

SECTION 123

FAITH: Mormonism | TEXT: Doctrine and Covenants | VOLUME: 2013 | AUTHOR: Joseph Smith

OVERVIEW

Written from Liberty Jail in March 1839, Doctrine and Covenants Section 123 represents Joseph Smith's instructions to the Church following their expulsion from Missouri. The text outlines a systematic bureaucratic mandate: the Saints are to collect affidavits, document property damages, and identify specific persecutors. Smith frames this not merely as legal strategy, but as a theological necessity; he asserts that this documentation is an 'imperative duty' owed to God and angels. The text posits that God is waiting for the Saints to complete this task before He can come forth from His 'hiding place' to execute justice. Furthermore, the text contains a sharp polemic against traditional Christianity, identifying the 'creeds of the fathers' as the 'mainspring of all corruption' and the spiritual force behind the violent persecution of the Saints. It concludes with an exhortation to 'waste and wear out our lives' in this cause, promising that after doing all in their power, they may then stand still and see the salvation of God.

KEY FIGURES

Joseph Smith, The Saints (Latter-day Saints), Heavenly Father, The Persecutors (Missouri Mobs/Government), Widows and Fatherless

DOCTRINES ANALYZED

1. THE GREAT APOSTASY AND CORRUPTION OF CREEDS

Assertion: Traditional Christian creeds are lies, the 'mainspring of all corruption,' and the 'fetters of hell' that incite persecution.

"the influence of that spirit which hath so strongly riveted the creeds of the fathers, who have inherited lies... and is now the very mainspring of all corruption (D&C 123:7)"

Evangelical Comparison: While Evangelicals uphold Sola Scriptura, they value historical creeds as faithful summaries of essential doctrine (Trinity, Christology). D&C 123:7-8 aggressively attacks these creeds, not just as incorrect, but as diabolical ('fetters of hell') and the root cause of violence and corruption. This reinforces the Mormon doctrine of Total Apostasy—the idea that the true church was lost and required restoration through Joseph Smith. To an Evangelical, this is a rejection of the Holy Spirit's preservation of truth through the church age.

2. CONDITIONAL DIVINE INTERVENTION

Assertion: God is waiting for the Saints to complete specific works (documentation of grievances) before He can fully act or claim His promise.

"as the last effort which is enjoined on us by our Heavenly Father, before we can fully and completely claim that promise which shall call him forth from his hiding place (D&C 123:6)"

Evangelical Comparison: The text suggests a transactional theology where God is 'hiding' and restricted from acting until the Saints fulfill a legalistic requirement of documenting persecution. In Evangelical theology, God is sovereign and does not require human permission or preliminary paperwork to execute justice or save His people. This text places the burden of activating God's power onto the shoulders of the believers.

3. EXCLUSIVE POSSESSION OF TRUTH

Assertion: Good people in other denominations are blinded and cannot find the truth unless they come to the LDS Church.

"who are blinded by the subtle craftiness of men... and who are only kept from the truth because they know not where to find it (D&C 123:12)"

Evangelical Comparison: This doctrine asserts that truth is geographically or institutionally located ('where to find it'), implying it is absent in other Christian traditions. Evangelicals believe truth is found in the Word of God (John 17:17) and illuminated by the Holy Spirit, not confined to a specific organization. This text

pathologizes other Christians as 'blinded' victims who are spiritually lost without the specific 'keys' or location of Mormonism.

COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

Divergence Status: Yes

Theological Gap: The fundamental gap lies in the text's identification of the 'creeds of the fathers' (historic Christianity) as the 'mainspring of all corruption.' This creates an unbridgeable divide; what Evangelicals view as the bulwark of truth (the nature of the Trinity and Christ), this text views as the 'fetters of hell.' Additionally, the soteriological implication of verse 17—that assurance comes *after* doing all in one's power—mirrors the Book of Mormon's 'saved by grace after all we can do' (2 Nephi 25:23), which diametrically opposes the Evangelical doctrine of Sola Fide (Faith Alone) where works are the fruit, not the prerequisite, of salvation.

Shared Values:

Desire for justice; Concern for the oppressed (widows and fatherless); Belief that God sees suffering; Perseverance in tribulation

Friction Points:

1. [Critical] Ecclesiology / Universal Church – Denounces the historic church and its creeds as corrupt and diabolical.
2. [Major] Sovereignty of God – Limits God's ability to act based on human completion of bureaucratic tasks.
3. [Major] Sola Scriptura – Replaces biblical instruction on suffering with a new revelation demanding legal retaliation/documentation.

Semantic Warnings:

"Truth"

In Text: The specific restorationist doctrines found only within the LDS Church.

Evangelical: The reality of God revealed in Jesus Christ and Scripture (John 14:6).

Example: Verse 12 says people are kept from 'the truth' because they don't know where to find it, implying truth is a hidden object possessed by Mormons, rather than the person of Christ accessible to all.

"Salvation of God"

In Text: In this context, primarily vindication and deliverance from enemies, but linked to eternal standing.

Evangelical: Deliverance from sin and death through Christ's atonement.

Example: Verse 17 speaks of seeing the 'salvation of God' as a result of their legal efforts.

SOTERIOLOGY

Salvation Defined: Here, vindication and the revelation of God's arm; ultimately, exaltation involves overcoming enemies.

How Attained: Through obedience to prophetic mandates and 'wasting and wearing out our lives' in the cause.

Basis of Assurance: Assurance is achieved 'after' doing all things in one's power (v17).

Comparison to Sola Fide: Explicitly contradicts Sola Fide. Verse 17 places the 'utmost assurance' at the end of a long road of human effort, whereas Romans 5:1 places peace with God at the moment of justification by faith.

MANDATES & REQUIREMENTS

Explicit Commands:

1. Gather facts on all sufferings and abuses (v1)
2. Document property damages and personal injuries (v2)
3. Identify names of all oppressors (v3)
4. Appoint a committee to take affidavits (v4)
5. Collect libelous publications (v4)

6. Present findings to heads of government (v6)
7. Waste and wear out lives in bringing darkness to light (v13)

Implicit Obligations:

1. View traditional Christian creeds as the enemy/source of evil
2. Accept that God's intervention is contingent on human diligence
3. Maintain a distinct 'Us vs. Them' mentality regarding the broader culture

EVANGELISM TOOLKIT

Discovery Questions:

1. In verse 17, it says we can have assurance 'after' we do all things in our power. How do you personally know when you have done enough to qualify for that assurance?
2. Verse 7 describes the 'creeds of the fathers' as the 'fetters of hell.' Since the Apostles' Creed focuses on the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, why do you think this scripture describes it that way?
3. Do you believe God is unable to act ('hiding place') until we perform certain duties, or is He sovereign over our circumstances regardless of our actions?

Redemptive Analogies:

1. The desire for a Record of Wrongs – We naturally want justice and a record of wrongs. However, the Gospel is that God keeps a record, but blots it out through Christ. Instead of holding onto the record of others' sins against us, we are released because God canceled the record of debt against us. [Colossians 2:14]
2. The Small Helm – Just as a small helm turns a ship, the tongue (James 3) or faith (Hebrews 11) directs life. The 'small thing' that saves isn't our massive effort of documentation, but the 'small' act of faith in Christ. [James 3:4-5]

Spiritual Weight:

1. Performance/Works-Righteousness [Severe] – The text creates a burden where God's intervention is contingent on the believer's exhaustion ('waste and wear out our lives'). The believer can never be sure if they have truly done 'all things that lie in our power,' leading to chronic spiritual anxiety.
2. Isolation/Us vs. Them [Moderate] – By labeling all other Christian traditions as 'blinded' and their creeds as 'diabolical,' the text isolates the believer, creating fear of the outside world and preventing genuine fellowship with other Christians.

EPISTEMOLOGY

Knowledge Source: Revelation through the Prophet Joseph Smith interpreting the community's suffering.

Verification Method: Adherents verify this by engaging in the work ('doing all things that lie in our power') and expecting subsequent assurance.

Evangelical Contrast: Biblical epistemology relies on the finished revelation of Scripture (2 Timothy 3:16). This text relies on ongoing prophetic instruction that reinterprets political struggles as cosmic spiritual battles.

TEXTUAL CRITICISM

Dating: March 1839

Authorship: Joseph Smith (dictated)

Textual Issues: Excerpted from a longer epistle. The canonized version focuses on the duty of documentation.