

SECTION 53

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

OVERVIEW

Doctrine and Covenants Section 53, received in June 1831, addresses Algernon Sidney Gilbert's request to know his standing and duty within the nascent Church of Christ (Latter-day Saints). Speaking in the voice of Jesus Christ, Joseph Smith delivers a revelation that validates Gilbert's prayers and issues specific ecclesiastical assignments. Gilbert is commanded to forsake the world, accept ordination as an elder, and serve as an 'agent' (a financial and logistical role) to the bishop. The text integrates spiritual duties (preaching repentance) with temporal administration (church agency). Theologically, it emphasizes a probationary view of the believer's life: further knowledge ('the residue') is withheld pending the quality of Gilbert's 'labor,' and salvation is explicitly defined as a future state contingent upon 'enduring to the end.' This section illustrates the early Mormon development of a hierarchical priesthood structure and a soteriology that intertwines faith with active, lifelong institutional service.

KEY FIGURES

Jesus Christ (The Speaker), Sidney Gilbert (Recipient), Joseph Smith (Prophet/Mediator), Sidney Rigdon (Travel Companion), The Bishop (Edward Partridge, implied authority)

DOCTRINES ANALYZED

1. CONDITIONAL REVELATION AND REWARD

Assertion: Future spiritual knowledge and ordinances are granted only in proportion to the adherent's current work and labor.

"the residue shall be made known in a time to come, according to your labor in my vineyard. (D&C 53:6)"

Evangelical Comparison: In this text, spiritual progression is transactional; the 'residue' (further light or ordinances) is unlocked via human labor. Evangelical theology teaches that while maturity grows, the believer possesses every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ immediately upon justification (Ephesians 1:3) and that God's revelation in Scripture is sufficient (2 Timothy 3:16-17), rather than piecemealed based on individual merit.

2. RITUAL MEDIATION OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

Assertion: The Holy Spirit is received specifically through the ordinance of laying on of hands by priesthood authority.

"reception of the Holy Spirit by the laying on of hands (D&C 53:3)"

Evangelical Comparison: The text institutionalizes the Holy Spirit's ministry, binding it to a priesthood ordinance ('laying on of hands'). In contrast, the New Testament describes the Spirit falling upon believers through the hearing of faith (Galatians 3:2) and as the immediate seal of regeneration (Ephesians 1:13-14), independent of human mediation or ritual timing (as seen in Acts 10:44 where the Spirit falls before baptism).

3. SALVATION BY ENDURANCE

Assertion: Salvation is not a present possession but a future outcome contingent on lifelong endurance.

"he only is saved who endureth unto the end (D&C 53:7)"

Evangelical Comparison: The text defines salvation as a conditional future state ('he only is saved who...'). This creates a theology of probation where one's status is never settled until death. Evangelical soteriology views 'endurance' as the **evidence** of genuine salvation, not the **cause** or **condition** of it. For the Evangelical, the believer 'has passed from death to life' (John 5:24) the moment they believe, whereas here, the verdict is suspended until the 'end'.

COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

Divergence Status: Yes

Theological Gap: The fundamental gap lies in the mechanism of grace. D&C 53 presents a system where grace is accessed through specific priesthood ordinances ('laying on of hands') and maintained through human effort ('labor,' 'endure'). The believer is in a probationary state, working toward a salvation that is only confirmed at the end. Evangelical theology posits that the believer is justified fully by Christ's finished work (Romans 5:1), with works being the fruit, not the root, of salvation. Furthermore, the text elevates a modern prophet's voice to the level of Scripture, creating a secondary authority that binds the conscience beyond the Bible.

Shared Values:

Belief in Jesus as the one crucified for sins (v2); Call to repentance and faith (v3); Rejection of worldliness (v2); Importance of prayer (v1)

Friction Points:

1. [Critical] Sola Scriptura – Joseph Smith speaks in the first person as Jesus, adding new commandments and requirements not found in the Bible.
2. [Critical] Sola Fide – Salvation is explicitly tied to 'enduring to the end' and receiving ordinances, rather than faith alone.
3. [Major] Universal Priesthood – Restricts the ministry of the Holy Spirit and preaching to those with specific priesthood ordination.

Semantic Warnings:

"Calling and Election"

In Text: In this specific 1831 context, it refers to a specific church assignment and office. (Later in LDS theology, it evolves to mean the assurance of exaltation).

Evangelical: God's sovereign choice of believers for salvation (2 Peter 1:10, Romans 11:29).

Example: *Gilbert is asking about his job description (calling), whereas a Christian reading 'election' thinks of predestination or soteriological choice.*

"Saved"

In Text: Final deliverance and exaltation contingent on lifelong endurance (v7).

Evangelical: Deliverance from the penalty of sin, possessed as a present reality by the believer (Ephesians 2:8).

Example: *In D&C 53:7, one is not 'saved' until they finish enduring; in Titus 3:5, God 'saved us' (past tense) by His mercy.*

"Ordination"

In Text: Conferral of priesthood authority necessary to administer sacraments and preach effectively.

Evangelical: Setting apart or appointing leaders, not necessarily conferring a mystical power required for the Holy Spirit's presence.

Example: *Gilbert needs 'mine ordination' to give the Holy Spirit; Evangelicals believe any believer is a priest (1 Peter 2:9).*

SOTERIOLOGY

Salvation Defined: A future state achieved after successfully enduring to the end of life.

How Attained: Through faith, repentance, priesthood ordinances (laying on of hands), and enduring labor.

Basis of Assurance: Low assurance; based on current 'labor' and future endurance.

Comparison to Sola Fide: The text rejects Sola Fide by adding 'enduring' and 'ordinances' as necessary conditions. Compare D&C 53:7 with Romans 3:28 ('man is justified by faith without the deeds of the law').

MANDATES & REQUIREMENTS

Explicit Commands:

1. Forsake the world (v2)
2. Take upon you mine ordination, even that of an elder (v3)
3. Preach faith, repentance, and remission of sins (v3)
4. Be an agent unto this church (v4)

5. Take your journey with Joseph Smith, Jun., and Sidney Rigdon (v5)

Implicit Obligations:

1. Accept the authority of the Bishop (v4)
2. Labor in the vineyard to qualify for future knowledge (v6)
3. Endure to the end of life to secure salvation (v7)

Ritual Requirements:

1. Ordination to the office of Elder
2. Laying on of hands for the gift of the Holy Spirit

EVANGELISM TOOLKIT

Discovery Questions:

1. In verse 7, it says 'he only is saved who endureth unto the end.' How do you define 'enduring,' and how can you ever be sure you've done enough of it?
2. Verse 6 says future blessings depend on your 'labor in the vineyard.' Does this mean God's acceptance of you fluctuates based on your daily performance?
3. The text mentions receiving the Holy Spirit by the laying on of hands (v3). How do you interpret accounts in the Bible, like Acts 10:44, where people received the Spirit **before** any ritual or baptism?

Redemptive Analogies:

1. The Desire for 'Calling and Election' – Gilbert wanted to know his place and purpose. The Gospel answers this deep human need not with a job description, but with an identity: 'Child of God.' [1 John 3:1 - 'Behold what manner of love the Father has bestowed on us, that we should be called children of God!']

Spiritual Weight:

1. Performance Anxiety [Severe] – The believer is placed on a treadmill where future blessings and final salvation are contingent on 'labor' and 'enduring.' There is no rest in a finished work.
2. Dependency on Hierarchy [Moderate] – The believer cannot access the Holy Spirit or know God's will fully without the mediation of the priesthood structure (ordination, agents, bishops).
3. Uncertainty [Mild] – The 'residue' (fullness of truth/blessing) is withheld, creating a sense that the believer never has the full picture or full resources.

EPISTEMOLOGY

Knowledge Source: Prophetic Revelation (Joseph Smith acting as the mouthpiece of God).

Verification Method: Implicitly, the verification is the fulfillment of the 'calling' and the internal witness of the Spirit mentioned in v3.

Evangelical Contrast: Biblical epistemology relies on the objective standard of written Scripture (Acts 17:11) rather than subjective modern revelations that alter or add to apostolic teaching.

TEXTUAL CRITICISM

Dating: June 8, 1831

Authorship: Joseph Smith (dictated)

Textual Issues: Part of the compilation of revelations originally published in the Book of Commandments (1833) and later the Doctrine and Covenants (1835).