

PREFACE

FAITH: Mormonism | TEXT: Preface to the Doctrine and Covenants | VOLUME: 1835 Edition | AUTHOR: Joseph Smith Jr., Oliver Cowdery, Sidney Rigdon, Frederick G. Williams

OVERVIEW

This Preface to the 1835 edition of the Doctrine and Covenants serves as a critical historical and theological manifesto for the early Latter Day Saint movement. Written by the First Presidency (Smith, Cowdery, Rigdon, Williams), it formally presents two distinct sections of scripture: the 'Lectures on Faith' (theology) and the 'Covenants and Commandments' (revelation). The authors articulate a defensive apologetic strategy, explicitly aiming to counter accusations that the church disbelieved the Bible or opposed civil government. By publishing these 'leading items of the religion,' the authors attempt to standardize doctrine and subject themselves to public scrutiny, while simultaneously claiming these writings are 'Revelations of God.' The text reveals a church in transition from a loose charismatic movement to a structured institution with a codified, open canon that stands alongside the Bible. It emphasizes accountability to God for the principles taught, framing the publication as a solemn duty performed under the direction of the High Council.

KEY FIGURES

Joseph Smith Jr., Oliver Cowdery, Sidney Rigdon, Frederick G. Williams, The High Council

DOCTRINES ANALYZED

1. OPEN CANON / CONTINUING REVELATION

Assertion: The text asserts that the volume contains 'Revelations of God' given since the church's organization, implying the Bible is not the final authority.

"Carefully selected from the revelations of God... items or principles for the regulation of the church, as taken from the revelations which have been given since its organization"

Evangelical Comparison: Evangelical Christianity adheres to Sola Scriptura, holding that the canon is closed and sufficient (2 Timothy 3:16-17, Jude 1:3). This text explicitly introduces a new volume of scripture, asserting that God is currently giving new 'items or principles' for church regulation that are equal in authority to biblical texts. This fundamentally alters the authority structure of the faith, moving from a fixed text to a fluid, prophetic stream.

2. THEOLOGICAL IMPORTANCE OF THE LECTURES ON FAITH

Assertion: The 'Lectures on Faith' are described as embracing the 'important doctrine of salvation.'

"The first part of the book will be found to contain a series of Lectures... in consequence of their embracing the important doctrine of salvation"

Evangelical Comparison: In 1835, these lectures were considered the 'Doctrine' portion of the 'Doctrine and Covenants.' Evangelicals view salvation doctrine as fully contained in the Bible. A critical historical note is that the LDS Church later decanonized these lectures in 1921, creating a theological tension: if they contained the 'important doctrine of salvation' in 1835, their removal suggests a shift in what constitutes essential doctrine.

3. ESCHATOLOGICAL ACCOUNTABILITY FOR WORKS

Assertion: The authors expect to be judged based on their labor and the principles they advance.

"We are to be called to answer to every principle advanced... and the reward of every man's labor be given him."

Evangelical Comparison: While Evangelicals believe believers will stand before the Bema Seat of Christ, salvation itself is secured by Christ's finished work, not the 'reward of every man's labor.' The phrasing here suggests that the authors' standing before God is contingent upon the correctness of their 'labor' and the principles they teach, reflecting a works-heavy view of final judgment common in Mormon theology.

COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

Divergence Status: Yes

Theological Gap: The fundamental gap lies in the source of authority. By publishing a book titled 'Doctrine and Covenants... from the Revelations of God,' the authors assert that the Bible is insufficient for the regulation of the church and the salvation of man. This violates the Evangelical tenet of Sola Scriptura. Furthermore, the inclusion of the 'Lectures on Faith' as essential doctrine (later removed) highlights the instability of this open canon compared to the immutable nature of the Biblical text in Evangelical theology.

Shared Values:

Belief in the Lord Jesus Christ.; Belief in a final judgment.; Desire for religious liberty and peace with civil government.; Reverence for the Bible (though defined differently).

Friction Points:

1. [Critical] Sola Scriptura – The text presents new, binding scripture ('Revelations') alongside the Bible.
2. [Major] Sola Fide – Suggests final standing is based on the 'reward of every man's labor' and adherence to new regulations.

Semantic Warnings:

"Revelations of God"

In Text: New, modern communications from God to Joseph Smith, written as scripture.

Evangelical: The closed canon of the Old and New Testaments (Hebrews 1:1-2).

Example: When this text says 'Revelations,' it refers to the D&C sections, not the Book of Revelation or the Bible.

"Salvation"

In Text: In this context, a state attained through understanding the 'Lectures on Faith' and obeying the 'Covenants.'

Evangelical: Deliverance from sin and death through faith in Christ alone.

Example: The text links 'salvation' to the 'Lectures on Faith,' implying intellectual assent to specific theology is a prerequisite.

SOTERIOLOGY

Salvation Defined: Implied as a future reward based on labor and adherence to the principles in the book.

How Attained: Through belief in the 'items of religion' and the 'reward of labor.'

Basis of Assurance: Confidence in the 'High Council' and the 'Revelations.'

Comparison to Sola Fide: The text focuses on 'labor' and 'principles for regulation,' moving away from the passive reception of grace found in Romans 4:5.

MANDATES & REQUIREMENTS

Explicit Commands:

1. None explicitly directed at the reader in the Preface, other than to receive the volume.

Implicit Obligations:

1. Accept the 'Doctrine and Covenants' as the word of God.
2. Recognize the authority of the High Council and the First Presidency.
3. Reject the 'misrepresentations' of the church by outsiders.

EVANGELISM TOOLKIT

Discovery Questions:

1. The Preface states that the 'Lectures on Faith' embrace the 'important doctrine of salvation.' Since they were removed from the D&C in 1921, does that mean the doctrine of salvation changed?
2. The authors mention receiving the 'reward of every man's labor.' How do you reconcile this with the Bible's teaching that salvation is a gift, not of works (Ephesians 2:8-9)?

3. If the Bible is the word of God, why was it necessary to add 'items or principles for the regulation of the church' that go beyond it?

Redemptive Analogies:

1. Desire for Intelligibility – Just as the authors desired to make their faith clear to avoid misunderstanding, God made His love perfectly intelligible in the person of Jesus Christ. [Hebrews 1:1-2 (God spoke in past by prophets, now by His Son)]
2. Accountability/Judgment – The text correctly identifies a coming judgment where secrets are revealed. The Gospel offers a solution to this fear: Christ's righteousness covers our secrets. [Romans 2:16, Romans 8:1]

Spiritual Weight:

1. Uncertainty of Canon [Moderate] – The believer must accept that 'doctrine' can change (e.g., Lectures on Faith being added then removed), creating instability in what is required for salvation.
2. Performance Pressure [Severe] – The focus on the 'reward of every man's labor' places the burden of final justification on the believer's performance rather than Christ's finished work.

PISTEMOLOGY

Knowledge Source: Institutional Revelation (The High Council/Presidency compiling revelations).

Verification Method: Implicitly, the verification is the intelligibility of the printed principles and the future judgment of God.

Evangelical Contrast: Evangelicals verify truth by testing it against the closed canon of Scripture (Acts 17:11). This text asks for verification based on the authority of the compilers and the claim of inspiration.

TEXTUAL CRITICISM

Dating: February 17, 1835

Authorship: Joseph Smith, Oliver Cowdery, Sidney Rigdon, Frederick G. Williams

Textual Issues: This Preface introduces the 1835 edition, which significantly revised earlier revelations found in the 1833 Book of Commandments. It also canonized the 'Lectures on Faith,' which were later decanonized.