

SECTION 47

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

OVERVIEW

Doctrine and Covenants Section 47, received on March 8, 1831, in Kirtland, Ohio, addresses an administrative transition within the early Latter-day Saint movement. Following Oliver Cowdery's reassignment to other duties, John Whitmer is called to serve as the Church Historian and Recorder. The context, provided in the section header, reveals that Whitmer was hesitant to accept the role solely on administrative grounds; he specifically requested a manifestation of God's will through 'Joseph the Seer.' The text validates this request, with the voice of the Lord (through Smith) commanding Whitmer to keep a 'regular history' and assist in transcribing revelations. The text elevates the administrative task of record-keeping to a spiritual discipline, promising the assistance of the Holy Spirit ('the Comforter') to write the history, but explicitly conditioning this supernatural aid on Whitmer's faithfulness. This section establishes the precedent in Mormonism that administrative calls are revelations and that the recording of church history is a sacred, pneumatological act.

KEY FIGURES

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

DOCTRINES ANALYZED

1. PROPHETIC MEDIATION OF PERSONAL DUTY

Assertion: God reveals His specific will for an individual's service through the Prophet/Seer, rather than solely through personal conviction.

"Behold, it is expedient in me that my servant John should write and keep a regular history... (D&C 47:1)"

Evangelical Comparison: In Evangelical theology, the Priesthood of the Believer (1 Peter 2:5, 9) implies that every Christian has direct access to God and can discern His will for their life through Scripture and the indwelling Holy Spirit (Romans 12:2). In this text, John Whitmer's epistemology is mediated; he refuses to act until the will of God is manifested 'through Joseph the Seer.' The doctrine here establishes a hierarchy where the Prophet functions as the necessary conduit for personal vocational direction, creating a dependency on the leader for spiritual validation that is foreign to the New Testament concept of the body of Christ functioning under the headship of Jesus alone.

2. CONDITIONAL PNEUMATOLOGY

Assertion: The assistance of the Holy Spirit (Comforter) in fulfilling a calling is contingent upon the individual's faithfulness.

"Wherefore, it shall be given him, inasmuch as he is faithful, by the Comforter, to write these things. (D&C 47:4)"

Evangelical Comparison: The text asserts that the Comforter's aid is given 'inasmuch as he is faithful.' This introduces a conditional clause to the operation of the Holy Spirit. In contrast, Evangelical theology teaches that the Holy Spirit is the permanent seal of the believer (Ephesians 1:13-14) and empowers gifts by grace, not merit (1 Corinthians 12:11). The Mormon view presented here suggests that spiritual empowerment for ministry is a fluctuating state dependent on human merit ('faithfulness'), whereas the Biblical view emphasizes the Spirit's work despite human weakness (2 Corinthians 12:9).

3. SACRED HISTORY

Assertion: The recording of institutional history is a divinely mandated, Spirit-led office.

"It shall be appointed unto him to keep the church record and history continually (D&C 47:3)"

Evangelical Comparison: This text elevates the role of 'Church Historian' to a spiritual office requiring the 'Comforter.' While the Bible contains history (Acts, Gospels), the New Testament does not establish a perpetual office of 'Recorder' within the church polity (Ephesians 4:11-12). This reflects Mormonism's high emphasis on institutional record-keeping as essential for salvation and church governance, contrasting with the Evangelical focus on the sufficiency of the completed canon of Scripture.

COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

Divergence Status: Yes

Theological Gap: The fundamental theological gap lies in the mediation of God's will. In this text, the believer (Whitmer) is dependent on the 'Seer' (Smith) to know his standing and duty before God. This violates the Evangelical tenet of the Universal Priesthood of Believers, where there is one Mediator, Christ Jesus (1 Timothy 2:5). Furthermore, the pneumatology (doctrine of the Spirit) is transactional. The Spirit helps 'inasmuch as he is faithful,' suggesting a works-righteousness framework for spiritual empowerment, contrasting with the Evangelical understanding of grace where God empowers the weak and unworthy.

Shared Values:

Importance of history/record keeping; Reliance on the Holy Spirit for service; Desire to do God's will

Friction Points:

1. [Major] Universal Priesthood – Replaces direct access to God's will with dependence on a human 'Seer'.
2. [Major] Sola Gratia – Makes the Spirit's help conditional on human faithfulness ('inasmuch as').
3. [Critical] Sola Scriptura – Establishes modern revelation as authoritative command and implies the Bible needs 'transcribing' (correction).

Semantic Warnings:

"The Comforter"

In Text: A spiritual aid for accurate record-keeping, conditional on human faithfulness.

Evangelical: The Holy Spirit (John 14:26), the third person of the Trinity, who indwells believers permanently as a seal of redemption (Ephesians 1:13).

Example: *In D&C 47, the Comforter helps write history if Whitmer is faithful; in John 14, the Comforter is given to be with believers forever.*

"Transcribing"

In Text: Assisting Joseph Smith in the 'Joseph Smith Translation' (JST) of the Bible.

Evangelical: Copying text; however, in this context, it implies the Bible is insufficient and requires prophetic correction.

Example: *Whitmer is called to assist in 'transcribing all things,' which implies an open canon or a corrective process applied to the Bible.*

SOTERIOLOGY

Salvation Defined: Not explicitly defined in this text, but service/calling is framed as a requirement for faithfulness.

How Attained: Implicitly through obedience to the Prophet's commands and 'faithfulness' in church duties.

Basis of Assurance: Performance of duty (writing the history) and the Prophet's validation.

Comparison to Sola Fide: The text emphasizes 'faithfulness' (loyalty/works) as the condition for spiritual blessing, rather than 'faith' (trust) in Christ's finished work.

MANDATES & REQUIREMENTS

Explicit Commands:

1. Write and keep a regular history of the church
2. Assist Joseph Smith in transcribing
3. Lift up voice in meetings when expedient

Implicit Obligations:

1. Accept the authority of Joseph Smith to dictate personal assignments
2. Maintain personal faithfulness to ensure the help of the Spirit

EVANGELISM TOOLKIT

Discovery Questions:

1. In verse 1, John Whitmer wanted Joseph Smith to tell him God's will. How does that compare to how you discern God's will for your life today?
2. Verse 4 says the Comforter would help John 'inasmuch as he is faithful.' How does that make you feel about your own reliance on the Spirit—does it depend on your performance?
3. Why do you think it was necessary for a 'Seer' to appoint a historian, rather than the church simply hiring or electing someone qualified?

Redemptive Analogies:

1. The Desire for a Record – Humans have a deep desire to be remembered and for their deeds to be recorded. This points to the 'Book of Life.' [Revelation 20:12, Luke 10:20 (Rejoice that your names are written in heaven, not just in a church history).]
2. The Need for a Mediator – Whitmer knew he needed a word from outside himself. We do need a Mediator, but it is Christ, not a man. [1 Timothy 2:5 (One mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus).]

Spiritual Weight:

1. Performance Anxiety [Moderate] – The believer must maintain a certain level of 'faithfulness' to ensure the Holy Spirit will assist them in their calling. Any failure in duty can be interpreted as a withdrawal of the Spirit.
2. Dependency/Infantilization [Moderate] – The believer is conditioned to doubt their own spiritual instincts and wait for a leader to validate their decisions, stunting personal spiritual maturity.

EPISTEMOLOGY

Knowledge Source: Mediated Revelation (Prophetic Dictation).

Verification Method: The individual (Whitmer) verifies truth by asking the Prophet (Smith) to speak for God.

Evangelical Contrast: Biblical epistemology relies on the objective standard of Scripture and the subjective witness of the Spirit within the believer (1 John 4:1), not on the dictation of a human leader. The text implies Whitmer could not know God's will without Smith's intervention.

TEXTUAL CRITICISM

Dating: March 8, 1831

Authorship: Joseph Smith (dictated)

Textual Issues: The 'history' Whitmer wrote was eventually suppressed by the LDS church for over a century because it contained details they found unfavorable after Whitmer left the church.