

SECTION 50

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

OVERVIEW

Given in May 1831, Doctrine and Covenants Section 50 addresses a critical moment in early Mormon history when converts in Kirtland, Ohio, were experiencing ecstatic spiritual manifestations—including shouting, falling, and contortions—which they attributed to the Holy Spirit. Joseph Smith sought divine guidance to discern between authentic spiritual gifts and 'false spirits.' The text presents a dialogue where the Lord instructs the elders on the 'pattern' of truth: that which is of God is light and edifies (builds up/enlightens), while that which does not edify is darkness. It establishes a subjective epistemology where mutual understanding and spiritual satisfaction between preacher and hearer confirm truth. Furthermore, the text links spiritual power and the ability to command spirits directly to the personal holiness of the priesthood holder, asserting that one must be 'purified and cleansed from all sin' to possess all things. It concludes with specific instructions for church leaders and a promise of an eventual face-to-face vision of Christ for the faithful.

KEY FIGURES

Jesus Christ (The Speaker), Joseph Smith (The Prophet), Satan (The Deceiver), Joseph Wakefield, Parley P. Pratt, John Corrill, Edward Partridge

DOCTRINES ANALYZED

1. EPISTEMOLOGY OF EDIFICATION

Assertion: Truth is identified by a feeling of edification and mutual rejoicing between speaker and hearer; if it does not edify, it is not of God.

"And that which doth not edify is not of God, and is darkness. (D&C 50:23)"

Evangelical Comparison: In Evangelical theology, the test of a spirit or teaching is its doctrinal fidelity to the revealed Word of God and the confession of Jesus Christ come in the flesh (1 John 4:1-3; Acts 17:11). D&C 50 shifts this test from objective doctrinal content to subjective experiential effect. The text argues that if a message 'edifies' (enlightens or feels positive) and causes mutual rejoicing, it is of God. This creates a closed loop where positive emotional response validates truth claims, potentially bypassing scriptural scrutiny.

2. AUTHORITY VIA PURIFICATION

Assertion: Spiritual authority to command spirits and receive answers is contingent upon the priesthood holder being cleansed from all sin.

"But no man is possessor of all things except he be purified and cleansed from all sin. (D&C 50:28)"

Evangelical Comparison: The text asserts that a man cannot possess all things or effectively wield power over spirits unless he is 'purified and cleansed from all sin.' This suggests a functional perfectionism where spiritual power is a result of personal righteousness. In contrast, Evangelical Christianity teaches that spiritual authority is delegated through the name of Jesus and His righteousness (Acts 3:12, 16), not the intrinsic holiness of the messenger. The requirement for total purification places a heavy burden of works-righteousness on the adherent.

3. THE DOCTRINE OF ELECTION/SECURITY

Assertion: Those given to Christ by the Father will not be lost, and the faithful are 'little children' who belong to Him.

"Fear not, little children, for you are mine... and none of them that my Father hath given me shall be lost. (D&C 50:41-42)"

Evangelical Comparison: The text utilizes strong Johannine language regarding the security of the believer ('none... shall be lost'). While this aligns verbally with Evangelical views on eternal security, the context of D&C 50 conditions this security on enduring in faithfulness (v5) and obedience to the specific revelations given through Joseph Smith. The 'security' is for those who remain within the specific covenant structure of the Restoration.

COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

Divergence Status: Yes

Theological Gap: The fundamental gap lies in the mechanism of discernment and the basis of authority. Evangelicalism relies on Sola Scriptura to test spirits; D&C 50 relies on the 'Spirit of truth' defined by the feeling of edification. Furthermore, the text promotes a form of perfectionism (v28-29) where the believer's power over darkness is contingent on their own purification from 'all sin,' whereas the Bible teaches that authority over demons is based on the name of Jesus and His victory, irrespective of the believer's flawed state (though faith is required). Finally, forgiveness is mediated through the acceptance of the prophet's message (v36), subtly shifting the locus of salvation.

Shared Values:

Existence of spiritual warfare/demons; Necessity of the Holy Spirit in preaching; Jesus as the Good Shepherd; Warning against hypocrisy

Friction Points:

1. [Critical] Sola Scriptura – Establishes subjective experience (edification) and new revelation as the standard for truth.
2. [Major] Sola Fide – Conditions spiritual standing and power on personal purification and works rather than faith alone.
3. [Minor] Universal Priesthood – Restricts authority to ordained elders and specific appointees (v13, v26) rather than all believers.

Semantic Warnings:

"Edify"

In Text: To produce a feeling of spiritual light, understanding, and mutual rejoicing; the litmus test for truth.

Evangelical: To build up the church in faith and holiness; a result of truth, but not the primary test of whether a spirit is true (falsehood can feel good).

Example: *A comforting lie might 'edify' (feel good) to a Mormon, but an Evangelical would reject it if it contradicts Scripture.*

"Purified"

In Text: A state of being cleansed from all sin, required for full priesthood power.

Evangelical: Positional sanctification through Christ's blood (Hebrews 10:10) and progressive growth in holiness.

Example: *In D&C 50, purification is a prerequisite for power; in the Bible, God often uses weak, sinful vessels (like Peter or David) to demonstrate His power.*

SOTERIOLOGY

Salvation Defined: Inheriting eternal life (v5) and eventual exaltation (implied by 'possessor of all things').

How Attained: Through faithfulness, enduring (v5), being purified from all sin (v28), and heeding the prophet's words (v36).

Basis of Assurance: Assurance is derived from the feeling of edification and the pronouncement of forgiveness by the Lord's servant.

Comparison to Sola Fide: D&C 50:36 links forgiveness to 'hearing these words of mine from the mouth of my servant,' adding a mediator (the prophet) and an action (hearing/obeying) to the receipt of grace, contrasting with Romans 3:28.

MANDATES & REQUIREMENTS

Explicit Commands:

1. Preach the gospel by the Spirit (v14)
2. Reason together to understand (v10)
3. Ask the Father in the name of Jesus regarding spirits (v31)
4. Proclaim against false spirits with a loud voice (v32)

5. Do not use railing accusation or boasting (v33)

6. Grow in grace and knowledge (v40)

7. Watch and be ready (v46)

Implicit Obligations:

1. Achieve a state of sinlessness to be a 'possessor of all things' (v28)

2. Accept Joseph Smith's voice as the channel for forgiveness (v36)

3. Discern truth through internal feelings of edification

Ritual Requirements:

1. Ordination to preach (v13)

2. Casting out spirits according to the specified pattern (v31-33)

EVANGELISM TOOLKIT

Discovery Questions:

1. In verse 23, it says 'that which doth not edify is not of God.' Have you ever encountered a hard truth from the Bible that didn't feel good (edify) at first, but was still true?

2. Verse 28 says no man possesses all things unless he is 'purified and cleansed from all sin.' How do you handle the pressure of needing to be sinless to have full spiritual power?

3. When verse 36 says 'your sins are forgiven you' because you are 'hearing these words,' how does that relate to Jesus's death on the cross as the source of forgiveness?

Redemptive Analogies:

1. The Chaos of False Spirits – Just as the early saints wanted to know what was real amidst chaos, we all long for truth that isn't counterfeit. Jesus is the Truth, not just a feeling. [John 14:6]

2. The Desire for Light – The text taps into a longing for progress and clarity. The Gospel promises that in Christ, we are transferred from the domain of darkness to the kingdom of His beloved Son. [Colossians 1:13]

Spiritual Weight:

1. Perfectionism/Performance [Severe] – The text links spiritual efficacy (power over spirits, answered prayer) to being 'purified and cleansed from all sin.' This suggests that if a believer struggles with sin or has unanswered prayers, they are spiritually powerless and illegitimate.

2. Subjective Uncertainty [Moderate] – By making 'edification' the test of truth, the believer is constantly analyzing their own emotional state to determine God's will, leading to anxiety when feelings are flat or negative.

EPISTEMOLOGY

Knowledge Source: Subjective experience (Edification/Light) and Prophetic Revelation.

Verification Method: Adherents verify truth by whether the message causes them to feel edified, enlightened, and spiritually unified with the speaker (v22-23).

Evangelical Contrast: Biblical epistemology tests truth by the objective standard of written Scripture (Acts 17:11, 2 Timothy 3:16). D&C 50:23 ('that which doth not edify is not of God') introduces a subjective filter where difficult or convicting truths might be rejected if they do not produce a positive feeling of 'edification' in the hearer.

TEXTUAL CRITICISM

Dating: May 9, 1831

Authorship: Joseph Smith (dictated)

Textual Issues: The text was edited in the 1835 edition of the Doctrine and Covenants to clarify priesthood offices and terminology that were not fully developed in 1831.