

Section 20

Section 20 is the founding document of the restored Church of Jesus Christ.

Joseph’s history says it came “by the Spirit of Prophecy and revelation.”¹ Joseph read it and the saints unanimously received it at the Church’s first quarterly conference in June 1830.²

It is a constitution of sorts and quite unique. It is not in the voice of the Lord or an angel, as most of the sections are. Rather, it is in the voice of the Latter-day Saints, a sort of “we the people” or, at least, “we the elders of the church” (D&C 20:16).

Section 20 does three things. Its first 16 verses justify the Church’s existence by highlighting the backstory of how it came to be established on April 6, 1830: the calling and commissioning of apostles to lead it, the coming forth of the Book of Mormon, and the collective witness of the elders.

The passage in verses 17–36 declares what we know. These are articles of faith: “There is a God in heaven,” this part begins, and then summarizes the plan of redemption. God created. Mankind fell. “The Almighty God gave his Only Begotten Son...He was crucified, died, and rose again” so that everyone who ever lived or lives can have

¹ “[History, 1838–1856, volume A-1 \[23 December 1805–30 August 1834\]](#),” p. 29, The Joseph Smith Papers, accessed July 23, 2020.

² “[Minutes, 9 June 1830](#),” p. 1, The Joseph Smith Papers, accessed September 23, 2020.

eternal life on conditions of enduring in faith and repentance. This section briefly situates the restored gospel relative to other theologies. Saints share with many Christians, for example, the truth that sanctification comes through the grace of Jesus Christ, but not the agency-compromising idea that a sanctified person can never fall from grace. Anyone can opt out of God’s grace, and the revelation warns the Church about that.

The third and longest passage begins in verse 37. It sets the qualifications for baptism, instructs how to administer the sacrament, relates the duties of priesthood holders and other members, and tells of the need for membership records.

Oliver Cowdery did not initially like verse 37’s detailed qualifications for baptism. He had prepared an earlier draft that specified only “whosoever repenteth & humbleth himself before me & desireth to be baptized in my name shall ye baptize them.”³ By comparison, verse 37 adds the requirements of a broken heart and contrite spirit, evidence of true repentance and willingness to assume the name of Jesus Christ with determination to serve him to the end, and a godly life (compare Moroni 6:1–4).

Oliver demanded “in the name of God” that Joseph delete the requirement that baptismal candidates should “manifest by their works that they have received the Spirit of Christ unto the remission of their sins.” Joseph asked Oliver “by what authority he took upon him to command me to add or diminish to or from a revelation or commandment from the Almighty God.”⁴ Joseph finally convinced Oliver, who read section 20 to the Church’s second conference in September 1830.⁵

There are two things section 20 does not do. Verse 1 does not establish once and for all the date of the Savior’s birth. Verse 1 is best understood as a headnote saying that the Church was organized on April 6 in 1830. It should not be understood to establish that date as precisely 1,830 years since Jesus was born. Joseph’s history says that the Lord “pointed out to us the precise day” to organize his Church.⁶ It does not specify

³ Oliver Cowdery, “Articles of the Church of Christ,” Church History Library, Salt Lake City.

⁴ “[History, circa June–October 1839 \[Draft 1\]](#),” p. [23], The Joseph Smith Papers, accessed July 23, 2020.

⁵ “[Minute Book 2](#),” p. 2, The Joseph Smith Papers, accessed July 23, 2020.

⁶ “[History, 1838–1856, volume A-1 \[23 December 1805–30 August 1834\]](#),” p. 29, The Joseph Smith Papers, accessed July 23, 2020.

that it was Jesus's birthday, nor does verse 1 say it was. Rather, it has been interpreted to mean that it was.

Section 20 does not do all the work of establishing the Church's authority, core doctrines, and practical organization and procedures. This revelation was amended frequently, as more became known. It is a beginning, not the sum total, of the restored Church of Jesus Christ.

I the undersigned hereby confer & authorize
 Given to John Whitmer signifying & pronouncing that he is
 an Elder of this Church of Christ estab-
 lished & regularly organized in these last days of the 6th
 day of April 1830 of which has been done by the will of God the Father
 according to his holy calling & the gift & power of the Holy Ghost
 agreeable to the revelations of Jesus Christ given to Joseph Smith Junr
 the first Elder of the Church signifying that he has been baptized &
 received into the Church according to the Articles & Covenants of the
 Church & ordained under the hand of Joseph Smith Junr who is an
 Apostle of our Lord

Witness my hand & seal this 9th day of June 1830

Joseph Smith 1st Elder
 Oliver Cowdery 2nd Elder

Given to the Bearer in Conference held in
 Fayette Seneca County 9th June 1830

License for John Whitmer, 9 June 1830. Image via Joseph Smith Papers.