}
2. Family Unity – The text highlights the deep human desire for our families to be saved and unified. The Gospel offers the ultimate family unity through adoption into God's family, guaranteed by the Spirit, not by our own efforts. [Ephesians 2:19 'So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God.']}

Spiritual Weight:

1. Transactional Forgiveness [Severe] – The believer is placed on a treadmill where forgiveness is a wage to be earned through exertion ('laborer is worthy of his hire'). This creates anxiety that if one is not working hard enough, their sins remain.
2. Family Salvation Responsibility [Severe] – Verse 2 links Marsh's faith and labor to his family's salvation. This imposes a heavy burden on LDS parents, suggesting that their personal faithfulness (or lack thereof) determines the eternal destiny of their children.

EPISTEMOLOGY

Knowledge Source: Prophetic Revelation (Joseph Smith) and Personal Revelation (The Comforter).

Verification Method: Adherents are told the Comforter will guide them (v11), but the primary verification is the acceptance of Joseph Smith's revelations (v4).

Evangelical Contrast: Biblical epistemology tests all spirits and prophecies against the fixed standard of Scripture (1 John 4:1, Acts 17:11). D&C 31 establishes the new revelations as the standard to be preached, creating a circular validation loop where the 'Comforter' is expected to confirm the new text.

TEXTUAL CRITICISM

Dating: September 1830

Authorship: Joseph Smith (dictated)

Textual Issues: Early manuscripts of D&C revelations were often edited before the 1835 publication to reflect developing theology, though this section is relatively stable compared to others.