

SECTION 23 (MODERN SECTION 51)

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

OVERVIEW

This revelation, originally dictated in May 1831 and cataloged as Section 23 in the 1835 Doctrine and Covenants (Section 51 in modern editions), addresses the practical and theological framework of the 'Law of Consecration.' As converts gathered to Ohio, Joseph Smith instructed the first Bishop, Edward Partridge, to settle them on consecrated lands. The text outlines a communal economic system where property is deeded to families according to their 'circumstances, wants, and needs.' Crucially, the text intertwines economic management with spiritual standing; while legal deeds were issued to satisfy land laws, the revelation implies that a member's right to church resources is contingent upon their worthiness. It establishes the 'Bishop's Storehouse' for surplus goods and concludes with a distinct soteriological claim: that faithful stewardship in these temporal matters is a prerequisite for entering the 'joy of the Lord' and inheriting eternal life.

KEY FIGURES

Jesus Christ (The Speaker), Edward Partridge (First Bishop), The Bishop's Agent (Financial administrator)

DOCTRINES ANALYZED

1. CONDITIONAL INHERITANCE OF ETERNAL LIFE

Assertion: Inheriting eternal life is contingent upon being found a 'faithful, a just and a wise steward' in temporal/church matters.

"And whoso is found a faithful, a just and a wise steward, shall enter into the joy of his Lord, and shall inherit eternal life. (Verse 5)"

Evangelical Comparison: In Evangelical theology, eternal life is a gift received through faith in Christ alone (Romans 6:23, Ephesians 2:8-9), not a reward for administrative faithfulness or wise resource management. This text shifts the basis of 'inheriting eternal life' from the finished work of Christ to the ongoing performance of the believer in managing church resources. It effectively re-contextualizes the Parable of the Talents (Matthew 25) from a descriptive parable about the Kingdom of God into a prescriptive law for economic communalism where salvation is the wage for successful stewardship.

2. ECCLESIASTICAL CONTROL OF PROPERTY

Assertion: The Bishop has the authority to appoint portions of property and determine if a member is worthy to retain their standing in the community.

"appoint unto this people their portion... until he transgresses and is not accounted worthy by the voice of the church... he shall not have power to claim that portion which he has consecrated (Verse 1)"

Evangelical Comparison: While the early Christian church practiced voluntary sharing (Acts 2:44-45), Peter explicitly affirmed in Acts 5:4 that property remained in the individual's power. This text, however, mandates a system where the Bishop determines 'wants and needs.' Furthermore, it links property rights to church discipline ('until he transgresses'), creating a system where spiritual failure can result in economic disenfranchisement (though the text notes legal deeds are used to satisfy land laws).

COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

Divergence Status: Yes

Theological Gap: The fundamental incompatibility lies in the conditions for salvation. D&C Section 23 (Modern 51) explicitly states that the one who is a 'faithful, just and wise steward' shall 'inherit eternal life.' This creates a works-righteousness paradigm where administrative obedience and economic cooperation are the mechanisms for securing eternal destiny. Evangelicalism maintains that while stewardship is a fruit of faith, it is never the root of justification. Furthermore, the text elevates the Bishop to a mediator of resources and worthiness, obscuring the direct priesthood of the believer.

Shared Values:

Care for the poor and needy.; Honesty in dealings.; Concept of stewardship (God owns all).; Desire for unity in the church.

Friction Points:

1. [Critical] Sola Fide (Faith Alone) – Eternal life is promised as a reward for being a 'faithful steward' (works) rather than through faith in Christ.
2. [Major] Universal Priesthood – The Bishop is given high control over the private property and livelihood of members, acting as a mediator of God's material blessings.

Semantic Warnings:

"Equal"

In Text: Based on 'circumstances, wants, and needs' (Verse 1), not mathematical equality.

Evangelical: Often refers to spiritual standing before God (Galatians 3:28) rather than economic distribution.

Example: *In this text, being 'equal' means a large family gets more land than a small family, determined by the Bishop.*

"Inheritance"

In Text: A physical plot of land/stewardship within the church, which can be lost through transgression.

Evangelical: Often refers to the imperishable spiritual inheritance kept in heaven for believers (1 Peter 1:4).

Example: *A Mormon in 1831 could lose their 'inheritance' (land) by displeasing the Bishop; a Christian's inheritance is guarded by God.*

SOTERIOLOGY

Salvation Defined: Entering the joy of the Lord / Inheriting eternal life.

How Attained: By being found a faithful, just, and wise steward (Verse 5).

Basis of Assurance: Performance in one's stewardship and standing in the church ('voice of the church').

Comparison to Sola Fide: The text establishes a 'Stewardship-Merit' system. In contrast, Romans 4:4-5 states, 'Now to the one who works, his wage is not counted as a gift but as his due. And to the one who does not work but believes in him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted as righteousness.'

MANDATES & REQUIREMENTS

Explicit Commands:

1. Edward Partridge must organize the people according to God's laws.
2. Appoint portions to every man equal according to family, circumstances, wants, and needs.
3. Give written deeds to secure property.
4. Appoint an agent to handle money for food and raiment.
5. Establish a Bishop's storehouse for surplus.
6. Deal honestly and be alike (unified).

Implicit Obligations:

1. Submit personal financial details to the Bishop for assessment of 'needs.'
2. Accept the Bishop's judgment on what constitutes a sufficient portion.
3. Maintain 'worthiness' to ensure continued standing in the economic community.

Ritual Requirements:

1. Consecration of property (transferring ownership to the Bishop/Church).

EVANGELISM TOOLKIT

Discovery Questions:

1. In verse 5, it says those who are faithful stewards inherit eternal life. How does that relate to the biblical teaching that eternal life is a free gift of God, not of works?
2. The text mentions being 'cut off' and losing one's portion if they transgress. Does this create anxiety about your standing with God being tied to your standing with church leadership?
3. How do you interpret 'equal' in this section? Does it mean everyone gets the same, or does the Bishop decide who needs what?

Redemptive Analogies:

1. The Desire for Equity – The text reflects a human longing for a world without greed or poverty. The Gospel answers this not through forced redistribution, but through the heart transformation of the Gospel which creates a voluntary community of love. [Acts 4:32-35 (Voluntary sharing based on unity of heart)]
2. Stewardship – We are indeed stewards of God's grace. The bridge is that Christ is the only truly faithful steward, and we inherit His reward through faith, rather than earning it through our own management. [1 Corinthians 4:1-2 (Stewards of the mysteries of God)]

Spiritual Weight:

1. Performance Anxiety [Severe] – The believer must constantly worry if their stewardship is 'wise' and 'faithful' enough to merit eternal life.
2. Insecurity of Salvation [Moderate] – Since property rights and church standing are tied to 'worthiness' (Verse 1), a believer's temporal and eternal security is fragile and dependent on maintaining the approval of leadership.
3. Ecclesiastical Dependence [Moderate] – The individual loses autonomy, relying on the Bishop to define their 'wants and needs,' creating a dynamic of control rather than spiritual liberty.

EPISTEMOLOGY

Knowledge Source: Prophetic Revelation (Joseph Smith acting as the mouthpiece of God).

Verification Method: Obedience to the revelation is expected; the text implies that the outcome ('turn unto them for their good') serves as verification.

Evangelical Contrast: Evangelical epistemology relies on the objective standard of written Scripture (2 Timothy 3:16) to test prophecy. This text demands obedience based on the subjective authority of the modern prophet.

TEXTUAL CRITICISM

Dating: May 1831.

Authorship: Joseph Smith (dictated).

Textual Issues: The 1835 version contains edits from the original manuscript to clarify the legal standing of the deeds (emphasizing they are binding according to the laws of the land) to protect the church from lawsuits by apostates.