

SECTION 39

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

OVERVIEW

Doctrine and Covenants Section 39, dictated by Joseph Smith on January 5, 1831, represents a pivotal moment in early Mormon missiology. It is addressed to James Covel, a veteran Methodist minister of forty years who had briefly investigated Mormonism. The text begins with a high Christology, identifying the speaker as the 'Great I Am' and the 'Light and Life of the world,' utilizing language heavily borrowed from the Johannine prologue. The core of the revelation is a direct commandment to Covel to repent and be baptized. Despite Covel's long career in Christian ministry, the text asserts that he must be baptized to 'wash away [his] sins,' implying the invalidity of his previous Methodist baptism and ministry. The revelation outlines the 'fulness of my gospel' as a sequence of repentance, water baptism, and the baptism of fire (Holy Ghost). It further commands Covel to relocate to Ohio, where the Saints were gathering, promising a great endowment of power. The text serves as a theological boundary marker, asserting that authority and valid sacraments exist exclusively within Joseph Smith's movement, regardless of a convert's prior Christian devotion.

KEY FIGURES

Jesus Christ (The Speaker), James Covel (Recipient, Methodist Minister), Joseph Smith (The Revelator)

DOCTRINES ANALYZED

1. BAPTISMAL REMISSION OF SINS

Assertion: Baptism is the mechanism by which sins are washed away, and previous non-LDS baptisms are invalid.

"Arise and be baptized, and wash away your sins... (D&C 39:10)"

Evangelical Comparison: In Evangelical theology, justification is by faith alone (Sola Fide), and baptism is a subsequent ordinance of obedience and identification, not a requirement for the remission of sins. This text, however, commands a man who has been a Christian minister for 40 years to be baptized to 'wash away' his sins. This implies two things: 1) His sins were not previously forgiven through faith in Christ alone, and 2) His previous baptism (likely Methodist/infant or believer's) was devoid of authority. This establishes the LDS doctrine that the ordinance itself, performed by proper authority, is essential for salvation.

2. THE GATHERING TO ZION

Assertion: Believers are commanded to physically assemble in specific geographic locations (Ohio) to receive blessings.

"Thou art called to go to the Ohio... inasmuch as my people shall assemble themselves at the Ohio, I have kept in store a blessing (D&C 39:14-15)"

Evangelical Comparison: While Evangelicals believe in the local assembly of believers, there is no theological mandate to migrate to a specific city to receive God's blessing or power. This text reflects the early Mormon doctrine of 'The Gathering,' where salvation and the 'endowment' of power were inextricably linked to being physically present in the designated headquarters (Zion/Ohio). This creates a geo-centric soteriology distinct from the omnipresent access to grace found in Protestant theology.

COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

Divergence Status: Yes

Theological Gap: While the text opens with orthodox-sounding Christology, it quickly pivots to a Restorationist exclusivism. The fundamental gap lies in the validity of Covel's previous faith. To an Evangelical, Covel was already a brother in Christ; to the voice in this text, Covel had 'rejected' Christ because he had not accepted the specific restorationist message. This redefines 'receiving Christ' (v5) from a matter of faith to a matter of accepting Joseph Smith's 'fulness of the gospel' (v11), which includes specific priesthood authority and ordinances. It replaces Sola Fide with a faith-plus-ordinance system.

Shared Values:

Jesus is the Light and Life of the world; Necessity of repentance; Expectation of the Second Coming; Rejection of 'cares of the world'

Friction Points:

1. [Critical] Sola Fide – Requires baptism for the remission of sins, adding a work/ritual to the requirement for salvation.
2. [Major] Universal Priesthood – Denies the validity of Covell's previous ministry and baptism, asserting exclusive authority in the restored church.
3. [Minor] Theology Proper (Omnipresence/Grace) – Limits the outpouring of specific blessings to a geographic location (Ohio).

Semantic Warnings:

"My Gospel"

In Text: Repentance, water baptism (LDS), and baptism of fire (v6).

Evangelical: The good news of Jesus's death, burial, and resurrection for the forgiveness of sins (1 Corinthians 15:1-4).

Example: *In v5, 'he that receiveth my gospel receiveth me' implies that rejecting the specific LDS ritual system is equivalent to rejecting Jesus Himself.*

"Wash away your sins"

In Text: Literal remission of sins through the ordinance of baptism.

Evangelical: Symbolic cleansing representing the spiritual reality of justification by faith (or, in Acts 22, calling on the name of the Lord).

Example: *The text commands a believer to be baptized to wash away sins, whereas Evangelicals believe the blood of Christ cleanses from sin upon faith (1 John 1:7).*

SOTERIOLOGY

Salvation Defined: Becoming sons of God (v4) through receiving the 'fulness of my gospel' (v11) and gathering (v22).

How Attained: Faith, Repentance, Baptism by water, Reception of Holy Ghost, Gathering to Zion.

Basis of Assurance: Conditional on obedience to the command to gather and be baptized.

Comparison to Sola Fide: Explicitly rejects Sola Fide by stating that receiving the gospel (defined as ordinances) is necessary to receive Christ (v5-6). Contrast with Romans 10:9-10.

MANDATES & REQUIREMENTS

Explicit Commands:

1. Arise and be baptized (v10)
2. Wash away your sins (v10)
3. Preach the fulness of the gospel (v11)
4. Go to the Ohio (v14)
5. Call faithful laborers (v17)
6. Cry with a loud voice: Hosanna (v19)

Implicit Obligations:

1. Abandon previous denominational affiliation (Methodism)
2. Accept Joseph Smith as the only channel for God's voice
3. Relocate geographically

Ritual Requirements:

1. Baptism by water (for remission of sins)
2. Laying on of hands for the gift of the Holy Ghost (v23)

EVANGELISM TOOLKIT

Discovery Questions:

1. In verse 10, James Covell is told to be baptized to 'wash away sins.' As a Methodist minister for 40 years, do you think he had not yet received forgiveness of sins through faith in Christ?
2. How does the definition of 'my gospel' in verse 6 compare to Paul's definition in 1 Corinthians 15:1-4?
3. The text says Covell had 'rejected' the Lord many times (v9). Do you think a sincere Christian who hasn't heard of Joseph Smith is considered to be rejecting Jesus?

Redemptive Analogies:

1. The desire to be 'right' before God – We all desire to have our hearts right before God. The Gospel says this happens through the imputed righteousness of Christ, not our own works. [2 Corinthians 5:21]
2. Pruning the Vineyard – God does prune us to make us fruitful, but this is the work of the Father on those already in the Vine (Jesus), not a threat of destruction for those who don't move to Ohio. [John 15:1-2]

Spiritual Weight:

1. Invalidation of Past Faith [Severe] – For a convert from another Christian tradition, this text imposes the heavy burden of believing their entire previous spiritual life, prayers, and service were insufficient or 'rejected' by God because they lacked LDS authority.
2. Geographic/Social Displacement [Moderate] – The command to 'go to the Ohio' represents the burden of uprooting one's life and family to maintain spiritual standing.
3. Urgency/Fear [Moderate] – The text emphasizes 'the time is at hand' and 'I come quickly,' creating a pressure cooker environment where immediate obedience to the prophet is the only safety from judgment.

EPISTEMOLOGY

Knowledge Source: Prophetic Revelation (Joseph Smith speaking as Christ).

Verification Method: Obedience to the commands (baptism and gathering) brings the 'Spirit' and a 'blessing so great as you never have known' (v10).

Evangelical Contrast: Evangelical epistemology relies on the objective standard of the closed biblical canon (2 Timothy 3:16), whereas this text relies on subjective spiritual experience following obedience to a modern prophet.

TEXTUAL CRITICISM

Dating: January 5, 1831

Authorship: Joseph Smith (dictated)

Textual Issues: The text is presented as the direct voice of Jesus. Historical context indicates it was a specific recruitment tool for a prominent Methodist.