

SECTION 13

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

OVERVIEW

Doctrine and Covenants Section 13 is a foundational text for the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, establishing its claim to exclusive ecclesiastical authority. It records a visitation on May 15, 1829, by John the Baptist (acting as an angelic messenger) to Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery. In this encounter, the 'Priesthood of Aaron' is conferred upon them. This event is theologically significant because it asserts that the authority to act in God's name—specifically to perform baptisms for the remission of sins—had been lost from the earth and required a literal, physical restoration by a biblical figure. The text outlines the specific 'keys' associated with this priesthood: the ministering of angels, the gospel of repentance, and baptism by immersion. Furthermore, it introduces a distinct eschatological expectation regarding the 'sons of Levi' offering an offering in righteousness, linking modern priesthood restoration to ancient Israelite practices. For the believer, this text validates the exclusive authority of LDS ordinances; for the comparative theologian, it marks a sharp departure from the Protestant understanding of the 'priesthood of all believers' and the sufficiency of Christ's High Priesthood.

KEY FIGURES

Messiah (Jesus Christ), John the Baptist (The Angel), Joseph Smith, Oliver Cowdery, The Sons of Levi

DOCTRINES ANALYZED

1. RESTORATION OF THE AARONIC PRIESTHOOD

Assertion: The Aaronic Priesthood is a necessary, distinct order of authority that was lost and had to be restored by angelic visitation to authorize baptism.

"I confer the Priesthood of Aaron... and this shall never be taken again from the earth"

Evangelical Comparison: In Evangelical theology, the Aaronic Priesthood was a shadow pointing to Christ. Once Jesus, the High Priest after the order of Melchizedek, offered the final sacrifice, the Levitical/Aaronic order was rendered obsolete (Hebrews 7:11-12, 18-19). The veil was torn, signifying direct access to God for all believers (1 Peter 2:5, 9). D&C 13 contradicts this by re-establishing the Aaronic order as a permanent, necessary institution for the administration of the gospel, effectively rebuilding the barrier between the laity and the ordinances of God that Christ removed.

2. SACERDOTAL BAPTISMAL EFFICACY

Assertion: Remission of sins through baptism is dependent on the administrator holding specific priesthood keys.

"keys... of baptism by immersion for the remission of sins"

Evangelical Comparison: D&C 13 links the 'remission of sins' directly to the 'keys' of baptism held by the priesthood. This implies that a baptism performed by a sincere believer without this specific priesthood authority is invalid and offers no remission of sins. In contrast, Evangelicalism holds to Sola Fide (Faith Alone); remission of sins comes through faith in Christ's finished work (Romans 3:24-25), and baptism is an outward sign of that inward reality, not the instrument that confers it based on the officiator's status.

3. RESTORATION OF LEVITICAL OFFERINGS

Assertion: The sons of Levi will eventually offer a literal offering unto the Lord in righteousness.

"until the sons of Levi do offer again an offering unto the Lord in righteousness"

Evangelical Comparison: The text anticipates a return to offerings by the 'sons of Levi.' While some LDS interpreters view this metaphorically, Joseph Smith taught it involved the restoration of animal sacrifice. To an Evangelical, this suggests the insufficiency of the Cross. Hebrews 10:10-14 explicitly states that Christ has 'perfected forever' those who are sanctified, and 'where there is remission of these, there is no more offering for sin.' Re-instituting Levitical offerings undermines the finality of the Atonement.

COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

Divergence Status: Yes

Theological Gap: The fundamental gap is the 'Priesthood of the Believer' versus the 'Restored Aaronic Priesthood.' Evangelicalism asserts that through Christ, all believers have direct access to God and authority to share the Gospel (1 Peter 2:5, 9; Matthew 28:18-20). D&C 13 asserts that spiritual authority is vertical, hierarchical, and restricted to those ordained by physical lineage to Joseph Smith. This creates a system where grace is mediated through a priesthood class rather than accessed directly through faith in the High Priest, Jesus Christ. Furthermore, the text's eschatology regarding the 'sons of Levi' suggests a regression to shadow-worship (sacrifices) rather than the substance of Christ.

Shared Values:

Importance of Baptism; Necessity of Repentance; Reverence for Biblical figures (John the Baptist); Desire to serve God ('fellow servants')

Friction Points:

1. [Critical] Universal Priesthood – Re-establishes a hierarchical, exclusive priesthood class necessary for valid ordinances.
2. [Major] Christology (Sufficiency of Christ) – Implies Christ's work did not permanently end the Aaronic order or Levitical offerings.
3. [Critical] Sola Fide – Links remission of sins to a ritual (baptism) performed by a specific authority, rather than faith alone.
4. [Major] Theology Proper (Finished Work) – Suggests a return to Old Testament sacrificial systems ('offering unto the Lord').

Semantic Warnings:

"Priesthood"

In Text: The exclusive power and authority of God delegated to man to act in His name for the salvation of the human family.

Evangelical: The status of all believers who offer spiritual sacrifices and have direct access to God (1 Peter 2:5); or the unique High Priesthood of Jesus.

Example: LDS: '*He holds the priesthood.*' (*He has authority*). Evangelical: '*We are a royal priesthood.*' (*We all have access*).

"Keys"

In Text: The right of presidency; the power to direct the labors of the priesthood and authorize ordinances.

Evangelical: Metaphor for the authority given to the apostles to open the kingdom of heaven through the preaching of the Gospel (Matthew 16:19).

Example: LDS: '*The bishop holds the keys of the ward.*' Evangelical: '*The Gospel is the key to the Kingdom.*'

SOTERIOLOGY

Salvation Defined: Includes 'remission of sins' as a distinct step achieved through authorized baptism.

How Attained: Requires the intervention of an authorized priest holding the 'keys' to perform the ordinance.

Basis of Assurance: Confidence is placed in the validity of the priesthood line of the administrator.

Comparison to Sola Fide: Directly opposes Sola Fide by making a work (baptism) and a human mediator (the priest) necessary conditions for the remission of sins.

MANDATES & REQUIREMENTS

Implicit Obligations:

1. Must receive baptism from someone holding this specific restored authority
2. Must recognize the authority of Joseph Smith and his successors as holders of these keys
3. Men must seek ordination to this priesthood to minister effectively

Ritual Requirements:

1. Baptism by immersion
2. Ordination to the Priesthood (laying on of hands)

EVANGELISM TOOLKIT

Discovery Questions:

1. When you read about the 'sons of Levi' offering an offering again, do you see that as animal sacrifice? How does that fit with Jesus being the 'Lamb of God' once for all?
2. In Hebrews 7, it says the Aaronic priesthood was changed because it couldn't bring perfection. Why would God restore a priesthood that the Bible says was set aside?
3. If I have faith in Jesus but wasn't baptized by a Mormon priesthood holder, are my sins forgiven?

Redemptive Analogies:

1. The Need for Valid Authority – We all want to be sure our sins are really forgiven. We don't need a human priest to assure us; we have the Word of God. [1 John 5:13 - 'These things have I written... that ye may KNOW that ye have eternal life.']}
2. Ministering of Angels – The Bible promises that angels minister to all heirs of salvation, not just those with priesthood keys. [Hebrews 1:14 - 'Are they not all ministering spirits, sent forth to minister for them who shall be heirs of salvation?']

Spiritual Weight:

1. Exclusivity/Invalidation [Severe] – The believer carries the burden of believing that all other Christian baptisms (including perhaps their own prior experience) are 'abominations' or at least invalid because they lacked this specific authority. This isolates them from the broader Body of Christ.
2. Dependency on Hierarchy [Moderate] – Spiritual standing is not based on direct access to Jesus, but is mediated through a chain of command. If the priesthood leader is wrong or the keys were lost, the believer's salvation is in jeopardy.

EPISTEMOLOGY

Knowledge Source: Direct angelic revelation and physical experience (tactile ordination).

Verification Method: Personal spiritual witness (testimony) of the event's historicity and the resulting authority.

Evangelical Contrast: Biblical epistemology relies on the illuminated Word of God as the standard for truth (Psalm 119:105). D&C 13 relies on the subjective claim of a private encounter with a departed spirit, which Galatians 1:8 warns against if it preaches a different gospel.

TEXTUAL CRITICISM

Dating: May 15, 1829 (Event); Published later (1876 in D&C, though accounts existed earlier).

Authorship: Joseph Smith (dictation of angelic message).

Textual Issues: Early accounts of the church's history did not explicitly mention the restoration of the Aaronic vs. Melchizedek priesthoods in this detail until several years after the event (retroactive theology).