

# SECTION 55

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

## OVERVIEW

Given in June 1831, Doctrine and Covenants Section 55 addresses William W. Phelps, a printer who had recently arrived in Kirtland, Ohio. The text outlines a specific soteriological and ecclesiastical process: Phelps is commanded to be baptized for the remission of sins and to receive the Holy Spirit via the laying on of hands. Following this initiation, he is to be ordained an elder by Joseph Smith. The revelation grants Phelps the authority to preach and, significantly, the power to bestow the Holy Spirit upon others. Practically, the text leverages Phelps's professional background, assigning him to assist Oliver Cowdery in printing and writing educational material for children. Finally, he is commanded to travel to Missouri ('the land of your inheritance') to establish his labors there, linking his spiritual calling with the physical gathering of Zion.

## KEY FIGURES

Jesus Christ (The Lord), William W. Phelps, Joseph Smith, Jun., Oliver Cowdery, Sidney Rigdon, Joseph Coe

## DOCTRINES ANALYZED

### 1. BAPTISMAL REGENERATION

**Assertion:** Remission of sins is contingent upon water baptism performed with specific intent.

"after thou hast been baptized by water... you shall have a remission of your sins (D&C 55:1)"

**Evangelical Comparison:** In Evangelical theology, remission of sins is a result of justification by faith alone (Romans 3:24-28), with baptism serving as an outward testimony of this inward reality. D&C 55:1 inverts this by placing remission 'after' the physical act of baptism, making the ritual a necessary condition for forgiveness. This aligns with Mormonism's view of baptism as a saving ordinance rather than a symbolic ordinance.

### 2. MEDIATED PNEUMATOLOGY

**Assertion:** The Holy Spirit is bestowed through the laying on of hands by authorized priesthood holders.

"reception of the Holy Spirit by the laying on of hands (D&C 55:1); on whomsoever you shall lay your hands... you shall have power to give the Holy Spirit (D&C 55:3)"

**Evangelical Comparison:** The text asserts that a human priesthood holder has the 'power to give the Holy Spirit' (v3). In contrast, Evangelical pneumatology teaches that the Spirit is the 'seal' given by God immediately upon believing (Ephesians 1:13) and is not dispensed or controlled by human mediators. The idea that a man can 'give' the Third Person of the Trinity suggests a hierarchical control over divine presence that is absent in the New Testament.

## COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

**Divergence Status:** Yes

**Theological Gap:** The fundamental gap lies in the mechanism of grace. D&C 55 establishes a 'chain of custody' for the Holy Spirit: God -> Joseph Smith -> W.W. Phelps -> Convert. This sacerdotalism (priestly mediation) is rejected by Evangelicals, who hold to the 'priesthood of all believers' (1 Peter 2:5, 9). Furthermore, the text makes remission of sins a result of a ritual (baptism) rather than the result of faith in Christ's finished work, reintroducing a works-righteousness framework where the ordinance is the saving agent.

### Shared Values:

Importance of educating children; Call to repentance; Use of personal talents for God's glory

### Friction Points:

- [Critical] Sola Fide – Conditioning remission of sins on water baptism.
- [Major] Universal Priesthood – Restricting the power to 'give' the Holy Spirit to ordained elders.
- [Major] Theology Proper (Pneumatology) – Treating the Holy Spirit as a power dispensed by human hands rather than a Sovereign Person.

## Semantic Warnings:

### "Remission of sins"

**In Text:** A state achieved *after* water baptism and dependent on the intent of the recipient.

**Evangelical:** A result of the shedding of blood (Hebrews 9:22) received by faith (Acts 10:43).

**Example:** *In D&C 55:1, remission follows the water; in Acts 10:43-47, the Spirit is received by faith before the water.*

### "Called and Chosen"

**In Text:** Selected for a specific church office and task.

**Evangelical:** Often refers to soteriological election (Ephesians 1:4) or the general call to discipleship.

**Example:** *Phelps is 'chosen' to be an elder and printer, not necessarily guaranteed eternal life.*

## SOTERIOLOGY

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**Salvation Defined:** Implied as a process beginning with remission of sins through ordinances and culminating in inheritance in Zion.

**How Attained:** Through baptism, reception of the Holy Ghost by laying on of hands, and obedience to specific callings.

**Basis of Assurance:** Performance of duties and validity of priesthood ordinances.

**Comparison to Sola Fide:** Explicitly rejects Sola Fide by inserting baptism and laying on of hands as necessary steps *before* remission and the Spirit are granted (D&C 55:1).

## MANDATES & REQUIREMENTS

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### Explicit Commands:

1. Be baptized
2. Be ordained an elder
3. Preach repentance
4. Assist Oliver Cowdery in printing
5. Select and write books for schools
6. Journey to Missouri

### Implicit Obligations:

1. Maintain an 'eye single to glory' to ensure ordinance efficacy
2. Submit to the leadership of Joseph Smith and Sidney Rigdon

### Ritual Requirements:

1. Baptism by water
2. Laying on of hands for the gift of the Holy Ghost
3. Ordination to the priesthood

## EVANGELISM TOOLKIT

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### Discovery Questions:

1. In verse 1, it says remission of sins comes 'after' baptism. How do you reconcile that with Acts 10:43-47, where Cornelius receives the Spirit and is saved *before* he is baptized?
2. Verse 3 says you have power to 'give' the Holy Spirit. Do you view the Spirit as a person who decides where to go (John 3:8), or as a power that the priesthood controls?
3. If a person has faith in Christ but hasn't had hands laid on them by a Mormon elder, does the Bible say they are devoid of the Spirit (Romans 8:9)?

### Redemptive Analogies:

1. Vocational Stewardship – Just as God wanted to use Phelps's unique talents, God calls every believer to do all things for His glory. [1 Corinthians 10:31 - 'Whether therefore ye eat, or drink, or whatsoever ye do, do all to the glory of God.']
2. Writing for Children – Reflects the heart of Jesus who welcomed children, emphasizing the importance of passing faith to the next generation. [Mark 10:14 - 'Suffer the little children to come unto me.']

#### **Spiritual Weight:**

1. Ritual Anxiety [Moderate] – The believer must worry if their baptism was performed with an 'eye single to glory' (v1). If their motive wasn't perfect, is their remission of sins invalid? This creates introspection and doubt rather than assurance in Christ's finished work.
2. Mediatorial Dependency [Severe] – Believers are taught they cannot receive the Holy Spirit without a specific man laying hands on them. This creates a dependency on the hierarchy for access to God, rather than the freedom of the priesthood of all believers.

## **EPISTEMOLOGY**

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**Knowledge Source:** Prophetic Revelation

**Verification Method:** Obedience to the prophet's instruction serves as the validation of the call.

**Evangelical Contrast:** Biblical epistemology relies on the illuminated Word of God (Psalm 119:105, 2 Timothy 3:16). This text relies on the immediate voice of a modern prophet to define truth and duty, bypassing biblical sufficiency.

## **TEXTUAL CRITICISM**

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**Dating:** June 14, 1831

**Authorship:** Joseph Smith (dictated)

**Textual Issues:** Early manuscripts show minor variations common to the compilation of the Book of Commandments vs. Doctrine and Covenants, but the core theological claims regarding Phelps's call remain consistent.