

SECTION 127

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

OVERVIEW

Doctrine and Covenants Section 127 is an epistle written by Joseph Smith to the Saints in Nauvoo on September 1, 1842. At this time, Smith was in hiding ('deep water') to avoid arrest and extradition to Missouri regarding the attempted assassination of Governor Lilburn Boggs. The text opens with Smith's personal defense, framing his legal troubles as diabolical persecution and comparing his suffering to that of the Apostle Paul. He asserts his innocence and claims a pre-mortal ordination to his prophetic role. The theological core of the text, however, shifts to the administration of 'baptism for the dead.' Smith declares that for these proxy ordinances to be valid in heaven, they must be meticulously recorded on earth. He introduces a bureaucratic requirement to the priesthood: the office of a recorder and the necessity of eyewitnesses. The text asserts that the binding power of the priesthood is inextricably linked to the physical records kept by the church, stating that what is recorded on earth is recorded in heaven. This section serves as a foundational text for the Latter-day Saint emphasis on genealogy and temple record-keeping.

KEY FIGURES

Joseph Smith, The Lord, The Recorder (Ecclesiastical Office), The Enemy (Persecutors/Missouri Officials), Paul the Apostle

DOCTRINES ANALYZED

1. VICARIOUS BAPTISM FOR THE DEAD

Assertion: Living ordinances performed by proxy are required for the salvation of those who died without the gospel.

"Verily, thus saith the Lord unto you concerning your dead: When any of you are baptized for your dead... (D&C 127:6)"

Evangelical Comparison: This doctrine represents a fundamental divergence from Evangelical theology. While Mormons cite 1 Corinthians 15:29 as a precedent, Evangelicals interpret that verse as Paul using a local pagan or erroneous practice to argue for the reality of resurrection, not as an endorsement of the practice. Evangelicalism holds that 'it is appointed for man to die once, and after that comes judgment' (Hebrews 9:27), rendering proxy works ineffective and unnecessary due to the sufficiency of Christ's atonement and the finality of death.

2. SACERDOTAL BUREAUCRACY (THE RECORDING DOCTRINE)

Assertion: Spiritual validity in heaven is contingent upon accurate physical record-keeping on earth.

"That in all your recordings it may be recorded in heaven; whatsoever you bind on earth, may be bound in heaven... (D&C 127:7)"

Evangelical Comparison: In this text, the 'binding' power of the priesthood is tethered to the act of writing. Smith asserts that if an ordinance is not recorded by an eyewitness on earth, it is not recorded in heaven. This introduces a legalistic and bureaucratic hurdle to salvation. In contrast, Evangelicalism teaches that God knows those who are His (2 Timothy 2:19) and that salvation is a spiritual transaction based on faith, not a clerical transaction based on archival perfection.

3. PRE-MORTAL ORDINATION

Assertion: Joseph Smith was ordained to his specific role before the world was created.

"I was ordained from before the foundation of the world for some good end... (D&C 127:2)"

Evangelical Comparison: Smith claims he was 'ordained from before the foundation of the world.' While Jeremiah 1:5 speaks of God knowing the prophet before formation in the womb, Mormon theology expands this to a literal pre-mortal existence where spirits are foreordained to specific roles. Evangelicals view humans as created at conception (Psalm 139:13), not as pre-existing spirits.

COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

Divergence Status: Yes

Theological Gap: D&C 127 widens the theological gap by institutionalizing 'Baptism for the Dead.' In Evangelical theology, salvation is a binary state determined during one's earthly life through faith in Christ (John 3:18). This text introduces a 'second chance' theology dependent on the works of the living. Furthermore, it elevates the role of the priesthood and record-keeping to a soteriological necessity—implying that without the 'recorder,' the saving power of the ordinance is nullified. This creates a system where salvation is mediated through an organization and its paperwork, rather than solely through the High Priesthood of Jesus Christ.

Shared Values:

Perseverance in suffering; Belief in the resurrection; Desire for the salvation of family/ancestors

Friction Points:

- 1. [Critical] Sola Fide – Salvation (for the dead) is made dependent on the ritual works of the living.
- 2. [Critical] Christology (Sufficiency of Christ) – Implies Christ's atonement is insufficient for the dead without a proxy baptism.
- 3. [Major] Sola Scriptura – Introduces extra-biblical requirements for salvation and new ecclesiastical offices.
- 4. [Major] Theology Proper (Anthropology) – Teaches pre-mortal existence/ordination of humans (Smith), blurring the Creator/creature distinction.

Semantic Warnings:

"Bind/Loose"

In Text: The power to record ordinances on earth so they are valid in heaven.
Evangelical: Apostolic authority to declare what is forbidden or permitted (doctrine/discipline) or to declare forgiveness based on the Gospel (Matthew 16:19, 18:18).
Example: *In D&C 127, binding is a clerical act of recording a ritual. In Matthew, it is Peter's authority to establish church teaching and discipline.*

"Reward"

In Text: Blessings contingent on 'redoubled works' and temple completion.
Evangelical: Often refers to crowns of service, not the gift of salvation itself (Ephesians 2:8-9).
Example: *D&C 127:4 promises reward for redoubled works; the Bible distinguishes between the gift of eternal life (Romans 6:23) and rewards for service (1 Cor 3:14).*

SOTERIOLOGY

Salvation Defined: Includes exaltation, which requires temple ordinances. Here, specifically extends the possibility of salvation to the dead.

How Attained: Through faith, repentance, and essential ordinances (baptism) performed either in person or by proxy.

Basis of Assurance: The existence of a valid record in the temple archives.

Comparison to Sola Fide: Directly contradicts Sola Fide by requiring a physical ritual and a physical record for the grace of God to be applied to the deceased. See Romans 4:5.

MANDATES & REQUIREMENTS

Explicit Commands:

- 1. Let the work of my temple... be continued on and not cease (v4)
- 2. Redouble your diligence, perseverance, and works (v4)
- 3. Appoint a recorder for baptisms for the dead (v6)
- 4. Ensure eyewitnesses are present for proxy baptisms (v6)
- 5. Keep records in order to be put in the archives of the holy temple (v9)

Implicit Obligations:

1. Accept Joseph Smith's innocence regarding his legal troubles
2. View Smith's persecution as a sign of his prophetic calling
3. Participate in proxy ordinances for ancestors

Ritual Requirements:

1. Baptism for the Dead
2. Recording/Witnessing of Ordinances

EVANGELISM TOOLKIT

Discovery Questions:

1. In verse 7, it says that what is recorded on earth is recorded in heaven. Does this mean that if a clerk makes a mistake or loses a book, that person's salvation is lost in heaven?
2. How do you interpret Hebrews 9:27 ('appointed for man to die once, and after that comes judgment') in light of the doctrine of baptism for the dead?
3. Joseph Smith compares himself to Jesus in verse 11 ('the prince of this world... hath nothing in me'). How does that sit with the biblical teaching that Jesus alone was without sin?

Redemptive Analogies:

1. The Recorder – The text highlights the need for our names to be written down to be saved. While D&C points to a human recorder, the Bible points to the 'Lamb's Book of Life.' [Revelation 20:15, Luke 10:20]
2. Desire to Save the Dead – The deep longing to see ancestors saved reflects God's heart that 'none should perish.' This longing is fulfilled not by our proxy works, but by trusting the Judge of all the earth to do right. [Genesis 18:25, 2 Peter 3:9]

Spiritual Weight:

1. Saviour Complex / Infinite Responsibility [Severe] – The believer is tasked with the redemption of their ancestors. Since the number of ancestors doubles with every generation back, this is a mathematical impossibility and an infinite burden of works, placing the role of 'savior' on the adherent.
2. Bureaucratic Anxiety [Moderate] – The fear that a clerical error, a missing witness, or a lost record could cost a family member their eternal salvation. The validity of the sacrament is placed on the procedure, not the promise of God.

EPISTEMOLOGY

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

Verification Method: Adherents are expected to accept the text based on Smith's office as 'prophet and seer' (v12) and the promise of reward for obedience.

Evangelical Contrast: Biblical epistemology tests prophecy against established scripture (Acts 17:11, 1 John 4:1). This text demands acceptance of new doctrines that contradict the sufficiency of Christ's finished work.

TEXTUAL CRITICISM

Dating: September 1, 1842

Authorship: Joseph Smith

Textual Issues: Written as a letter, later canonized. The context of Smith's flight from the law is essential for understanding the tone of persecution.