

SECTION 37

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

OVERVIEW

Given in December 1830 near Fayette, New York, Doctrine and Covenants Section 37 marks a pivotal shift in early Mormon history: the initiation of 'The Gathering.' In this text, Joseph Smith speaks in the voice of the Lord to command a cessation of the 'translation' (the Joseph Smith Translation of the Bible) due to external threats ('the enemy'). The primary directive is a mandate for the entire Church to assemble geographically in 'the Ohio' (Kirtland). This text establishes the precedent that the Prophet holds authority not only over doctrinal matters but over the physical location and migration of the membership. It transitions the movement from a scattered group of believers in New York to a centralized society in Ohio, justified by the need for safety and preparation for Oliver Cowdery's return.

KEY FIGURES

Jesus Christ (The Speaker), Joseph Smith, Sidney Rigdon, Oliver Cowdery

DOCTRINES ANALYZED

1. THE DOCTRINE OF GATHERING

Assertion: God commands His people to physically assemble in a specific geographic location designated by the prophet.

"a commandment I give unto the church, that it is expedient in me that they should assemble together at the Ohio (D&C 37:3)"

Evangelical Comparison: In Evangelical theology, the 'gathering' of the saints is local (the local church assembly) and spiritual (the universal body of Christ), culminating eschatologically in the New Jerusalem. There is no 'holy land' or command to migrate to a specific city in the Church Age. D&C 37 reinstates a geo-political model of the Kingdom similar to Old Testament Israel, requiring physical migration to a 'Zion' location (Ohio) as a test of faith and obedience, effectively re-sacralizing geography which Christ desacralized in the New Covenant.

2. PROPHETIC AUTHORITY OVER TEMPORAL AFFAIRS

Assertion: The Prophet has the authority to dictate where members live and when they must move.

"Behold, I say unto you that it is not expedient in me that ye should translate any more until ye shall go to the Ohio (D&C 37:1)"

Evangelical Comparison: The Evangelical concept of the Priesthood of the Believer implies that individuals seek God's will for their lives, jobs, and locations directly through Scripture and the Holy Spirit. In D&C 37, the directive to move families hundreds of miles is mediated solely through Joseph Smith. This establishes a hierarchy where the leader's revelation supersedes individual agency regarding personal property and residence.

COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

Divergence Status: Yes

Theological Gap: The fundamental gap lies in the nature of the Kingdom of God. In D&C 37, the Kingdom is becoming a physical, geo-political entity requiring gathering to a central point (Zion/Ohio). In Evangelical theology, based on the New Testament, the Kingdom is spiritual and universal, existing wherever believers gather in Jesus' name (Matthew 18:20). The text also elevates the safety of the prophet and the 'expediency' of the movement above the completion of scriptural work (translation), suggesting a pragmatic shift driven by external pressure ('the enemy') rather than purely theological necessity.

Shared Values:

Importance of preaching the gospel.; Strengthening the church body.; Prayer in faith.

Friction Points:

1. [Major] Universal Priesthood – Centralizes the will of God for the individual's life location in the hands of one leader.
2. [Minor] Theology Proper (God's Omnipotence) – Implies God's work (translation) must pause because of human enemies, suggesting God is reactive to human threats.
3. [Critical] Sola Scriptura – Adds extra-biblical commandments binding on the conscience of the believer.

Semantic Warnings:

"Gathering"

In Text: Physical migration of all believers to a single location designated by the prophet.

Evangelical: Spiritual unity in Christ (Ephesians 1:10) or the future eschatological gathering by angels (Matthew 24:31).

Example: In D&C 37, 'gathering' means packing wagons for Ohio. In Hebrews 10:25, 'assembling' refers to local church worship.

"The Enemy"

In Text: Specific human persecutors or mobs in New York threatening the safety of Smith and Rigdon.

Evangelical: Usually refers to Satan (1 Peter 5:8) or death (1 Corinthians 15:26), though human enemies exist.

Example: The text cites 'the enemy' as the reason to stop translating Scripture, implying human threats can pause divine work.

SOTERIOLOGY

Salvation Defined: Implicitly tied to being with the body of the Church in the gathered location.

How Attained: Requires obedience to the prophetic command to gather.

Basis of Assurance: Compliance with the current revelation (moving to Ohio).

Comparison to Sola Fide: Sola Fide asserts justification by faith regardless of location. D&C 37 implies that faith is insufficient without the work of physical migration.

MANDATES & REQUIREMENTS

Explicit Commands:

1. Stop translating the Bible (JST) immediately.
2. Go to the Ohio (Joseph and Sidney).
3. Preach the gospel in New York/Colesville before leaving.
4. Strengthen the church in Colesville.
5. The entire Church must assemble at the Ohio.

Implicit Obligations:

1. Accept Joseph Smith's directive as the voice of God.
2. Be willing to abandon current homes and property in New York.
3. Prioritize the safety of the leadership ('for your sakes').

EVANGELISM TOOLKIT

Discovery Questions:

1. In verse 1, the Lord tells Joseph to stop translating the Bible because of 'the enemy.' How does this compare to the idea that God's Word cannot be bound (2 Timothy 2:9)?
2. Why do you think the gathering in the New Testament changed from a geographic one (Jerusalem) to a spiritual one (wherever two or three are gathered)?
3. How would you feel if the prophet commanded you to move your family to a different state today? Does that authority feel like freedom or a burden?

Redemptive Analogies:

1. The desire for a safe gathering place. – The text reflects a human longing for safety and community away from the world. The Gospel answers this not with a city in Ohio, but with the 'Rock' of Christ. [Psalm 61:2-3 - 'Lead me to the rock that is higher than I. For thou has been a shelter for me, and a strong tower from the enemy. ']

Spiritual Weight:

1. Displacement / Total Control [Severe] – The adherent must be willing to uproot their entire life, career, and home at the command of a leader. This creates a psychological environment where personal stability is always secondary to institutional directives.
2. Fear of the Enemy [Moderate] – The text validates a worldview where 'the enemy' is powerful enough to alter God's plans (stopping translation), potentially inducing paranoia or a siege mentality in the believer.

EPISTEMOLOGY

Knowledge Source: Prophetic Revelation.

Verification Method: Obedience to the command to gather is the implicit verification; the text offers no external proof other than the authoritative voice.

Evangelical Contrast: Biblical epistemology relies on the testing of spirits against Scripture (1 John 4:1, Acts 17:11). Here, the knowledge of God's will (to move to Ohio) is inaccessible via Scripture and relies entirely on Smith's utterance.

TEXTUAL CRITICISM

Dating: December 1830.

Authorship: Joseph Smith (dictated).

Textual Issues: Early manuscripts show minor variations common to the compilation of the Book of Commandments/D&C.