

# SECTION 129

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

## OVERVIEW

Recorded in February 1843 in Nauvoo, Illinois, Doctrine and Covenants Section 129 addresses the issue of spiritual discernment and the nature of heavenly beings. Joseph Smith instructs his followers on how to identify messengers from beyond the veil. He categorizes heavenly beings into two groups: resurrected personages (angels with flesh and bones) and spirits of just men made perfect (who have not yet been resurrected). The text provides a pragmatic, physical test: the recipient is to offer their hand to the messenger. A resurrected angel will shake hands, and the touch will be felt. A spirit of a just man will refuse to shake hands to avoid deception, as he lacks a body. The devil, however, appearing as an angel of light, will attempt to shake hands but will offer no substance, thereby revealing his deceit. This text establishes a materialist ontology for heavenly beings and provides a ritualistic mechanism for discerning spiritual truth.

## KEY FIGURES

Joseph Smith, Jesus Christ, Angels (Resurrected Personages), Spirits of Just Men Made Perfect, The Devil

## DOCTRINES ANALYZED

### 1. MATERIALITY OF ANGELS

**Assertion:** Angels are resurrected human beings possessing tangible bodies of flesh and bones.

"Angels, who are resurrected personages, having bodies of flesh and bones (D&C 129:1)"

**Evangelical Comparison:** In Evangelical theology, angels are a distinct order of creation (Colossians 1:16), ministering spirits sent to serve those who will inherit salvation (Hebrews 1:14). They are not, and never were, humans. Humans do not become angels upon death. D&C 129 conflates the two, asserting that angels are simply resurrected humans. Furthermore, while Jesus has a resurrected body, biblical angels are consistently portrayed as spirits, though they can manifest physically. The assertion that *all* angels in heaven have flesh and bones fundamentally alters the biblical ontology of the heavenly host.

### 2. SENSORY EPISTEMOLOGY

**Assertion:** Spiritual truth and the identity of a messenger are verified through physical sensation (touch/handshake).

"If he be an angel he will do so, and you will feel his hand. ... If it be the devil... you will not feel anything (D&C 129:5, 8)"

**Evangelical Comparison:** The Bible warns that Satan is a deceiver. Evangelical theology relies on the 'analogy of faith'—comparing a message against the revealed Word of God—to test spirits (Galatians 1:8). D&C 129 introduces a mechanical, ritualistic test. It assumes that the Devil is ontologically incapable of simulating touch or is bound by a cosmic law that forces him to attempt a handshake he cannot complete. This shifts discernment from theological content (what the messenger says) to physical phenomena (how the messenger feels).

## COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

**Divergence Status:** Yes

**Theological Gap:** The fundamental gap lies in the nature of reality and discernment. Evangelicalism maintains a Creator/creature distinction where angels are a separate order of being from humans. D&C 129 collapses this, making angels merely an advanced stage of human existence (resurrected). Furthermore, the text introduces a 'gnostic' element—secret knowledge or keys—required for safety, whereas the Bible presents the open Word of God as sufficient. The reliance on a physical test for spiritual entities presumes a materialist cosmology that is foreign to the biblical description of the spiritual realm.

### Shared Values:

Belief in the existence of angels.; Belief in the existence of the devil.; Belief in the afterlife.; Desire not to be deceived by Satan.

### Friction Points:

1. [Major] Sola Scriptura – Adds necessary 'keys' for spiritual safety not found in the Bible.
2. [Major] Theology Proper (Creation Order) – Conflates humans and angels, denying the distinct creation of the angelic host.
3. [Moderate] Sola Fide / Gospel Sufficiency – Implies that safety from deception comes through ritual knowledge rather than resting in the finished work of Christ and His Word.

### Semantic Warnings:

#### "Angel"

**In Text:** A resurrected human being with a body of flesh and bones.

**Evangelical:** A created spiritual being, distinct from humanity, serving as God's messenger (Hebrews 1:7, 14).

**Example:** *In D&C 129, an angel is a human like Peter or Paul after resurrection. In the Bible, angels are beings like Gabriel or Michael who were never human.*

#### "Spirits of just men made perfect"

**In Text:** Righteous humans who have died but are not yet resurrected.

**Evangelical:** The saints in heaven, viewed as fully justified and sanctified through Christ (Hebrews 12:23).

**Example:** *D&C 129 uses this term to denote a lack of physical body; the Bible uses it to denote a completion of moral/spiritual sanctification.*

## SOTERIOLOGY

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**Salvation Defined:** Implicitly linked to resurrection and glory (inheriting 'the same glory').

**How Attained:** Not explicitly defined in this text, but implies a progression from spirit to resurrected angel.

**Basis of Assurance:** Knowledge of keys to avoid deception.

**Comparison to Sola Fide:** The text focuses on technical knowledge of the spirit world rather than justification by faith. It suggests that 'just men' are those who do not deceive, emphasizing moral order over imputed righteousness.

## MANDATES & REQUIREMENTS

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### Explicit Commands:

1. Offer your hand to a messenger claiming to be from God.
2. Request the messenger to shake hands.

### Implicit Obligations:

1. Memorize the three outcomes of the handshake test to avoid deception.
2. Accept the materiality of heavenly beings.

### Ritual Requirements:

1. The ritual of the handshake as a discernment tool.

## EVANGELISM TOOLKIT

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### Discovery Questions:

1. If an angel appeared to you and passed the handshake test, but preached a gospel different than the Bible (like Galatians 1:8 warns), which would you trust: the handshake or the Scripture?
2. Why do you think the Devil, who is a master deceiver, would be bound to offer his hand if he knows it will reveal his identity?
3. How does this teaching that angels are resurrected humans fit with Hebrews 1:14, which calls them 'ministering spirits' sent to serve us?

### Redemptive Analogies:

1. The Desire for Certainty – This text reveals a deep human longing to know for sure that we are not being deceived. The Gospel answers this not with a handshake, but with the internal witness of the Holy Spirit (Romans 8:16) and the objective truth of God's Word (John 17:17). [Romans 8:16, 1 John 5:13]

**Spiritual Weight:**

1. Fear of Deception [Moderate] – The believer is burdened with the fear that without these specific 'keys,' they are vulnerable to the devil. It creates a reliance on esoteric knowledge rather than God's protection.
2. Performance/Ritualism [Mild] – Discernment becomes a technical procedure to be performed correctly (offering the hand) rather than a relational reliance on the Holy Spirit and Scripture.

## **EPISTEMOLOGY**

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**Knowledge Source:** Empiricism/Sensory Experience

**Verification Method:** Tactile verification (shaking hands) to determine the nature of a being.

**Evangelical Contrast:** Biblical epistemology for discernment is doctrinal and Spirit-led, not tactile. 1 John 4:2 focuses on the confession of Jesus Christ come in the flesh, and Galatians 1:8 focuses on the content of the gospel message. D&C 129 relies on physical sensation, which is subjective and potentially deceptive.

## **TEXTUAL CRITICISM**

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**Dating:** February 9, 1843

**Authorship:** Joseph Smith

**Textual Issues:** This section is a compilation of instructions given by Smith. It reflects the 'Nauvoo theology' which is significantly more materialist and esoteric than the earlier 'Kirtland theology' or the Book of Mormon.