

SECTION 23

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

OVERVIEW

Doctrine and Covenants Section 23 consists of five distinct, short revelations dictated by Joseph Smith in April 1830, shortly after the formal organization of the Church of Christ (later The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints). The recipients are Oliver Cowdery, Hyrum Smith, Samuel H. Smith, Joseph Smith Sr., and Joseph Knight Sr. The text functions as a divine administrative directive, assigning specific roles to these individuals. Four of the five men are told they are 'under no condemnation' and are given duties to exhort and strengthen the church. However, Joseph Knight Sr., a close friend of the Smith family who had not yet been baptized, receives a distinct command to 'take up [his] cross,' pray vocally, and 'unite with the true church.' The text establishes Joseph Smith's role as the mediator of God's specific will for individuals and delineates the early hierarchy of duties (preaching vs. exhortation) within the nascent movement.

KEY FIGURES

Joseph Smith (The Revelator), Oliver Cowdery, Hyrum Smith, Samuel H. Smith, Joseph Smith Sr., Joseph Knight Sr.

DOCTRINES ANALYZED

1. ECCLESIASTICAL EXCLUSIVITY

Assertion: The organization Joseph Smith established is the 'true church' which one must 'unite with' to fulfill their duty.

"it is your duty to unite with the true church (D&C 23:7)"

Evangelical Comparison: In this text, the command to 'unite with the true church' is given to Joseph Knight Sr. as a prerequisite for his spiritual fulfillment. In Evangelical theology, the 'true church' (Ecclesia) is comprised of all regenerate believers across all denominations who trust in Christ alone (Ephesians 4:4-6). Membership in the body of Christ is spiritual and occurs at the moment of salvation (1 Corinthians 12:13), whereas this text implies that joining the specific institutional organization established by Joseph Smith constitutes uniting with the true church.

2. PROPHETIC MEDIATION OF STANDING

Assertion: The prophet has the authority to declare the spiritual standing ('under no condemnation') of individuals.

"Behold, I speak unto you... thou art under no condemnation (D&C 23:1, 3, 4, 5)"

Evangelical Comparison: Four of the five men are explicitly told they are 'under no condemnation.' This phrase echoes Romans 8:1, but in the biblical context, this status is a permanent reality for all who are 'in Christ Jesus' via faith. In D&C 23, it appears as a status report delivered by the prophet based on their current obedience and loyalty to the restoration movement. This establishes a dynamic where spiritual assurance is mediated through the revelation of the church leader rather than the direct witness of the Spirit through the Word.

COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

Divergence Status: Yes

Theological Gap: The fundamental theological gap lies in the mediation of grace and duty. In Evangelicalism, the believer is a priest (1 Peter 2:9) with direct access to God, guided by Scripture. In D&C 23, the believer's duty and spiritual status are dictated through Joseph Smith. Furthermore, the command to Joseph Knight to 'unite with the true church' to receive the 'reward of the laborer' suggests that salvation and reward are contingent upon joining this specific restorationist movement, violating the evangelical understanding of the Universal Church and Sola Fide.

Shared Values:

Warning against pride; Importance of prayer (private and family); Duty to strengthen the church; Responsibility to family

Friction Points:

1. [Major] Universal Priesthood / Ecclesiology – Claims the 'true church' is a specific institution one must join for reward, denying the validity of other Christian expressions.
2. [Critical] Sola Scriptura – Joseph Smith speaks in the first person as God, adding new binding scripture.

Semantic Warnings:

"Under no condemnation"

In Text: A state of approval from the Lord concerning one's current behavior and loyalty to the restoration.

Evangelical: A permanent legal standing of justification for those in Christ Jesus (Romans 8:1).

Example: *In D&C 23, Joseph Knight is NOT told he is under no condemnation, implying he lacks this status until he obeys the command to join the church.*

"True Church"

In Text: The specific organization established by Joseph Smith in 1830.

Evangelical: The spiritual body of all true believers in Christ (Ephesians 1:22-23).

Example: *Joseph Knight was a believer in the Bible, yet was told he still needed to unite with the 'true church.'*

SOTERIOLOGY

Salvation Defined: Implied as being 'under no condemnation' and receiving the 'reward of the laborer.'

How Attained: Requires uniting with the 'true church' (baptism) and fulfilling specific callings.

Basis of Assurance: Prophetic declaration ('I speak unto you... thou art under no condemnation').

Comparison to Sola Fide: Contradicts Sola Fide by implying that Joseph Knight's faith was insufficient without the work of uniting with the specific organization (Galatians 2:16).

MANDATES & REQUIREMENTS

Explicit Commands:

1. Beware of pride (Oliver Cowdery)
2. Make known thy calling (Oliver Cowdery)
3. Strengthen the church continually (Hyrum, Samuel, Joseph Sr.)
4. Pray vocally before the world, in secret, and in family (Joseph Knight Sr.)
5. Unite with the true church (Joseph Knight Sr.)

Implicit Obligations:

1. Accept Joseph Smith as the voice of God
2. Submit to specific role assignments (preaching vs. exhortation)

Ritual Requirements:

1. Baptism (implied in 'unite with the true church')

EVANGELISM TOOLKIT

Discovery Questions:

1. In this section, four men are told they are 'under no condemnation,' but Joseph Knight is not. Why do you think that distinction was made?
2. How does someone know they are 'under no condemnation' today? Is it a feeling, a declaration from a leader, or something else?

3. Verse 7 mentions the 'reward of the laborer' is tied to uniting with the church. How does this relate to the biblical idea that salvation is a gift, not a wage (Romans 6:23)?

Redemptive Analogies:

1. The desire for assurance ('Under no condemnation') – The text shows a deep human need to know one is right with God. The Gospel offers this assurance permanently through Christ's work, not our own. [Romans 8:1, 1 John 5:13]

Spiritual Weight:

1. Institutional Exclusivity [Severe] – The burden of believing that salvation and God's full approval are found only within the specific structure of the LDS church, creating fear of leaving or questioning the institution.
2. Performance Anxiety [Moderate] – The pressure to constantly 'strengthen the church' and 'make known thy calling' to maintain the status of being under no condemnation.

PISTEMOLOGY

Knowledge Source: Prophetic Revelation

Verification Method: Obedience to the commands given and acceptance of the prophet's voice.

Evangelical Contrast: Evangelical epistemology relies on the objective standard of the Bible (2 Timothy 3:16) illuminated by the Holy Spirit, rather than subjective revelations given to a third party.

TEXTUAL CRITICISM

Dating: April 1830

Authorship: Joseph Smith (Dictated)

Textual Issues: Early manuscript evidence suggests Joseph Knight was specifically admonished to pray because he had previously refused to pray vocally, feeling he could not. The published version softens the context but keeps the command.