

Comments on Doctrine & Covenants 38

This revelation is a follow-up to D&C 37. There were doubts among some of the early Church members concerning the command to go to Ohio. A conference was held and the members sought additional comments regarding the command. Thus the rather stern and negative tone of this revelation.

This revelation reiterates and expands on the command to go to Ohio and why they need to go (v. 28-33, cp. 37:1). The Lord also addresses the members who are not willing to leave (v. 6-12) and indicates why they are not willing to leave (v. 14-27).

1 THUS saith the Lord your God, even Jesus Christ, the Great I AM, Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end, the same which looked upon the wide expanse of eternity, and all the seraphic hosts of heaven, before the world was made; 2 The same which knoweth all things, for all things are present before mine eyes; 3 I am the same which spake, and the world was made, and all things came by me.

4 I am the same which have taken the Zion of Enoch into mine own bosom; and verily, I say, even as many as have believed in my name, for I am Christ, and in mine own name, by the virtue of the blood which I have spilt, have I pleaded before the Father for them.

5 But behold, the residue of the wicked have I kept in chains of darkness until the judgment of the great day, which shall come at the end of the earth; 6 And even so will I cause the wicked to be kept, that will not hear my voice but harden their hearts, and wo, wo, wo, is their doom.

v1-12 The eternal perspective (v. 1-6) is paralleled with the temporal perspective (v. 7-12).

v1-6 These verses present an overarching, eternal perspective where the Lord presents all things from the beginning (Creation, v. 1-3) to the meridian of time (Incarnation, v. 4), to the end (Judgement, v. 5-6) and indicates that He perceives them all and has His hand in them all.

The text serves as an authority statement, of which it is one of the longest and most forceful in the Scriptures. Such a statement would certainly be intended to address those in the audience who did not believe Joseph was in fact prophesying for the Lord. Note the repeated use of the emphatic pronoun "I am" and "I".

v6 The Lord is addressing those in the audience and warning them if they harden their hearts against His words they will be damned.

7 But behold, verily, verily, I say unto you that mine eyes are upon you. I am in your midst and ye cannot see me; 8 But the day soon cometh that ye shall see me, and know that I am; for the veil of darkness shall soon be rent, and he that is not purified shall not abide the day. 9 Wherefore, gird up your loins and be prepared. Behold, the kingdom is yours, and the enemy shall not overcome. 10 Verily I say unto you, ye are clean, but not all; and there is none else with whom I am well pleased;

11 For all flesh is corrupted before me; and the powers of darkness prevail upon the earth, among the children of men, in the presence of all the hosts of heaven-- 12 which causeth silence to reign, and all eternity is pained, and the angels are waiting the great command to reap down the earth, to gather the tares that they may be burned; and, behold, the enemy is combined.

v7-12 These verses take their theme from v. 1-6 but makes it more particularly contemporary to the audience. Rather than an overarching "from eternity to eternity", we have a targeted point in time where the Lord says that He has his eyes on them and is among them right now. He is generally pleased with the ecclesia, but not all of them (v. 1-10, also cp. D&C 1:30-31).

To put it into context, the Lord indicates that while He is pleased with the Church in general, the world is growing more and more grossly wicked (v. 11), even to destruction (v. 12).

v8 "the day soon cometh", i.e., Judgement Day.

"He that is not purified shall not abide the day", cp. Mal. 3:2, Isa. 33:14, Ps. 15, Ps. 24, Deut. 4:24, Exod. 19:8, Ps. 50:3.

v9 "gird up your loins", this is a Hebraism that means "Get to work", cf. 1 Kings 18:46, 2 Kings 4:29, 2 Kings 9:1, 1 Peter 1:13, and for a similar admonition, cp. D&C 27:15-18. The saying has reference to the loose robes Middle-eastern people wore anciently, and still commonly wear today. The robes are baggy to the point that they are an impediment to activities such as running or harvesting. The result was when such activities were to be undertaken, the individual would remove excess robes and those which remained would be reigned in with a belt or girdle about the mid-section. In the case of males, robes above the waist were sometimes turned down so as to free the person entirely. The person was then free from the encumbrance of baggy clothing. See Smith's Bible Dictionary entry for "Dress" for a more lengthy discussion.

v10 "ye are clean, but not all", cp. v. 14.

v11 "in the presence of all the hosts of heaven", just as the Lord is among them and sees their doings (v. 7), so do all the hosts of heaven see what is going on in the world.

v12 "silence", cp. Lam. 2:9-10, Ps. 35:2, Ps. 50:3, Ps. 83:1, Isa. 65:6.

13 And now I show unto you a mystery, a thing which is had in secret chambers, to bring to pass even your destruction in process of time, and ye knew it not; ... 28 And again, I say unto you that the enemy in the secret chambers seeketh your lives. 29 Ye hear of wars in far countries, and you say that there will soon be great wars in far countries, but ye know not the hearts of men in your own land. 30 I tell you these things because of your prayers; wherefore, treasure up wisdom in your bosoms, lest the wickedness of men reveal these things unto you by their wickedness, in a manner which shall speak in your ears with a voice louder than that which shall shake the earth; but if ye are prepared ye shall not fear. 31 And that ye might escape the power of the enemy, and be gathered unto me a righteous people, without spot and blameless-- 32 wherefore, for this cause I gave unto you the commandment that ye should go to the Ohio; and there I will give unto you my law; and there you shall be endowed with power from on high; 33 And from thence, whosoever I will shall go forth among all nations, and it shall be told them what they shall do; for I have a great work laid up in store, for Israel shall be saved, and I will lead them whithersoever I will, and no power shall stay my hand.

v13-33 The Lord explains the reason they need to leave is because their neighbors are plotting against them. This is a lengthy expansion on D&C 37:1. The people want to know why they have to move to Ohio, so the Lord explains why.

Note there isn't an explicit or implicit mention of the establishment of Zion as the reason for their moving. In preceding revelations (cf. 6:6, 11:6, 12:6, etc.) the Lord had said Zion would be built, but there is no mention of that here at all.

Verses 14-29 are a lengthy parenthesis addressing why the people in the audience don't want to gather to Ohio. The Lord starts discussing the secret combination against the Saints in v. 13, but then addresses the issue of why some of the people will not listen to His warning before returning to the subject of the secret combination again in v. 28.

v13 The Lord warns them there are people out to get them. Part of the Lord's arsenal against His adversaries is to simply expose

their secret works to the light of day.

"a mystery", a hidden thing, an unknown thing. Not a mystery of the gospel (cf. Mark 4:11) but a conspiracy of men being exposed.

14 But now I tell it unto you, and ye are blessed, not because of your iniquity, neither your hearts of unbelief; for verily some of you are guilty before me, but I will be merciful unto your weakness. 15 Therefore, be ye strong from henceforth; fear not, for the kingdom is yours.

16 And for your salvation I give unto you a commandment, for I have heard your prayers, and the poor have complained before me, and the rich have I made, and all flesh is mine, and I am no respecter of persons. 17 And I have made the earth rich, and behold it is my footstool, wherefore, again I will stand upon it. 18 And I hold forth and deign to give unto you greater riches, even a land of promise, a land flowing with milk and honey, upon which there shall be no curse when the Lord cometh; 19 And I will give it unto you for the land of your inheritance, if you seek it with all your hearts. 20 And this shall be my covenant with you, ye shall have it for the land of your inheritance, and for the inheritance of your children forever, while the earth shall stand, and ye shall possess it again in eternity, no more to pass away.

21 But, verily I say unto you that in time ye shall have no king nor ruler, for I will be your king and watch over you. 22 wherefore, hear my voice and follow me, and you shall be a free people, and ye shall have no laws but my laws when I come, for I am your lawgiver, and what can stay my hand?

23 But, verily I say unto you, teach one another according to the office wherewith I have appointed you; 24 And let every man esteem his brother as himself, and practise virtue and holiness before me. 25 And again I say unto you, let every man esteem his brother as himself. 26 For what man among you having twelve sons, and is no respecter of them, and they serve him obediently, and he saith unto the one: Be thou clothed in robes and sit thou here; and to the other: Be thou clothed in rags and sit thou there--and looketh upon his sons and saith I am just? 27 Behold, this I have given unto you as a parable, and it is even as I am. I say unto you, be one; and if ye are not one ye are not mine.

v14-27 The Lord discerns the core reason why people do not want to move to Ohio, it is their greed and selfishness. But, notwithstanding this, the Lord blesses them (v. 14) and admonishes them to not be weak anymore (v. 15).

It is for their own good He gives them the commandment to go to Ohio. In doing so He can give them a land for their inheritance, for the poor as well as the wealthy, a land of great

bounty (v. 16-20)

But how can the Lord be their Master and Lawgiver if they do not do what He tells them to? (v. 21-22)

Thus, all must learn and do what they are told (v. 23) and treat every brother as himself when it comes to material things (v. 24-25). Otherwise, they will be considered unjust (v. 26). They must be one, or they will be rejected by the Lord (v. 27).

This text can be taken as an early and informal admonition to live the Law of Consecration, and therefore a predecessor to the United Order. Note the implicit message is if they take advantage of the Lord's mercy and wisdom they may escape their enemies. However, to do so they must care for the poor and be selfless with their material possessions. Otherwise, they will be rejected by Him.

v14-16 The uneven distribution of material possessions is threatening to divide the ecclesia. Throughout all of time this has been a persistent problem, cp. Isa. 4-5, Jacob 2:12-21, Alma 31:26-28, ct. 4 Ne. 1:2-3.

v15 "fear not", cp. 30:11.

v17-22 These verses presents the eternal perspective on material things. People often get too focused on the temporal perspective, here the Lord admonishes them, as well as us, to use the eternal perspective.

While this section is composed mainly of a series of references to the Millennial time period, when the Lord will again personally reign, the requirement to use our temporal things to help one another applies today.

v21 Compare 2 Ne. 10:11, Ether 2:12, D&C 41:4.

v23 Contrast 3 Ne. 6:12.

v30 "treasure up wisdom", an admonition common to the D&C, cp. D&C 6:3, 7, 20, 27, D&C 11:7.

"lest the wickedness of men reveal these things unto you by their wickedness", i.e., lest the wickedness of these men be revealed to you by them actually doing it to you. You are being forewarned against their plot so they cannot accomplish it against you.

v31 "without spot", cp. v. 42, D&C 36:6.

v33 "Israel shall be saved", cp. 1 Ne. 22:7-11, D&C 39:11.

34 And now, I give unto the church in these parts a commandment, that certain men among them shall be appointed, and they shall be appointed by the voice of the church; 35 And they shall look to the poor and the needy, and administer to their relief that they shall not suffer; and send them forth to the place which I have commanded them; 36 And this shall be their work, to govern the affairs of the property of this church.

37 And they that have farms that cannot be sold, let them be left or rented as seemeth them good. 38 See that all things are preserved; and when men are endowed with power from on high and sent forth, all these things shall be gathered unto the bosom of the church.

39 And if ye seek the riches which it is the will of the Father to give unto you, ye shall be the richest of all people, for ye shall have the riches of eternity; and it must needs be that the riches of the earth are mine to give; but beware of pride, lest ye become as the Nephites of old.

v34-39 Some are called to look after the needs of the poor so none are overlooked (v. 34-36, cp Acts 6:1-4). Those who cannot sell their land should rent it if they can, and move to Ohio anyway (v. 37). After they are settled at Ohio and the Lord grants them the power and blessings He intends to give them, then the Church can deal with the remainder of the properties (v. 38). Then, if they seek earthly wealth the Lord will give it to them, because their primary goal is the spiritual wealth of eternity, not material things. The things of the earth are the Lord's to give, but once given the recipients must beware of pride lest they fall (v. 39).

v34-36 Ideally there would be no need for there to be a specific calling if all people were looking out for their neighbor's welfare. However, this is clearly not the case then, or now.

v37 "let them be left", not abandoned altogether as v. 38 indicates they are to be preserved. However, failing to sell the land is not to prevent someone from moving to Ohio. In other words, maintain title to your land in New York, but still move to Ohio.

40 And again, I say unto you, I give unto you a commandment, that every man, both elder, priest, teacher, and also member, go to with his might, with the labor of his hands, to prepare and accomplish the things which I have commanded. 41 And let your preaching be the warning voice, every man to his neighbor, in mildness and in meekness. 42 And go ye out from among the wicked. Save yourselves. Be ye clean that bear the vessels of the Lord. Even so. Amen.

v40-42 This text forms the conclusion drawing on the preceding

text as well as recent revelations, cp. D&C 36.

v42 "be ye clean that bear the vessels of the Lord", a quotation from Isa. 52:11, also cp. 3 Ne. 20:41, D&C 133:5. The context of the Isaiah passage is the exodus of righteous Israel out of Babylon on the eve of her collapse. They are carrying back the Temple vessels to Jerusalem which went into exile with them. In this context, the Lord is telling the ecclesia to keep itself clean from the world by gathering out from it. It can also be seen as a veiled allusion to the imminent building of the Temple at Kirtland, Ohio.

Historical Material Pertaining to Doctrine & Covenants 38

While the members of the Church had received a revelation telling them to gather to Ohio (cf. D&C 37), some of the members wanted additional information concerning that command. A conference was organized and held at the Whitmer family home and this revelation was received at that conference. It is plain from the historical accounts not all members were receptive of the command to move to Ohio.

The first excerpt below is Joseph's brief comment, the second is John Whitmer's historical account, the third is Newell Knight's autobiographical recounting, and the fourth is Orson Pratt's recollections some time after the events.

In reviewing the history, one has to consider the social implications of what is being required. If all Mormons left at the same time, once word spread of their imminent departure it would adversely affect real estate values. This almost certainly fueled the opposition to Joseph. Then, once some of the members decided not to leave, as was obviously the case, this caused a serious rift between those who left and those who stayed given such a blatant test of faithfulness. Given what was at stake, it is not hard to see why the Lord's comments were stern and the weak in faith fell away.

Excerpt from History of the Church

The year 1831 opened with a prospect great and glorious for the welfare of the kingdom; for on the 2nd of January, 1831, a conference was held in the town of Fayette, New York, at which the ordinary business of the Church was transacted; and in addition, the following revelation was received:

[text of D&C 38 quoted]

(Joseph Smith, History of the Church, Vol. 1, page 140)

Excerpt from Book of John Whitmer

The time had now come for the general conference to be held. Which was the first of January 1831, and according to this appointment the Saints assembled themselves together. After transacting the necessary business, Joseph the Seer addressed the congregation and exhorted them to stand fast, looking forward considering the end of their salvation. The solemnities of eternity rested on the congregation and having previously received a revelation to go to Ohio, they desired to know somewhat more concerning this matter. Therefore, the Seer enquired of the Lord in the presence of the whole congregation, and thus came the word of the Lord saying:

[text of D&C 38 quoted]

After the Lord had manifested the above words, through Joseph the Seer, there were some divisions among the congregations, some would not receive the above as the word of the Lord: but that Joseph had invented it himself to deceive the people that in the end he might get gain. Now this was because, their hearts were not right in the sight of the Lord, for they wanted to serve God and man; but our Savior has declared that it was impossible to do so. The conference was now closed, and the Lord had manifested his will to his people. Therefore they made preparations to journey to the Ohio, with their wives, and children and all that they possessed, to obey the commandment of the Lord. After these things were done Joseph and Sidney went to Colesville to do the will of the Lord in that part of the land and to strengthen the disciples in that part of the vineyard, and preach the gospel to a hardened and a wicked people; and it is fearful that they are all delivered over to hardness of heart and blindness of (mind), so that they cannot be brought to repentance. For when Sidney and the revelator arrived there, they held prayer meetings among the disciples, and they also held public meetings, but it was all in vain; they threatened to kill them. Therefore, they knew that they were not fit for the kingdom of God, and well nigh ripe for destruction. The Spirit of the Lord fell upon Sidney, and he spoke with boldness, and he preached the gospel in its purity; but they laughed him to scorn, he being filled, with the Holy Spirit, he cried aloud, "O ye heavens give ear and ye angels attend, I bear witness in the name of Jesus Christ that this people is sealed up to everlasting destruction." And immediately he left them and escaped out of their hands. And his enemies were astonished and amazed at the doctrines which he preached, for they taught as men having authority and not as hireling priests.

After Joseph and Sidney returned from Colesville to Fayette. The Lord manifested himself to Joseph the Revelator and gave commandment for me to go to Ohio, and carry the commandments and revelations, with me, to comfort and strengthen my brethren in that land. The disciples had increased in numbers about three hundred. But the enemy of all righteousness had got hold of some of those who professed to be his followers, because they had not sufficient knowledge to detect him in all of his devices. He took a notion to blind the minds of some of the weaker ones, and made them think that an angel of the Lord appeared to them and showed them writings on the outside cover of the Bible, and on parchment, which flew through the air, and on the back of their hands, and many such foolish and vain things--others lost their strength, and some slid on the floor, and such like maneuvers, which proved greatly to the injury of the cause.

The Lord also worked, and many embraced the work, and the honest in heart stood firm and immovable. It was very necessary

that this people should have instructions, and learn to discern between the things of God and the works of Satan. For the inhabitants of the earth knew nothing of the working of the spirit of the Lord, in these days. (John Whitmer, Book of John Whitmer, chapter 1, paragraphs 8-12)

Excerpt from Autobiography of Newell Knight

A new year dawned upon us, with everything around us bright and cheerful, and the prospects ahead such as to give us joy. In the midst of persecution we rejoiced, knowing that our God was with us, and His great work would roll on, and man could not stop its progress.

On the 2nd of January, 1831, the third conference of the Church assembled. Many of the Saints came together from the region around, and much good instruction was given. The Saints manifested unshaken confidence in the great work which they were engaged, and all rejoiced under the blessings of the gospel. Considerable business was transacted for the Church.

It was at this conference that we were instructed as a people, to begin the gathering of Israel, and a revelation was given to the prophet on this subject.

Having returned home from conference, in obedience to the commandment which had been given, I, together with the Colesville Branch, began to make preparations to go to Ohio. Towards the latter part of January Brother Joseph Smith and wife, Sidney Rigdon and Edward Partridge started for Kirtland, Ohio.

As might be expected, we were obliged to make great sacrifices of our property. The most of my time was occupied in visiting the brethren, and helping to arrange their affairs, so that we might travel together in one company. Having made the best arrangements we could for the journey, we bade adieu to all we held dear on this earth and in the early part of April started for our destination. (Newell Knight, Autobiography of Newell Knight, chapter 6, paragraphs 3-6)

Excerpt from Journal of Discourses

This brings to my mind a revelation which was given in a General Conference on the 2nd day of January, 1831, the Church then having been organized about nine months. All the Saints were gathered together from various little Branches that had been established in the house of Father Whitmer, whose sons became conspicuous in this last dispensation as being witnesses of the Book of Mormon,--whose house also became conspicuous as the place where the Prophet Joseph Smith received many revelations and

communications from heaven. In one small room of a log-house, nearly all the Latter-day Saints (east of Ohio) were collected together. They desired the Prophet of the Lord to inquire of God and receive a revelation to guide and instruct the Church that were then present. Brother Joseph seated himself at the table. Brother Sidney Rigdon, who was at that time a member of the Church, having just arrived from the West, where he embraced the Gospel through the administration of some of the Elders, was requested to act as scribe in writing the revelation from the mouth of the Prophet Joseph. I will read a portion of this revelation:-"And again I say unto you, Let every man esteem his brother as himself; for what man among you having twelve sons, and is no respecter of them, and they serve him obediently, and he saith unto the one, Be thou clothed in robes and sit thou here; and to the other, Be thou clothed in rags and sit thou there; and looketh upon his sons and saith, I am just? Behold, this I have given unto you as a parable, and it is even as I am. I say unto you, Be one; and if ye are not one, ye are not mine." (Orson Pratt, Journal of Discourses, Vol. 7, page 372, January 29, 1860)

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