

SECTION 21

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

OVERVIEW

Doctrine and Covenants Section 21 is the constitutive document for the ecclesiastical authority structure of the Latter-day Saint movement. Delivered on April 6, 1830, the day the Church was legally organized, it designates Joseph Smith not merely as a presiding officer, but as a 'seer, a translator, a prophet, an apostle of Jesus Christ, and an elder' (v. 1). The text fundamentally alters the epistemological landscape for the adherent by commanding them to give heed to all of Smith's words and commandments 'as if from mine [God's] own mouth' (v. 5). This revelation serves as the theological linchpin for the LDS doctrine of 'living oracles,' effectively placing the current prophet's utterances on par with, or functionally above, ancient scripture. It promises spiritual protection against the 'gates of hell' (v. 6) strictly conditional upon this obedience to the prophet, thereby inserting a human mediator into the believer's spiritual security. The text also establishes a hierarchy, with Oliver Cowdery commanded to ordain Joseph Smith, yet acknowledging Joseph as the 'first' elder and preacher.

KEY FIGURES

Joseph Smith, Oliver Cowdery, God the Father, Jesus Christ

DOCTRINES ANALYZED

1. PROPHETIC VICE-REGENCY

Assertion: The words of the Church President are to be received by the membership as if they were spoken directly by God.

"For his word ye shall receive, as if from mine own mouth, in all patience and faith. (D&C 21:5)"

Evangelical Comparison: In Evangelical theology, the canon of Scripture is closed (Jude 1:3), and no human leader speaks with the infallibility or authority of God (Sola Scriptura). D&C 21:5 elevates Joseph Smith's pronouncements to the level of divine speech ('as if from mine own mouth'). This creates a dynamic where the 'living prophet' can supersede biblical teaching, a concept alien to the evangelical understanding of the sufficiency of Scripture (2 Timothy 3:16-17). It shifts the locus of authority from the fixed text of the Bible to the fluid utterances of a man.

2. MEDIATED SPIRITUAL SECURITY

Assertion: Protection from spiritual darkness and the 'gates of hell' is contingent upon obedience to the prophet.

"For by doing these things [heeding the prophet] the gates of hell shall not prevail against you... (D&C 21:6)"

Evangelical Comparison: The text asserts that the 'gates of hell' are held back by the believer's adherence to the prophet's commandments. In contrast, Evangelical Christianity teaches that Christ's finished work and the indwelling Holy Spirit provide security against spiritual darkness (Romans 8:38-39; 1 John 4:4). By conditioning spiritual safety on following a human leader, D&C 21 introduces a functional mediator other than Christ, violating the principle of Sola Christus (1 Timothy 2:5).

COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

Divergence Status: Yes

Theological Gap: The fundamental gap lies in the doctrine of authority. D&C 21:5 creates a 'Prophetic Filter' through which God's will is interpreted and administered. For the Mormon, the path to God is paved with obedience to the Prophet's current teachings. For the Evangelical, the path is direct through the High Priesthood of Jesus (Hebrews 4:14-16), guided by the fixed standard of the Bible. The text's requirement to receive a man's words 'as if from [God's] own mouth' is a categorical violation of the Creator-creature distinction and the uniqueness of the God-breathed Scriptures.

Shared Values:

Belief in Jesus Christ; Jesus crucified for the sins of the world (v. 9); Necessity of remission of sins; Desire for holiness

Friction Points:

1. [Critical] Sola Scriptura – The text elevates Joseph Smith's oral and written commandments to the status of divine speech, effectively opening the canon.
2. [Major] Universal Priesthood – Establishes a rigid hierarchy where one man (Joseph) is the 'seer' and 'translator' whom others must obey, denying the equal standing of believers before God.
3. [Critical] Sola Christus – Conditions spiritual protection ('gates of hell shall not prevail') on obedience to a man, obscuring the sufficiency of Christ's finished work.

Semantic Warnings:

"Apostle"

In Text: An administrative office in the church hierarchy conferred by ordination (v. 1, 10).

Evangelical: Specifically, one who had seen the risen Lord and was directly commissioned by Him (Acts 1:21-22); generally, a 'sent one' or missionary.

Example: *In D&C 21, Oliver Cowdery ordains Joseph an apostle; in the Bible, apostleship is a direct calling from Christ, not an office conferred by peer ordination.*

"Church of Christ"

In Text: The specific institutional organization established on April 6, 1830.

Evangelical: The universal, invisible body of all true believers across time and space (Ephesians 1:22-23).

Example: *D&C 21 implies the 'Church' did not exist immediately prior to this organization, whereas Evangelicals view the Church as existing continuously since Pentecost.*

SOTERIOLOGY

Salvation Defined: Implied as 'remission of sins' (v. 8, 9) and protection from the powers of darkness (v. 6).

How Attained: Through faith in Christ (v. 9) BUT mediated through believing the prophet's words and laboring in the vineyard (v. 9).

Basis of Assurance: Assurance is derived from 'doing these things' (obeying the prophet) and seeing the 'manifestations of blessings' (v. 8).

Comparison to Sola Fide: D&C 21:9 links belief in the prophet's words to the blessing of the faithful. While it mentions Jesus' sacrifice, the mechanism of receiving that benefit is tied to the acceptance of the restoration via Joseph Smith, contrasting with Romans 3:28 (justification by faith apart from works/law).

MANDATES & REQUIREMENTS

Explicit Commands:

1. Keep a record of the proceedings (v. 1)
2. Give heed unto all [Joseph's] words and commandments (v. 4)
3. Receive his word as if from God's own mouth (v. 5)
4. Oliver Cowdery to ordain Joseph Smith (v. 10)

Implicit Obligations:

1. Accept Joseph Smith's titles (seer, translator, prophet) as valid
2. Submit to ecclesiastical hierarchy
3. Exercise 'patience and faith' when the prophet's words are difficult to accept

Ritual Requirements:

1. Ordination (laying on of hands)
2. Record keeping (administrative ritual)

EVANGELISM TOOLKIT

Discovery Questions:

1. In verse 5, it says to receive the prophet's words 'as if from [God's] own mouth.' How do you handle a situation where a prophet's words might seem to conflict with the Bible?
2. Verse 6 promises that the gates of hell won't prevail if you heed the prophet. Does this mean a believer's spiritual safety is dependent on their obedience to a leader?
3. How does the command to listen to Joseph Smith 'in all patience and faith' affect how you read the New Testament?

Redemptive Analogies:

1. The Longing for a Sure Word – We all want to hear God speak clearly. God *has* spoken clearly and finally through His Son, Jesus Christ. [Hebrews 1:1-2 ('God... hath in these last days spoken unto us by his Son')]
2. Protection from Darkness – The fear of spiritual darkness is real. Jesus defeated the powers of darkness on the cross, disarming them publicly. [Colossians 2:15 ('And having spoiled principalities and powers, he made a shew of them openly')]

Spiritual Weight:

1. Cognitive Dissonance / Blind Obedience [Severe] – The command to receive words 'in all patience and faith' (v. 5) creates a burden to suppress doubts or critical thinking when the leader's words contradict conscience, reason, or previous scripture. The believer must constantly align their reality with the leader's statements to maintain spiritual safety.
2. Fear of Spiritual Loss [Moderate] – By linking protection from the 'gates of hell' to obedience to the prophet (v. 6), the text instills a fear that stepping away from the hierarchy exposes one to immediate demonic destruction.

EPISTEMOLOGY

Knowledge Source: Continuing Revelation through a designated human channel (Joseph Smith).

Verification Method: The text implies verification through the results of obedience: 'For by doing these things... the Lord God will disperse the powers of darkness' (v. 6).

Evangelical Contrast: Biblical epistemology tests prophets against established Scripture (Acts 17:11, Deuteronomy 13:1-5). D&C 21 demands acceptance of the prophet's word 'in all patience and faith,' suggesting that the prophet's word validates itself rather than being subject to external scriptural testing.

TEXTUAL CRITICISM

Dating: April 6, 1830

Authorship: Joseph Smith (dictated as revelation)

Textual Issues: The text was recorded in the earliest revelation books. Some edits were made in later publications to clarify titles and hierarchy as the church structure evolved (e.g., adding 'apostle' retrospectively in some historical contexts, though present here).