

SECTION 131

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

OVERVIEW

Doctrine and Covenants Section 131, recorded in May 1843, represents a critical theological pivot in Mormon development, moving away from traditional Christian metaphysics and soteriology. In this text, Joseph Smith introduces a stratified concept of the 'Celestial Kingdom,' dividing it into three degrees. The central claim is that the highest degree—which allows for 'increase' (eternal progeny and godhood)—is accessible only to those who enter into the 'new and everlasting covenant of marriage.' This effectively makes a specific ritual ordinance a prerequisite for the fullness of salvation. Furthermore, Smith redefines the 'more sure word of prophecy' (a biblical phrase) as a specific revelation guaranteeing one's eternal sealing. Finally, the text presents a radical ontological shift by declaring that 'all spirit is matter,' rejecting the classical Christian view of God and spirit as immaterial. This establishes a materialistic cosmology where the spiritual and physical differ only in purity, not in essence.

KEY FIGURES

Joseph Smith

DOCTRINES ANALYZED

1. CELESTIAL MARRIAGE REQUIREMENT

Assertion: To obtain the highest degree of the Celestial Kingdom, a man must enter into the new and everlasting covenant of marriage; otherwise, he cannot have an 'increase.'

"And in order to obtain the highest, a man must enter into this order of the priesthood [meaning the new and everlasting covenant of marriage]; And if he does not, he cannot obtain it. (D&C 131:2-3)"

Evangelical Comparison: This doctrine creates a fundamental schism with Evangelical Christianity. Jesus explicitly taught in Matthew 22:30 that in the resurrection, people 'neither marry, nor are given in marriage, but are as the angels of God in heaven.' D&C 131 contradicts this by making marriage the defining characteristic of the highest state of eternal existence. In Evangelical theology, salvation is complete in Christ alone (Colossians 2:10), and one's standing before God is not mediated by a spouse or a marital ordinance. By conditioning the 'highest' salvation on marriage, this text introduces a 'plus-one' theology (Jesus + Marriage) that violates Sola Fide.

2. MATERIALISM OF SPIRIT

Assertion: Spirit is not immaterial but is a form of 'fine or pure' matter.

"There is no such thing as immaterial matter. All spirit is matter, but it is more fine or pure... (D&C 131:7)"

Evangelical Comparison: Classical Theism and Evangelical theology maintain a Creator-creature distinction. God is uncreated Spirit, not composed of matter (John 4:24, Luke 24:39). D&C 131 asserts a form of philosophical materialism, collapsing the ontological distinction between the Creator and creation. If spirit is matter, then God (who is Spirit) is a material being subject to space and time, rather than the transcendent Creator of space and time. This redefinition affects the understanding of God's omnipresence and immutability.

3. SALVATION AND KNOWLEDGE

Assertion: It is impossible for a man to be saved in ignorance.

"It is impossible for a man to be saved in ignorance. (D&C 131:6)"

Evangelical Comparison: This statement leans toward a Gnostic understanding of salvation, where specific knowledge (gnosis) is required for redemption. In contrast, the Evangelical baseline emphasizes that saving faith can be possessed by a child or someone with limited intellectual capacity, as it relies on the object of faith (Christ) rather than the depth of the subject's knowledge (Ephesians 2:8-9). While knowledge of the Gospel is necessary (Romans 10:14), the Mormon context implies a progressive acquisition of deep doctrinal and ritual knowledge is required for exaltation.

COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

Divergence Status: Yes

Theological Gap: The theological gap here is both metaphysical and soteriological. Metaphysically, D&C 131 embraces materialism ('all spirit is matter'), which denies the classical Christian understanding of God's transcendence and spirituality. Soteriologically, it bifurcates salvation into 'degrees,' making the highest level (exaltation) contingent upon a human work (marriage) and priesthood ordinances. This directly contradicts the Evangelical tenet that Christ's finished work is sufficient for the believer's full glorification. The text effectively creates a caste system in heaven based on marital status.

Shared Values:

Belief in an afterlife; Importance of marriage (though defined differently); Desire for assurance of salvation

Friction Points:

1. [Critical] Sola Fide – Adds the work/ritual of marriage as a requirement for the highest form of eternal life.
2. [Critical] Christology – Implies Christ's atonement is insufficient to bring a believer to the highest heaven without the addition of the marriage covenant.
3. [Major] Theology Proper – Denies the immaterial nature of God and spirit, asserting a materialistic universe.
4. [Major] Sola Gratia – Salvation (in its fullest sense) is contingent on knowledge ('impossible to be saved in ignorance'), leaning toward Gnosticism.

Semantic Warnings:

"Salvation"

In Text: Often used interchangeably with 'exaltation' or 'eternal life' in the highest degree of glory, requiring ordinances.

Evangelical: Deliverance from sin and its consequences, granted by grace through faith alone.

Example: *In D&C 131, a man can be 'saved' in a lower kingdom but denied the highest heaven because he is unmarried.*

"Increase"

In Text: Eternal progeny; the ability to beget spirit children in the afterlife (becoming a god).

Evangelical: N/A (Biblical 'increase' usually refers to crops, numbers of believers, or spiritual fruit, never post-mortal reproduction).

Example: *D&C 131:4 states without marriage, a man 'cannot have an increase.'*

"Spirit"

In Text: Fine, pure matter.

Evangelical: Immaterial, non-corporeal essence (John 4:24, Luke 24:39).

Example: *D&C 131:7 claims 'All spirit is matter.'*

SOTERIOLOGY

Salvation Defined: Graded salvation: General salvation for most, but 'Exaltation' (highest heaven with increase) for the married/sealed.

How Attained: Faith + Priesthood Ordinances (Sealing) + Knowledge.

Basis of Assurance: The 'more sure word of prophecy'—a specific revelation of one's sealed status.

Comparison to Sola Fide: Directly opposes Sola Fide by stating that faith in Christ is insufficient for the highest glory; one must also perform the work of marriage.

MANDATES & REQUIREMENTS

Explicit Commands:

1. Enter into the order of the priesthood known as the new and everlasting covenant of marriage (D&C 131:2)

Implicit Obligations:

1. Seek the 'more sure word of prophecy' (assurance of sealing)
2. Acquire spiritual knowledge to avoid ignorance
3. Purify the body to discern spiritual matter

Ritual Requirements:

1. Celestial Marriage (Sealing) ordinance

EVANGELISM TOOLKIT

Discovery Questions:

1. When you read that 'spirit is matter,' how does that shape your view of God's presence? Is He limited to one location like we are?
2. D&C 131 mentions that without marriage, there is an 'end' to one's kingdom. How does that make you feel about single people or those who never find a spouse?
3. Jesus said in Matthew 22 that we are like angels in heaven, neither marrying nor giving in marriage. How do you reconcile Jesus's words with the requirement in verse 2?

Redemptive Analogies:

1. The desire for 'Increase' and Legacy – Humans have a longing for eternal significance and legacy. The Gospel offers this not through biological reproduction in heaven, but through being adopted as joint-heirs with Christ. [Romans 8:16-17 (Joint-heirs with Christ)]
2. The 'More Sure Word' – This reflects a deep human need for assurance of salvation. The Bible offers this assurance freely through the Holy Spirit, not through a second ritual or special revelation. [1 John 5:13 ('These things have I written... that ye may know that ye have eternal life')]

Spiritual Weight:

1. Performance/Qualification [Severe] – The believer must find a spouse and remain worthy of a temple recommend to qualify for the 'highest' heaven. This places one's eternal destiny in the hands of another human being (the spouse).
2. Fear of Separation [Severe] – The text implies that without this ordinance, families are not together forever in the fullest sense. This creates immense anxiety about the spiritual performance of family members.
3. Intellectual Pressure [Moderate] – The statement 'impossible to be saved in ignorance' creates a burden to constantly acquire theological data to ensure salvation, rather than resting in child-like faith.

EPISTEMOLOGY

Knowledge Source: Direct revelation through the Prophet and the 'Holy Priesthood.'

Verification Method: Future empirical verification ('when our bodies are purified we shall see that it is all matter').

Evangelical Contrast: Biblical epistemology relies on the sufficiency of Scripture (2 Timothy 3:16) and the internal witness of the Spirit regarding the Word, not on new revelations that contradict previous biblical teaching.

TEXTUAL CRITICISM

Dating: May 16-17, 1843

Authorship: Joseph Smith (recorded by William Clayton)

Textual Issues: Originally recorded in William Clayton's journal. It was not canonized in the D&C until the 1876 edition under Brigham Young.