

SECTION 51

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

OVERVIEW

Doctrine and Covenants Section 51, received in May 1831, addresses the practical and theological implementation of the Law of Consecration. As Saints from Colesville, New York, arrived in Thompson, Ohio, Joseph Smith dictated this revelation to instruct Bishop Edward Partridge on how to settle them. The text outlines a system where property is consecrated to the bishop, who then deeds back a portion to the individual based on 'family,' 'circumstances,' and 'wants and needs' (v. 3). This stewardship becomes private property ('deeded unto him'), yet the surplus belongs to the bishop's storehouse to assist the poor. The text emphasizes economic equality ('receive alike') and unity ('be one'). Crucially, it ties spiritual salvation to temporal stewardship, declaring that the faithful steward will 'inherit eternal life' (v. 19). It also provides counsel on living with uncertainty, instructing the Saints to live 'as for years' even though their time in Ohio might be short.

KEY FIGURES

Jesus Christ, Edward Partridge, Joseph Smith

DOCTRINES ANALYZED

1. LAW OF CONSECRATION (STEWARDSHIP)

Assertion: Believers must deed property to the Bishop, receiving back a portion based on need, which they manage as stewards.

"appoint unto this people their portions, every man equal according to his family, according to his circumstances and his wants and needs. (D&C 51:3)"

Evangelical Comparison: In Evangelical theology, stewardship implies that God owns all things, but the believer retains autonomy in management, accountable to God directly. Giving is voluntary and cheerful (2 Corinthians 9:7). D&C 51 institutionalizes this by requiring the transfer of legal title to the ecclesiastical leader (Bishop), who then determines what the individual needs. This shifts the locus of control from the individual conscience to the priesthood hierarchy, effectively merging spiritual authority with economic control.

2. SOTERIOLOGICAL STEWARDSHIP

Assertion: Eternal life is contingent upon being a 'faithful, a just, and a wise steward' in temporal matters.

"whoso is found a faithful, a just, and a wise steward shall enter into the joy of his Lord, and shall inherit eternal life. (D&C 51:19)"

Evangelical Comparison: Evangelicalism teaches that works are the fruit of salvation, not the root. Ephesians 2:8-9 explicitly states salvation is not of works. D&C 51:19 creates a 'if/then' proposition where the inheritance of eternal life is the result of being found a 'wise steward.' This introduces a performance-based metric for final salvation, suggesting that financial/temporal mismanagement could jeopardize one's eternal standing.

COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

Divergence Status: Yes

Theological Gap: While Evangelicals affirm stewardship, D&C 51 elevates it to a soteriological requirement. The text constructs a theocratic socialism where the Bishop determines 'wants and needs,' a role Evangelicals reserve for the individual conscience under the Holy Spirit. Furthermore, the threat of being 'cut off' (v. 2) and losing claim on the storehouse (v. 5) introduces a system of conditional security based on obedience to ecclesiastical authority, contrasting sharply with the Evangelical doctrine of the perseverance of the saints and security in Christ alone.

Shared Values:

Care for the poor; Honesty in business; Stewardship of resources; Unity in the church

Friction Points:

1. [Critical] Sola Fide – Eternal life is presented as a reward for faithful stewardship and economic wisdom.
2. [Major] Universal Priesthood – The Bishop acts as a mediator of God's material provision and a judge of the member's 'needs,' usurping the individual's direct accountability to God.

Semantic Warnings:

"Bishop"

In Text: A priesthood office with legal and economic authority to distribute property and judge worthiness.

Evangelical: An overseer/elder charged with spiritual teaching and shepherding (1 Timothy 3, Titus 1), not a financial redistributor.

Example: *In D&C 51, the Bishop holds the title to the storehouse; in the New Testament, apostles appointed deacons to handle food distribution so they could focus on the Word (Acts 6).*

"Eternal Life"

In Text: The highest degree of glory (Exaltation), contingent here on stewardship.

Evangelical: The gift of God through Jesus Christ, possessed by all believers upon faith (Romans 6:23).

Example: *D&C 51:19 says a wise steward 'shall inherit eternal life,' implying it is a future reward for work done.*

SOTERIOLOGY

Salvation Defined: Entering into the 'joy of the Lord' and inheriting 'eternal life' (v. 19).

How Attained: Through faith in Christ coupled with faithful, just, and wise stewardship (works).

Basis of Assurance: Assurance is derived from being 'found' faithful by the Lord and the church.

Comparison to Sola Fide: The text explicitly links the inheritance of eternal life to the quality of one's stewardship ('whoso is found a faithful... steward'), violating the principle that inheritance is by sonship, not service (Galatians 4:7).

MANDATES & REQUIREMENTS

Explicit Commands:

1. Edward Partridge must organize the people according to God's laws (v. 1-2)
2. Appoint portions based on family, circumstances, and needs (v. 3)
3. Give written deeds to secure property rights (v. 4)
4. Establish a bishop's storehouse for surplus (v. 13)
5. Deal honestly and be alike (v. 9)

Implicit Obligations:

1. Submission to the Bishop's assessment of one's personal 'needs'
2. Willingness to surrender surplus property to the church
3. Living with a mindset of permanence ('act... as for years') even in temporary circumstances

Ritual Requirements:

1. Consecration of property (legal/spiritual transfer)

EVANGELISM TOOLKIT

Discovery Questions:

1. In verse 19, it says the 'faithful, just, and wise steward' will inherit eternal life. How does a person know when they have been 'wise enough' to secure that inheritance?
2. Who determines your 'wants and needs' according to verse 3? How does that compare to your understanding of personal accountability before God?
3. If eternal life is a gift (Romans 6:23), why does this passage present it as a result of stewardship?

Redemptive Analogies:

1. Living for the Future in the Present – Just as the Saints were told to live faithfully even in a temporary home, Christians are called to live as citizens of heaven while sojourning on earth. [Jeremiah 29:5-7 (Build houses and dwell in them... for in the peace thereof shall ye have peace) / 1 Peter 2:11]
2. The Desire for Equity – The text expresses a longing for the removal of class barriers, which is ultimately fulfilled not by economic redistribution, but by our shared status as 'one in Christ Jesus.' [Galatians 3:28]

Spiritual Weight:

1. Performance Anxiety [Severe] – The believer must constantly wonder if their financial management and stewardship are 'wise' enough to merit eternal life. The link between money management and salvation creates a high-stakes pressure on daily economic decisions.
2. Loss of Autonomy [Moderate] – Submitting one's assessment of 'needs' to a Bishop creates a dynamic of dependency and potential shame. The believer is not trusted to judge their own needs but must rely on an external authority.

EPISTEMOLOGY

Knowledge Source: Prophetic Revelation (Joseph Smith) mediated through Priesthood Administration (Edward Partridge).

Verification Method: Obedience to the revelation is expected; the text implies verification comes through the 'good' result of acting in faith (v. 17) and the eventual reward of eternal life (v. 19).

Evangelical Contrast: Biblical epistemology relies on the illuminated Word of God (Psalm 119:105) and the internal witness of the Spirit regarding the finished work of Christ, not on new legislative revelations regarding property management.

TEXTUAL CRITICISM

Dating: May 20, 1831

Authorship: Joseph Smith (dictated)

Textual Issues: Early manuscripts show evolution in the understanding of property rights (from communal to deeded stewardship).