

SECTION 138

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

OVERVIEW

Doctrine and Covenants Section 138 is a seminal text in Latter-day Saint theology, canonizing a vision received by Church President Joseph F. Smith in 1918 shortly before his death. Triggered by his pondering of 1 Peter 3 and 4 regarding Christ's preaching to spirits in prison, the vision expands significantly on biblical eschatology. Smith reports seeing the hosts of the dead, both righteous and wicked. A key theological clarification is made: Christ did not personally preach to the wicked in spirit prison; rather, He organized the righteous spirits-prophets and faithful saints-to carry the gospel message to those in darkness. The text establishes the metaphysical necessity of 'vicarious baptism' and other temple ordinances for the dead, asserting that salvation for the deceased is contingent upon the works of the living and the acceptance of the gospel by the spirits. It connects biblical patriarchs with modern LDS leaders (like Joseph Smith and Brigham Young), positing that they were 'reserved' in the pre-existence for this specific labor. This text serves as the primary scriptural mandate for the massive genealogical and temple work undertaken by the LDS Church.

KEY FIGURES

Jesus Christ, Joseph F. Smith, Peter (Apostle), Adam, Eve, Abel, Noah, Abraham, Moses, Isaiah, Elijah, Joseph Smith (Jr.), Hyrum Smith, Brigham Young

DOCTRINES ANALYZED

1. POST-MORTAL PROBATION AND EVANGELISM

Assertion: The gospel is actively preached to those who died without it, offering a second chance for repentance and salvation.

"Thus was the gospel preached to those who had died in their sins, without a knowledge of the truth, or in transgression... (D&C 138:32)"

Evangelical Comparison: Evangelical theology, grounded in texts like Hebrews 9:27 ('it is appointed unto men once to die, but after this the judgment') and the Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus (Luke 16), generally holds that one's eternal destiny is fixed at death. D&C 138 radically departs from this by establishing a complex missiology within the 'spirit world.' It asserts that the dead who rejected prophets in life or died in sin can still be taught faith and repentance. This effectively removes the finality of death regarding soteriology, replacing the 'day of salvation' (2 Corinthians 6:2) with an extended probation period.

2. VICARIOUS ORDINANCES FOR THE DEAD

Assertion: Dead spirits require physical ordinances (baptism) performed by living proxies to be redeemed.

"The dead who repent will be redeemed, through obedience to the ordinances of the house of God... (D&C 138:58)"

Evangelical Comparison: While Evangelicals view baptism as an outward sign of inward grace, D&C 138 elevates it to a metaphysical necessity for salvation ('redemption'). The text claims that even if a spirit repents, they cannot be redeemed without 'vicarious baptism' (v33) and 'ordinances of the house of God' (v58). This creates a dependency on human agency and ritual work for the application of Christ's atonement, contradicting the sufficiency of Christ's finished work on the cross and the doctrine of justification by faith alone.

3. PRE-MORTAL FOREORDINATION

Assertion: LDS leaders were chosen and instructed in the spirit world before they were born.

"Even before they were born, they, with many others, received their first lessons in the world of spirits... (D&C 138:56)"

Evangelical Comparison: The text asserts that figures like Joseph Smith and Brigham Young were 'reserved' and received lessons before birth (v53-56). Evangelical theology affirms God's foreknowledge (Jeremiah 1:5) but rejects the Platonic or Gnostic notion of the pre-existence of the human soul. In biblical anthropology, man is a unity of body and spirit created in time; in D&C 138, man is an eternal intelligence who existed prior to mortality, shifting the focus to individual merit accumulated before birth.

COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

Divergence Status: Yes

Theological Gap: The theological gap is systemic. In Evangelicalism, the Cross is the singular, sufficient event for salvation, applied by the Holy Spirit through faith. In D&C 138, the Cross is the **basis** for salvation, but the **application** requires an elaborate machinery of post-mortem evangelism and physical rituals performed in temples. This creates a 'works-righteousness by proxy' system. Furthermore, the text alters Christology by limiting Jesus's descent into Hell; instead of a triumphant proclamation to the spirits (as often interpreted in 1 Peter), D&C 138 depicts Jesus as an administrator who delegates the preaching to subordinates because He 'went not in person among the wicked' (v29).

Shared Values:

Belief in life after death; Centrality of Christ's atonement for redemption; Reality of consequences for sin; Reverence for biblical prophets

Friction Points:

1. [Critical] Sola Scriptura – Adds a massive theological superstructure (spirit prison ministry) based on a private vision, not biblical exegesis.
2. [Critical] Sola Fide – Explicitly states redemption requires 'obedience to the ordinances' (v58), denying faith alone.
3. [Major] Eschatology (Hebrews 9:27) – Teaches probation after death, contradicting 'once to die, then the judgment.'
4. [Critical] Christology (Sufficiency) – Implies Christ's atonement is legally blocked from saving the dead until a human performs a ritual.
5. [Major] Theology Proper (Anthropology) – Teaches pre-existence of souls (v56), blurring the Creator/creature distinction.

Semantic Warnings:

"Redemption"

In Text: Resurrection and entry into God's kingdom, contingent on ordinances.

Evangelical: Deliverance from sin through the payment of a price (Christ's blood), received by faith.

Example: *In D&C 138:58, the dead are redeemed 'through obedience to the ordinances,' whereas in Ephesians 1:7, we have redemption 'through his blood.'*

"Gospel"

In Text: Faith, repentance, baptism, Holy Ghost, and temple ordinances.

Evangelical: The good news of Christ's death, burial, and resurrection for sinners (1 Cor 15:1-4).

Example: *D&C 138:33 includes 'vicarious baptism' as part of the gospel message taught to spirits.*

SOTERIOLOGY

Salvation Defined: Liberation from 'spirit prison' (bondage) and resurrection, leading to entry into the Father's kingdom.

How Attained: Faith in Christ + Repentance + Vicarious Baptism + Confirmation + Obedience to Gospel principles.

Basis of Assurance: Confidence is placed in the completion of temple work and the hope that the deceased ancestor accepts it.

Comparison to Sola Fide: D&C 138:33 lists 'vicarious baptism' alongside faith and repentance as requirements. Romans 3:28 states a man is justified by faith apart from deeds of the law.

MANDATES & REQUIREMENTS

Explicit Commands:

1. Preach the gospel to those in darkness (for spirits)
2. Repent (for the dead)

Implicit Obligations:

1. Living members must build temples
2. Living members must perform vicarious ordinances (baptism, etc.) for the dead
3. Living members must engage in genealogical research to identify ancestors

Ritual Requirements:

1. Vicarious baptism
2. Laying on of hands for the Holy Ghost (proxy)
3. Ordinances of the house of God (Temple endowments/sealings)

EVANGELISM TOOLKIT

Discovery Questions:

1. In verse 58, it says the dead are redeemed 'through obedience to the ordinances.' How does this fit with the thief on the cross who was saved without baptism?
2. The text says Christ organized messengers because He couldn't go to the wicked personally (v29, 37). Does this limit Jesus's power or presence in the afterlife compared to the biblical view of Him holding the keys of Death and Hades (Rev 1:18)?
3. If the Book of Mormon says 'that same spirit which doth possess your bodies at the time that ye go out of this life... will have power to possess your body in that eternal world' (Alma 34:34), how does D&C 138 allow for such a radical change of heart after death?

Redemptive Analogies:

1. Concern for the Unreached – This reflects God's heart that 'none should perish' (2 Peter 3:9). However, the Gospel answer is the urgency of missions ***now*** and confidence in God's just character (Gen 18:25), rather than post-mortem rituals. [Romans 10:14-15 (How shall they hear without a preacher? - emphasizing the urgency of the living)]
2. Release from Bondage – Christ indeed came to set captives free. The Gospel offers this freedom ***immediately*** upon faith, not pending a future ritual. [Hebrews 2:14-15 (Christ destroyed him who had the power of death to deliver those who were subject to bondage)]

Spiritual Weight:

1. Saviour Complex / Works-Righteousness [Severe] – The believer is burdened with the role of 'co-redeemer.' The salvation of billions of ancestors depends on the believer's faithfulness to attend the temple and perform rituals. If they fail, their ancestors remain in 'prison.'
2. Uncertainty [Moderate] – Since salvation depends on the dead spirit ***accepting*** the work, the living believer can never know if their work was actually effective, leading to a lack of closure.
3. Procrastination of Repentance [Moderate] – Implicitly, the doctrine of a 'second chance' can lead to a false sense of security for the living, thinking they or their loved ones can fix spiritual issues after death.

EPISTEMOLOGY

Knowledge Source: Subjective spiritual experience ('eyes of my understanding were opened') triggered by meditation on scripture.

Verification Method: Internal spiritual confirmation (testimony) and acceptance of the prophetic office of the narrator.

Evangelical Contrast: Biblical epistemology relies on the objective, finished revelation of Scripture (Jude 3). D&C 138 relies on ongoing, open-ended revelation where a modern leader can establish new metaphysical realities (like the organization of spirit prison) based on private vision.

TEXTUAL CRITICISM

Dating: Received Oct 3, 1918; Canonized in 1976 (originally Pearl of Great Price, moved to D&C in 1979).

Authorship: Joseph F. Smith (6th President of the LDS Church).

Textual Issues: The text was accepted as scripture decades after it was written. It reflects the specific concerns of the WWI/Spanish Flu era (mass death).