

SECTION 96

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

OVERVIEW

Doctrine and Covenants Section 96, received on June 4, 1833, addresses a specific administrative dispute regarding Church-owned land in Kirtland, Ohio, known as the 'French farm.' A conference of high priests could not agree on who should manage the property, leading Joseph Smith to inquire of the Lord. The resulting text instructs that the land be divided into lots for inheritances and that Newel K. Whitney take charge of the portion designated for the 'holy house' (the Kirtland Temple). The revelation emphasizes the strengthening of the 'Stake of Zion.' Significantly, the text addresses John Johnson, a prominent convert, accepting his financial offering and admitting him into the 'order' (the United Firm, a church business management entity). The text explicitly links Johnson's financial contribution and future obedience to a promise of eternal life, identifying him as a literal descendant of the biblical patriarch Joseph. This section illustrates the blending of temporal administration (land deeds, debt) with high theological claims (temple building, lineage, and salvation) characteristic of early Mormonism.

KEY FIGURES

Jesus Christ (The Speaker), Newel K. Whitney (Bishop), John Johnson (Convert and Financial Benefactor), Joseph Smith (Prophet/Receiver)

DOCTRINES ANALYZED

1. CONDITIONAL ASSURANCE OF SALVATION

Assertion: Eternal life is promised to an individual based on the condition that they keep commandments from that point forward.

"unto whom I give a promise of eternal life inasmuch as he keepeth my commandments from henceforth (D&C 96:6)"

Evangelical Comparison: In Evangelical theology, assurance of salvation is rooted in the sufficiency of Christ's atonement and the sealing of the Holy Spirit (Ephesians 1:13-14), not in a believer's ability to maintain sinless perfection. D&C 96:6 introduces a 'probationary' model of eternal life where the promise is valid only 'inasmuch' as the adherent keeps commandments 'from henceforth.' This implies that future sin could revoke the promise of eternal life, effectively neutralizing the concept of Sola Fide (Faith Alone) and Sola Gratia (Grace Alone) by reintroducing a works-based maintenance system for salvation.

2. LITERAL ISRAELITE LINEAGE

Assertion: Modern individuals are identified as literal descendants of biblical patriarchs, entitling them to specific blessings.

"For he is a descendant of Joseph and a partaker of the blessings of the promise made unto his fathers (D&C 96:7)"

Evangelical Comparison: While the New Testament teaches that the dividing wall between Jew and Gentile is broken down in Christ (Ephesians 2:14) and that lineage is spiritual through faith, early Mormonism (and continuing today via Patriarchal Blessings) emphasizes a restoration of literal tribal identity. Here, John Johnson is told he is a literal descendant of Joseph of Egypt. This shifts the focus from being 'in Christ' to being 'of the blood of Israel,' creating a theological tier system based on ancestry and covenant rights.

3. THE UNITED ORDER (CONSECRATION)

Assertion: Spiritual standing is tied to membership in a temporal/financial order for managing church assets.

"it is expedient in me that he should become a member of the order... that he may assist in bringing forth my word (D&C 96:8)"

Evangelical Comparison: The 'order' mentioned is the United Firm, a business partnership. The text elevates a business arrangement to a spiritual command ('expedient in me'). In Evangelicalism, while stewardship is a virtue, salvation and spiritual standing are never contingent upon joining a specific financial collective or holding title to church property. This text blurs the line between the Kingdom of God and the corporate assets of the institution.

COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

Divergence Status: Yes

Theological Gap: The fundamental gap lies in the mechanism of salvation and the nature of authority. D&C 96:6 explicitly conditions the promise of eternal life on the recipient's ability to 'keep my commandments from henceforth.' This creates a 'covenant of works' dynamic that the New Testament argues was fulfilled and replaced by Christ (Galatians 3). Furthermore, the text elevates the administrative needs of the organization (land, debt) to the level of divine fiat, blurring the distinction between the temporal church organization and the spiritual Kingdom of God. The requirement for John Johnson to pay off the church's debts to be 'ordained' to the blessing suggests a form of simony or at least a heavy financial prerequisite for spiritual status.

Shared Values:

Desire to build a place for worship (Temple/Church); Stewardship of resources; Importance of obeying God

Friction Points:

1. [Critical] Sola Fide – Salvation (Eternal Life) is conditioned on future obedience ('inasmuch as he keepeth...').
2. [Major] Christology – Christ's work is treated as insufficient; the believer must complete the work through their own obedience to secure the promise.
3. [Minor] Theology Proper (Anthropology) – Reintroduces tribal/bloodline distinctions (descendant of Joseph) which the New Testament dissolves in Christ.
4. [Major] Sola Scriptura – New revelation is added to the canon to solve a land dispute.

Semantic Warnings:

"Eternal Life"

In Text: Exaltation in the highest degree of glory, contingent on ordinances and enduring to the end in works.

Evangelical: Life with God starting at the moment of salvation, a free gift of God through Christ (Romans 6:23).

Example: In D&C 96:6, eternal life is a conditional future reward. In John 5:24, it is a present possession of the believer.

"Zion"

In Text: A literal city/community to be built in America (Independence, MO) with 'stakes' like Kirtland.

Evangelical: Often refers to Jerusalem, the people of God, or the heavenly city (Hebrews 12:22).

Example: The text speaks of strengthening the 'stake' of Zion geographically in Ohio.

SOTERIOLOGY

Salvation Defined: Eternal Life (Exaltation), linked here to lineage blessings and temple building.

How Attained: Through a combination of financial offering (accepted by God), lineage (descendant of Joseph), and future obedience ('keepeth my commandments').

Basis of Assurance: Conditional promise based on the believer's performance.

Comparison to Sola Fide: Directly opposes Sola Fide. The text says 'inasmuch as he keepeth my commandments,' whereas the Bible says 'not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to his mercy he saved us' (Titus 3:5).

MANDATES & REQUIREMENTS

Explicit Commands:

1. Newel K. Whitney must take charge of the French farm (v2)
2. Divide the land into lots for inheritances (v3)
3. Ordain John Johnson to the order (v9)
4. John Johnson must seek to take away incumbrances (debts) upon the house (v9)

Implicit Obligations:

1. Submit to the council's determination regarding land distribution

2. Accept Joseph Smith's administrative decisions as the voice of God
3. Maintain perfect obedience ('keep commandments from henceforth') to secure eternal life

Ritual Requirements:

1. Ordination of John Johnson (v9)
2. Preparation for building a 'holy house' (Temple) (v2)

EVANGELISM TOOLKIT

Discovery Questions:

1. In verse 6, the Lord promises John Johnson eternal life 'inasmuch as he keepeth my commandments from henceforth.' How would you interpret 'from henceforth'? Does this mean one future sin breaks the promise?
2. How does the requirement to 'keep commandments' for eternal life fit with the biblical teaching that salvation is a gift, not of works (Ephesians 2:8-9)?
3. Why do you think God was so concerned with the specific division of the French farm lots in this revelation?

Redemptive Analogies:

1. The Holy House (Temple) – The text shows a desire for God to dwell among His people. In the Old Testament, this was the Temple. In the New Testament, God dwells ~~in~~ His people. [1 Corinthians 6:19: 'What? know ye not that your body is the temple of the Holy Ghost which is in you...?']
2. Removing Incumbrances (Debt) – Just as the physical house had debt that needed to be paid, we have a spiritual debt of sin we cannot pay. Christ paid this 'incumbrance' fully. [Colossians 2:14: 'Blotting out the handwriting of ordinances that was against us... nailing it to his cross.']

Spiritual Weight:

1. Performance Anxiety / Perfectionism [Severe] – The phrase 'inasmuch as he keepeth my commandments from henceforth' creates a crushing burden. It implies that the security of eternal life is revocable upon failure. The believer is on a permanent probation.
2. Elitism / Identity Crisis [Mild] – By emphasizing literal lineage (descendant of Joseph), the text creates a caste system. Those who feel they lack this 'royal blood' or spiritual pedigree may feel second-class.
3. Financial Pressure [Moderate] – Linking spiritual ordination and standing to the clearing of financial debts ('take away incumbrances') conflates financial capacity with spiritual worthiness.

EPISTEMOLOGY

Knowledge Source: Prophetic Revelation. The text solves a dispute the council could not resolve by appealing to the Prophet's direct channel to God.

Verification Method: Implicitly, the verification is the acceptance of Joseph Smith's role; the text offers no external test other than the authority of the speaker.

Evangelical Contrast: Biblical decision-making involves wisdom, prayer, and scriptural principles (Acts 15), but does not typically claim 'Thus saith the Lord' for every administrative property dispute. This text demands total epistemic surrender to the leader's voice as God's voice.

TEXTUAL CRITICISM

Dating: June 4, 1833

Authorship: Joseph Smith (dictated)

Textual Issues: The text was originally part of the minute book of the Kirtland High Council. It was canonized to establish the order of the United Firm.