

SECTION 128

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

OVERVIEW

Written as an epistle in September 1842 while Joseph Smith was in hiding, Doctrine and Covenants Section 128 serves as a critical theological treatise establishing the bureaucratic and ritualistic requirements for the salvation of the dead. Smith expands upon previous instructions regarding proxy baptism, shifting focus from the act itself to the strict necessity of witnessing and recording the ordinance. He argues that a record bound on earth via priesthood authority is legally binding in heaven, interpreting the 'books' of Revelation 20:12 as earthly church records. The text asserts that the living cannot be 'made perfect' (achieve full exaltation) without performing these ordinances for their ancestors, creating a mutual dependency between generations. The letter culminates in a triumphant catalog of angelic visitations (Peter, James, John, Moroni, etc.) that Smith claims restored the necessary 'keys' to perform these binding acts, framing the presentation of these genealogical records in the temple as the prophesied 'offering in righteousness' to the Lord.

KEY FIGURES

Joseph Smith, Elijah, Peter, James, John, Moroni, Michael (Adam), Gabriel (Noah), Raphael

DOCTRINES ANALYZED

1. VICARIOUS SOTERIOLOGICAL NECESSITY

Assertion: The salvation (perfection) of the living is impossible without the redemption of their dead ancestors through proxy ordinances.

"For we without them cannot be made perfect; neither can they without us be made perfect. (D&C 128:18)"

Evangelical Comparison: In Evangelical theology, salvation is a personal transaction between the believer and Christ (Romans 10:9), independent of one's ancestors or descendants. This text introduces a doctrine of co-dependency where the believer's final 'perfection' is held hostage by the status of their ancestors. It shifts the focus from Christ's finished work to an ongoing, multi-generational project of ritual performance. This directly violates the sufficiency of Christ's atonement by implying His work is incomplete without the 'welding link' of human-performed ordinances.

2. SACERDOTAL LEGALISM

Assertion: Spiritual validity in heaven depends entirely on accurate earthly record-keeping and priesthood witnesses.

"whatsoever you record on earth shall be recorded in heaven, and whatsoever you do not record on earth shall not be recorded in heaven (D&C 128:8)"

Evangelical Comparison: The text elevates administrative procedure to the level of soteriological necessity. By interpreting the 'books' of judgment (Rev 20:12) as literal church registers, Smith creates a system where a failure to record an ordinance equates to a failure of the ordinance itself in the eyes of God. Evangelicalism views the 'Book of Life' as God's sovereign record of the elect, not a duplicate of fallible human paperwork. This doctrine places the power of salvation in the hands of the recorder rather than the Savior.

COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

Divergence Status: Yes

Theological Gap: While Evangelicalism teaches that Christ's death was a 'once for all' sacrifice (Hebrews 9:12, 10:10) sufficient for all who believe, D&C 128 posits that the work of salvation is incomplete. It introduces a 'plus' to the Gospel: Faith + Repentance + Baptism + Priesthood Authority + Proxy Ordinances for Ancestors. The text redefines the 'offering in righteousness' not as Christ's blood or a believer's self-surrender, but as a genealogical record book. This shifts the locus of salvation from the Cross to the Temple font and the clerk's desk.

Shared Values:

Belief in the resurrection; Reverence for biblical figures (Peter, James, John, Elijah); Desire for family unity; Belief in a final judgment

Friction Points:

1. [Critical] Sola Scriptura – Joseph Smith authoritatively reinterprets Revelation, Corinthians, and Malachi to support new doctrines not found in the Bible.
2. [Critical] Sola Fide – Salvation is made dependent on works (proxy baptisms) and the administrative act of recording them.
3. [Critical] Christology (Sufficiency of Christ) – Implies Christ's atonement is insufficient to save without the addition of human-mediated proxy ordinances.

Semantic Warnings:

"Salvation/Perfection"

In Text: Exaltation in the highest degree of glory, contingent on temple ordinances and sealing generations.

Evangelical: Deliverance from sin and death through faith in Jesus Christ (Ephesians 2:8-9).

Example: *In D&C 128:15, 'salvation' requires the dead; in the Bible, the thief on the cross was saved without family or baptism.*

"Keys"

In Text: Exclusive authorization delegated to Joseph Smith to govern the priesthood and bind ordinances.

Evangelical: The authority given to the church to preach the gospel and declare forgiveness based on Christ's work (Matt 16:19 context).

Example: *Smith claims 'keys' allow him to control who is bound in heaven; Evangelicals view keys as opening the door of faith.*

"Offering in Righteousness"

In Text: A book of genealogical records presented in the temple.

Evangelical: Often refers to Christ's sacrifice or the believer's self-offering (Romans 12:1).

Example: *D&C 128:24 explicitly redefines the Malachi 3 offering as a physical record book.*

SOTERIOLOGY

Salvation Defined: Perfection, which includes the welding together of all generations of one's family into a chain back to Adam.

How Attained: Through the Priesthood, baptism (personal or proxy), and the recording of these acts.

Basis of Assurance: Confidence is based on the 'sealing power' of the priesthood and the accuracy of church records.

Comparison to Sola Fide: Directly opposes Sola Fide. The text states 'judged out of those things which were written in the books, according to their works' (v7), interpreting 'works' as specific ritual ordinances.

MANDATES & REQUIREMENTS

Explicit Commands:

1. Appoint recorders in each ward
2. Appoint a general church recorder
3. Record specific dates, names, and witnesses for every baptism for the dead
4. Present a book of records in the holy temple

Implicit Obligations:

1. Perform genealogical research to identify ancestors
2. Participate in proxy temple ordinances
3. Accept Joseph Smith's authority as the sole conduit of these keys

Ritual Requirements:

1. Baptism for the dead (immersion)
2. Witnessing of ordinances by two or three people
3. Certification of records

EVANGELISM TOOLKIT

Discovery Questions:

1. In verse 8, it says what is not recorded on earth is not recorded in heaven. Does this mean a clerical error by a scribe could cost someone their salvation?
2. The text says we cannot be made perfect without our dead ancestors (v15). Does this mean your standing with God depends on the spiritual status of your great-grandparents?
3. How do you reconcile the requirement for baptism for the dead with the thief on the cross, who was promised paradise without baptism or a record book?
4. If the 'offering in righteousness' is a book of records (v24), how does that compare to the biblical teaching that we are sanctified by the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all (Hebrews 10:10)?

Redemptive Analogies:

1. The Welding Link – Humans have a deep longing for connection and belonging. The text seeks to solve the separation of death. [Ephesians 2:13-19 shows that the true 'welding link' is the blood of Christ, which breaks down the wall of hostility and makes us all members of God's household, regardless of ancestry.]

Spiritual Weight:

1. Saviour Complex / Atlas Complex [Severe] – The adherent is placed in the position of 'saviour on Mount Zion' for their ancestors. The salvation of potentially thousands of individuals rests on the adherent's diligence in research and temple attendance.
2. Legalistic Anxiety [Moderate] – The extreme emphasis on precise recording (v3-4) creates a fear that technical mistakes invalidates spiritual realities. The believer can never be sure if the 'paperwork' of heaven is in order.

EPISTEMOLOGY

Knowledge Source: Direct revelation to the Prophet and experiential confirmation ('voice of gladness').

Verification Method: Emotional resonance ('Let your hearts rejoice') and acceptance of Smith's testimony of angelic encounters.

Evangelical Contrast: Biblical epistemology relies on the objective standard of Scripture (Acts 17:11). This text relies on subjective 'glad tidings' and the authoritarian claim of exclusive keys.

TEXTUAL CRITICISM

Dating: September 6, 1842

Authorship: Joseph Smith

Textual Issues: The text is an epistle (letter) that was later canonized. It demonstrates Smith's evolving theology in Nauvoo, moving toward high-church ritualism.