

SECTION 1 (PREFACE)

FAITH: Mormonism | TEXT: Doctrine and Covenants | VOLUME: 1835 Edition | AUTHOR: Joseph Smith

OVERVIEW

Section 1 of the Doctrine and Covenants, received on November 1, 1831, functions as the Lord's formal 'Preface' to the collection of Joseph Smith's revelations (then the Book of Commandments). The text presents a cosmic courtroom scene where God addresses all inhabitants of the earth, warning of imminent judgment and calamity. The central argument is that the world has strayed entirely from God's ordinances and broken the 'everlasting covenant,' necessitating a restoration. Consequently, God claims to have called Joseph Smith Jr. and others to break down the mighty, re-establish the covenant, and proclaim the fullness of the gospel. The text makes two critical theological assertions that define Mormonism: first, that the organization established by Smith is 'the only true and living church upon the face of the whole earth,' and second, that the words of the church's prophets are ontologically equivalent to the voice of God ('whether by mine own voice, or by the voice of my servants, it is the same'). It establishes a closed epistemological loop where rejecting the 'servants' is synonymous with rejecting God.

KEY FIGURES

The Lord (The Speaker), Joseph Smith Jr., The Disciples/Servants (Early Mormon Elders), Inhabitants of the Earth

DOCTRINES ANALYZED

1. TOTAL APOSTASY

Assertion: The entire world has strayed from God's ordinances and broken the everlasting covenant, rendering all previous Christianity invalid.

"For they have strayed from mine ordinances, and have broken mine everlasting covenant; they seek not the Lord to establish his righteousness (v3)"

Evangelical Comparison: Evangelical Christianity holds that while the visible church may err, the true Church (the body of believers) persists through history, sustained by the Holy Spirit and the Word. This text asserts a total institutional and orbital failure of Christianity ('broken mine everlasting covenant'), necessitating a completely new dispensation. This directly contradicts Matthew 16:18 and Ephesians 3:21, implying that Christ's work in the church failed for centuries.

2. PROPHETIC EQUIVALENCE

Assertion: The spoken word of the Lord's servants (prophets) carries the exact same authority as God's direct voice.

"What I the Lord have spoken, I have spoken... whether by mine own voice, or by the voice of my servants, it is the same (v8)"

Evangelical Comparison: In Evangelical theology, all human teaching—even prophecy—must be tested against the closed canon of Scripture (Acts 17:11, 1 Thess 5:21). This text elevates the 'voice of the servants' to a level of infallibility and immediate authority that bypasses scriptural verification. It creates a dynamic where the living prophet effectively outranks the written canon.

3. ECCLESIOLOGICAL EXCLUSIVITY

Assertion: The organization led by Joseph Smith is the only valid church on earth.

"The only true and living church upon the face of the whole earth, with which I the Lord am well pleased (v5)"

Evangelical Comparison: Evangelicals define the 'true church' as the invisible body of all born-again believers across all denominations (1 Corinthians 12:12-13). This text restricts the 'true church' to a specific institutional hierarchy holding restored priesthood keys, effectively un-churching all other Christians.

COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

Divergence Status: Yes

Theological Gap: The fundamental gap lies in the definition of the 'Everlasting Covenant.' In Hebrews 13:20, this covenant is sealed by the blood of Jesus and is unbreakable by man. In D&C 1:15, the covenant is viewed as a system of ordinances that men 'broke' and 'strayed from,' requiring Joseph Smith to restore it. This shifts salvation from a reliance on Christ's merit (Sola Fide) to reliance on the restored priesthood's authority and the believer's adherence to its laws. Furthermore, the text's claim to be the 'only true church' denies the validity of all other Christian baptisms and confessions.

Shared Values:

God is the ultimate judge; Sin has consequences; The world is in a state of rebellion/sin; Call to repentance

Friction Points:

1. [Critical] Sola Scriptura – Asserts that the voice of modern servants is equal to God's voice, effectively opening the canon and subjugating the Bible to modern prophecy.
2. [Critical] Christology (Sufficiency of Christ) – Implies Christ's established church failed and His covenant was broken by men, requiring a mortal (Smith) to restore it.
3. [Major] Universal Priesthood – Centralizes authority in a specific hierarchy ('my servants') and denies the validity of believers outside this structure.

Semantic Warnings:

"Everlasting Covenant"

In Text: A system of priesthood ordinances and laws that can be broken and lost by human apostasy.

Evangelical: The New Covenant in Christ's blood, which is eternal, secure, and dependent on God's faithfulness, not man's (Hebrews 13:20, Jeremiah 31:31-34).

Example: *In D&C 1:15, men have 'broken mine everlasting covenant.' In Hebrews, the covenant is secured by the unchangeable priesthood of Jesus.*

"Church"

In Text: A specific institutional organization established by Joseph Smith (v5).

Evangelical: The spiritual assembly of all true believers in Christ (Eph 1:22-23).

Example: *The text refers to 'the only true and living church,' implying all other Christian assemblies are dead or false.*

SOTERIOLOGY

Salvation Defined: Implicitly defined as being 'sealed' against wrath (v2) and forgiven through repentance and obedience (v5).

How Attained: By heeding the prophets, repenting, and 'doing the commandments' (v5).

Basis of Assurance: Membership in the 'only true and living church' and personal obedience.

Comparison to Sola Fide: The text explicitly links forgiveness to 'doing the commandments' (v5), contrasting with Romans 4:5 ('to him that worketh not, but believeth... his faith is counted for righteousness').

MANDATES & REQUIREMENTS

Explicit Commands:

1. Hearken and listen (v1)
2. Fear and tremble (v2)
3. Prepare for that which is to come (v3)
4. Repent and do the commandments (v5)
5. Search these commandments (v7)

Implicit Obligations:

1. Accept Joseph Smith's revelations as the word of God
2. Submit to the authority of the 'servants' as if submitting to God
3. Believe that all other churches are in apostasy

Ritual Requirements:

1. Participation in the 'ordinances' which the text claims were previously lost (v3)

EVANGELISM TOOLKIT

Discovery Questions:

1. In verse 15, it says people 'broken mine everlasting covenant.' If the covenant is based on Christ's blood and promise (Hebrews 13:20), is it possible for humans to break it, or is Christ's work stronger than man's failure?
2. Verse 38 says the voice of the servants is the same as the Lord's. How do you handle situations where a servant (prophet) teaches something that contradicts the Bible or a previous prophet?
3. The text says God cannot look on sin with the 'least degree of allowance' (v31). If that is the standard, and forgiveness requires 'doing the commandments' (v32), how can anyone have peace about their standing with God?

Redemptive Analogies:

1. The desire for a clear Voice. – The text appeals to the human longing for God to speak clearly into chaos. The Gospel answers this not with a new law, but with the Word made flesh (Jesus) who is the final word (Hebrews 1:1-2). [Hebrews 1:1-2]
2. The reality of judgment. – The text correctly identifies that the world is under judgment. This creates a bridge to discuss the *solution* to that judgment: not a new church organization, but the propitiation of Christ. [Romans 3:23-25]

Spiritual Weight:

1. Epistemological Anxiety [Severe] – The believer must accept the 'voice of the servants' as God's voice (v38). This creates immense cognitive dissonance and anxiety when leaders err, contradict scripture, or change doctrines, as the believer has no mechanism to question the leader without 'rejecting God.'
2. Perfectionism/Legalism [Severe] – Verse 31 states God cannot look on sin with the 'least degree of allowance.' Verse 32 conditions forgiveness on 'doing the commandments.' This creates a crushing burden where forgiveness is a result of successful performance rather than a gift of grace.
3. Isolation/Us vs. Them [Moderate] – By defining their group as the 'only true and living church' (v30) and the rest of the world as 'Babylon' (v16), the text isolates the believer from the broader Christian heritage and community, fostering fear of the 'outside.'

EPISTEMOLOGY

Knowledge Source: Testimony of the Spirit confirming the voice of the Prophet.

Verification Method: Adherents are told to 'Search these commandments' with the promise that 'the Spirit beareth record' (v8).

Evangelical Contrast: Biblical epistemology tests spirits to see if they confess the biblical Christ (1 John 4:1) and aligns with the 'faith once for all delivered' (Jude 3). This text demands acceptance of new revelation based on internal subjective confirmation ('Spirit beareth record') rather than objective scriptural consistency.

TEXTUAL CRITICISM

Dating: Received November 1, 1831; Published in 1835 D&C.

Authorship: Joseph Smith (dictated).

Textual Issues: This section was written *after* many other revelations to serve as a preface. It reflects a more developed ecclesiology (church structure) than the earliest revelations.