

SECTION 5

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

OVERVIEW

Dated March 1829, this revelation was dictated by Joseph Smith in Harmony, Pennsylvania, in response to Martin Harris, his scribe and financier, who desired a 'witness' (physical proof) of the Golden Plates to satisfy his own doubts and those of his family. The text, speaking in the voice of Jesus Christ, rebukes the 'unbelieving and stiffnecked generation' that demands signs. It establishes a critical theological boundary: Joseph Smith is commanded not to show the plates to anyone unless God commands it. The text affirms Joseph's 'gift to translate' while warning him that he must 'pretend to no other gift' at this time. It introduces the concept of the Three Witnesses who will eventually be called to testify of the record. Theologically, it links the acceptance of Joseph's new 'word' directly to salvation, warning of a 'desolating scourge' for those who reject it. It places heavy conditions on both Harris and Smith, stating that eternal life and the privilege of witnessing are contingent upon humility, repentance, and strict obedience to commandments.

KEY FIGURES

The Lord (Jesus Christ), Joseph Smith, Jr., Martin Harris, The Three Witnesses (Prophesied)

DOCTRINES ANALYZED

1. CONDITIONAL ETERNAL LIFE

Assertion: Eternal life is granted to Joseph Smith (and by extension, others) only if he is 'firm in keeping the commandments.'

"And that you be firm in keeping the commandments wherewith I have commanded you; and if you do this, behold I grant unto you eternal life... (D&C 5:22)"

Evangelical Comparison: In Evangelical theology, eternal life is the free gift of God (Romans 6:23) received through faith in Christ's finished work, independent of the believer's ability to maintain moral firmness. D&C 5:22 and 5:35 explicitly condition the grant of eternal life on the believer's performance ('if you do this,' 'if thou art faithful'). This shifts the basis of assurance from Christ's merit to the individual's obedience, reintroducing a works-righteousness paradigm that the Protestant Reformation sought to correct.

2. PROPHETIC EXCLUSIVITY

Assertion: God's word for 'this generation' comes exclusively through Joseph Smith.

"But this generation shall have my word through you; (D&C 5:10)"

Evangelical Comparison: Evangelicalism holds that God speaks primarily through His completed canon of Scripture (Hebrews 1:1-2) and that all believers have direct access to God (1 Timothy 2:5). D&C 5 establishes a new dispensation where the 'word' is mediated specifically through Joseph Smith. This creates a bottleneck for divine truth, making access to God's will dependent on accepting Smith's specific revelations, effectively replacing the sufficiency of the Bible with the necessity of a modern prophet.

COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

Divergence Status: Yes

Theological Gap: While using Christian terminology (repentance, born of Spirit, eternal life), D&C 5 fundamentally alters the mechanism of salvation. In Evangelicalism, the Bible is the sole authority and faith in Christ is the sole requirement for justification. D&C 5 introduces a new authority (Joseph Smith's revelations) and a new requirement (accepting this specific 'word' and keeping commandments firmly). The text presents a God who is 'kindled' in anger against those who require evidence, contrasting with the biblical God who provided the 'many infallible proofs' of the Resurrection (Acts 1:3). The gap is between a 'finished' Gospel and a 'restored' gospel that requires new works.

Shared Values:

Belief in God; Necessity of repentance; Concept of being born of water and Spirit; Reality of divine judgment

Friction Points:

1. [Critical] Sola Scriptura – Asserts new binding revelation through Joseph Smith that supersedes or adds to the Bible.
2. [Critical] Sola Fide – Makes eternal life conditional on 'firmness' in keeping commandments (v. 22).
3. [Major] Universal Priesthood – Restricts the 'power' to view the plates and receive the word to Joseph Smith and his appointed witnesses.

Semantic Warnings:

"Eternal Life"

In Text: A conditional reward granted for being 'firm in keeping commandments' (v. 22).

Evangelical: A free gift of God received through faith in Jesus Christ (Romans 6:23).

Example: *In D&C 5:22, Joseph is told he gets eternal life 'if' he keeps commandments. In John 5:24, the believer 'has' eternal life immediately upon believing.*

"Witness"

In Text: A special privilege granted only to a select few (Three Witnesses) to see the plates.

Evangelical: The Holy Spirit witnessing to the believer's spirit (Romans 8:16) and the historical eyewitnesses of the Resurrection open to public scrutiny (1 Cor 15).

Example: *Martin Harris is denied a witness until he humbles himself; Thomas was granted a witness (touching the wounds) specifically to cure his doubt.*

SOTERIOLOGY

Salvation Defined: Being 'lifted up at the last day' (v. 35) and receiving 'eternal life' (v. 22).

How Attained: Through believing the new words (Book of Mormon), being born of water/Spirit, and being 'faithful in keeping my commandments' (v. 35).

Basis of Assurance: Based on the adherent's performance ('if thou art faithful').

Comparison to Sola Fide: Directly opposes Sola Fide. D&C 5:22 says 'if you do this [keep commandments]... I grant unto you eternal life.' Ephesians 2:8-9 says 'For by grace are ye saved through faith... not of works.'

MANDATES & REQUIREMENTS

Explicit Commands:

1. Joseph Smith must repent and walk more uprightly (v. 21)
2. Joseph Smith must not show the plates to unauthorized persons (v. 3)
3. Joseph Smith must stop translating for a season (v. 30, 34)
4. Martin Harris must humble himself, bow down, and pray to receive a witness (v. 24)

Implicit Obligations:

1. Believers must accept Joseph Smith's testimony without physical proof (v. 7)
2. Adherents must accept the Book of Mormon as the 'word' of the Lord equal to previous verification (v. 20)

Ritual Requirements:

1. Baptism ('born of water') linked to believing these specific words (v. 16)

EVANGELISM TOOLKIT

Discovery Questions:

1. In verse 22, the Lord tells Joseph Smith he will be granted eternal life 'if' he is firm in keeping commandments. How does that compare to the assurance found in 1 John 5:13?
2. Verse 4 says Joseph should 'pretend to no other gift' until the translation is finished. Since he later started a church and revised the Bible, how do you interpret this limitation?
3. Martin Harris was told he had to humble himself 'sufficiently' to see the evidence. How does a person know when they have been humble 'enough' to receive truth?

Redemptive Analogies:

1. The Desire for a Witness – Just as Martin Harris longed for certainty, all humans long to know God is real. God provided the ultimate witness not on gold plates hidden in the woods, but in the person of Jesus Christ, who was seen, touched, and heard (1 John 1:1). [1 John 1:1-3]

Spiritual Weight:

1. Performance Anxiety [Severe] – The text links eternal life directly to being 'firm' in keeping commandments. This creates a perpetual anxiety: 'Have I been firm enough? Have I done enough?'
2. Fear of Judgment [Moderate] – The text threatens a 'desolating scourge' and destruction for those who do not accept this specific new revelation, creating fear-based compliance.
3. Dependency on Mediation [Severe] – The believer is cut off from direct verification of the plates and must rely entirely on Joseph Smith's integrity, creating a fragile spiritual foundation dependent on a man.

EPISTEMOLOGY

Knowledge Source: Subjective spiritual manifestation and the testimony of select witnesses.

Verification Method: Adherents are told that if they believe the words, they will receive a manifestation of the Spirit (v. 16). Martin Harris is told he must humble himself to 'see' (v. 24).

Evangelical Contrast: Biblical epistemology relies on the objective, historical truth of the Resurrection and the fixed canon of Scripture (2 Peter 1:19-21). D&C 5 relies on a circular validation: one must believe the words first to receive the spiritual manifestation (v. 16), and physical evidence is withheld from the skeptic.

TEXTUAL CRITICISM

Dating: March 1829

Authorship: Joseph Smith (dictated)

Textual Issues: Early manuscripts show evolution in the text. Verse 4 originally read 'pretend to no other gift,' which some critics argue referred to Joseph's folk magic practices. Later editions softened or recontextualized this to mean other spiritual gifts.