

SECTION 90

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

OVERVIEW

Given in Kirtland, Ohio, on March 8, 1833, Doctrine and Covenants Section 90 is a pivotal administrative and theological text that formalizes the hierarchy of the early Latter-day Saint movement. It establishes the First Presidency by installing Sidney Rigdon and Frederick G. Williams as counselors 'equal' with Joseph Smith in holding the keys of the kingdom, though Smith retains primacy as the conduit for 'oracles' (revelations). The text asserts that the keys given to Smith will never be taken from him, even in the world to come, solidifying his role not just as a founding prophet but as a permanent mediator. It outlines a missiological vision where the gospel will go to Gentiles and then Jews, with every man hearing in his own tongue. Practically, it addresses the 'School of the Prophets,' the translation of the Bible (Joseph Smith Translation), and financial concerns, calling for a wealthy agent to pay church debts to avoid disrepute. The tone combines administrative instruction with warnings against treating the prophet's words lightly.

KEY FIGURES

Joseph Smith, Sidney Rigdon, Frederick G. Williams, Vienna Jaques, Joseph Smith, Sen., William E. McLellin, Sidney Gilbert

DOCTRINES ANALYZED

1. PERPETUITY OF PROPHETIC KEYS

Assertion: Joseph Smith holds the keys of the kingdom forever, even in the afterlife (v. 3).

"the keys of this kingdom shall never be taken from you, while thou art in the world, neither in the world to come (D&C 90:3)"

Evangelical Comparison: In Evangelical theology, Jesus Christ is the sole mediator (1 Timothy 2:5) and the permanent holder of authority (Hebrews 7:24). This text elevates Joseph Smith to a permanent mediatorial position that extends into the afterlife ('world to come'). While Evangelicals recognize pastoral authority, they reject the concept of a human holding 'keys' of the kingdom in an absolute, dynastic, or eternal sense, viewing the 'keys' in Matthew 16:19 as the authority of the Gospel message itself, not a metaphysical power vested in a person.

2. CONTINUING REVELATION (ORACLES)

Assertion: The church receives 'oracles' (new revelations) through Joseph Smith, which are binding and necessary for spiritual stability.

"through you shall the oracles be given to another... let them beware how they hold them lest they are accounted as a light thing (D&C 90:4-5)"

Evangelical Comparison: Evangelicalism holds to the sufficiency of Scripture (2 Timothy 3:16-17) and the closure of the canon (Jude 3). D&C 90 establishes a system where the 'oracles' coming through the prophet are essential for survival against 'storms' (v. 5). This creates a dependency on the living prophet for truth, whereas Evangelicalism points believers to the finished revelation of God in Christ as recorded in the Bible.

3. SANCTIFICATION THROUGH CHASTISEMENT

Assertion: Zion is cleansed through chastisement and pleading until she 'overcomes.'

"I, the Lord, will contend with Zion... and chasten her until she overcomes and is clean before me (D&C 90:36)"

Evangelical Comparison: The text presents a view of cleansing that is a process of overcoming through chastisement. In contrast, Evangelical soteriology teaches that the believer is declared righteous (justified) by faith alone (Romans 5:1), and while discipline occurs (Hebrews 12), one's standing as 'clean' before God is based on the blood of Jesus (1 John 1:7), not on the community's ability to 'overcome.'

COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

Divergence Status: Yes

Theological Gap: The fundamental gap lies in the locus of authority and mediation. In Evangelicalism, the believer has direct access to God through Christ (Hebrews 4:16) and guidance through the completed Scriptures. D&C 90 interposes Joseph Smith and his counselors as necessary conduits of 'keys' and 'oracles.' Furthermore, the text presents salvation/Zion as a project to be achieved through 'overcoming' and chastisement, rather than a status received by grace. The elevation of Joseph Smith to a role involving keys in the 'world to come' suggests a soteriological function that infringes on the exclusive domain of Jesus Christ.

Shared Values:

Importance of prayer (v. 1); Desire to preach the gospel to all nations (v. 11); Warning against pride and slothfulness (v. 17-18); Financial integrity (paying debts) (v. 23)

Friction Points:

1. [Critical] Sola Scriptura – Asserts that new 'oracles' given through Joseph are necessary to avoid condemnation, effectively superseding the Bible.
2. [Critical] Solus Christus – Attributes eternal, mediatorial keys to Joseph Smith in the 'world to come.'
3. [Major] Sola Gratia – Zion is cleansed by 'overcoming' through chastisement, implying conditional acceptance based on performance.

Semantic Warnings:

"Keys of the Kingdom"

In Text: Authoritative power to govern the church and receive revelation, held permanently by Joseph Smith.

Evangelical: The authority of the Gospel message to open the door of salvation (Matt 16:19), or Christ's sovereign authority over death (Rev 1:18).

Example: *In D&C 90, keys are a dynastic possession of men; in the Bible, keys represent the ministerial use of the Gospel.*

"Translation"

In Text: Joseph Smith's inspired revision of the English Bible text (v. 13).

Evangelical: Rendering text from one language (e.g., Greek/Hebrew) to another.

Example: *Joseph was 'translating' the prophets without using ancient manuscripts, which Evangelicals view as rewriting Scripture.*

SOTERIOLOGY

Salvation Defined: Implied as participation in the 'kingdom' and Zion, requiring cleansing and overcoming.

How Attained: Through the administration of keys, receiving oracles, and personal righteousness/overcoming.

Basis of Assurance: Conditional: 'Thy sins are forgiven thee' (v. 1) is linked to the petition, but retention of standing depends on not treating oracles lightly (v. 5).

Comparison to Sola Fide: The text emphasizes 'overcoming' and 'walking uprightly' to be clean (v. 36), contrasting with Romans 4:5 where God justifies the ungodly by faith.

MANDATES & REQUIREMENTS

Explicit Commands:

1. Beware how oracles are held (v. 5)
2. Finish the translation of the prophets (v. 13)
3. Study and learn books, languages, and people (v. 15)
4. Set houses in order (v. 18)
5. Provide a place for Frederick G. Williams' family (v. 19)
6. Find a rich agent to pay church debts (v. 22-23)
7. Vienna Jaques to go to Zion and consecrate money (v. 28-30)

Implicit Obligations:

1. Accept the First Presidency as the authorized channel of God
2. Financially support the church structure (consecration)
3. Repent of 'high-mindedness' and 'slothfulness'

Ritual Requirements:

1. Ordination to the ministry/presidency (v. 11-12)
2. Administration of the Comforter (v. 11)

EVANGELISM TOOLKIT

Discovery Questions:

1. In verse 3, it says Joseph Smith holds the keys even in the 'world to come.' How does that relate to Jesus holding the keys of death and Hades in Revelation 1:18?
2. Verse 5 suggests that our spiritual house will fall if we treat the prophet's oracles lightly. How do we balance that with Jesus saying that hearing *His* words is the rock (Matthew 7:24)?
3. The text mentions needing a 'man who has got riches' to pay the church's debts (v. 22). How does this compare to the biblical idea that God owns the cattle on a thousand hills and provides for His work?

Redemptive Analogies:

1. The Wealthy Agent – We all have a debt of sin we cannot pay that brings disrepute. We need a wealthy Agent. [Colossians 2:14 - Jesus canceled the record of debt that stood against us. He is the true Agent with the 'unsearchable riches of Christ' (Eph 3:8).]
2. Every Man in His Own Tongue – This reflects the heart of God at Pentecost, reversing Babel. [Revelation 7:9 - A multitude from every nation, tribe, people, and language standing before the Throne (not a human presidency).]

Spiritual Weight:

1. Fear of Fallibility [Severe] – The believer is told that treating the prophet's words as a 'light thing' will cause their spiritual house to collapse in the storm. This creates anxiety where one must constantly validate and obey the leader to ensure spiritual survival.
2. Mediatorial Dependence [Moderate] – Believers are taught that access to the kingdom's blessings is channeled through Joseph Smith (even in the afterlife), creating a dependency on a man rather than direct confidence in Christ.
3. Performance Anxiety [Moderate] – Zion is chastened *until* she overcomes. This implies that the cessation of chastisement and the achievement of cleanliness are dependent on human performance.

EPISTEMOLOGY

Knowledge Source: Vertical revelation through the Prophet (Oracles) and the 'Comforter' revealing mysteries.

Verification Method: Pragmatic confirmation ('all things shall work together for your good' v. 24) and the absence of condemnation.

Evangelical Contrast: Biblical epistemology tests prophecy against Scripture (Acts 17:11, 1 John 4:1). This text centers epistemology on the person of the prophet; truth is what comes through the 'keys' held by Joseph Smith.

TEXTUAL CRITICISM

Dating: March 8, 1833

Authorship: Joseph Smith

Textual Issues: The revelation was edited in the 1835 Doctrine and Covenants to reflect the formalized titles of the First Presidency, which were not fully developed in the original 1833 manuscript.